

Interview of Stalin

(June 28, 1935)

Romain Rolland

<https://mltoday.com/from-the-archives-1935-interview-of-stalin-by-romain-rolland/>

This interview with Stalin by the well-known French writer, Romain Rolland, is over 80 years old, but this is the first time it has been translated into English. It brings to light a number of important features of life in the Soviet Union. For one, Stalin points out that a large number of counter-revolutionaries had crossed into the Soviet Union illegally to assassinate Soviet leaders. Many of them were captured and the majority of them were shot. These counter-revolutionaries from abroad were joined by internal reactionaries. There were also small groups of young children who were goaded by adults into attacks on shock-workers, and the Soviet Union was forced to lower the age of criminal responsibility to scare these children away from criminal activity.

However, the most interesting part of the interview deals with Stalin's statement that there may at times be different positions between the USSR as a socialist state and that of a communist party in a capitalist country. Stalin takes the example of the mutual assistance pact that the Soviet Union signed with France in 1935, directed against the fascist powers. Stalin points out that this does not mean that the French communist party, which was not in power, should change its position against the French capitalist government, since there was nothing to prevent the French government from using arms against the French workers.

One could also apply this position to the situation of June 1940, when most of France was occupied by Nazi Germany. Although the Soviet Union-German non-aggression pact was still in force, this did not mean that the French CP should not have organized the people of France to fight against the Nazi occupation. Indeed, after the war, the French bourgeoisie under Charles de Gaulle criticized the CP for not fighting against the German occupation until the Soviet Union was attacked in June of 1941.

Finally, Stalin also clarifies the story of "Stalin's dachas." He pointed out that he and other Soviet leaders did not have their own dachas, only that certain dachas were allocated to their use by the Soviet government.

George Gruenthal, 2017

INTERVIEW STALIN 1995

Stalin: I am glad to talk to the world's greatest writer.

Romain Rolland: I very much regret that my health did not allow me to visit earlier this great new world, of which we are all proud, and on which we have set our hopes. With your permission, I would like to speak to you in my dual capacity of an old friend and sympathizer of the U.S.S.R., and of a witness from the West, an observer and confidant of the youth and sympathizers from France.

You should know what the U.S.S.R. represents in the eyes of thousands of people in the West. They know it in a very confused way, but it embodies their hopes, their ideals, which are often different and sometimes contradictory. In the current severe economic and moral crisis, they expect from the U.S.S.R. leadership, directives and an answer to their uncertainties.

Obviously it is difficult to satisfy them. The U.S.S.R. has its own task, which is immense, its work of construction and defense; and it should devote everything to this: the best directive it can give is by its example. It shows the way by its own activity.

However it cannot ignore the great responsibility that the present world situation imposes on it – this responsibility, in a certain way “imperative,” to watch over the masses of other countries that have put their faith in it. It is not enough to quote the famous words of Beethoven: “O man, help thyself!” They need help and advice.

Now, to be able to do this effectively, we must take into account the temperament and ideology of each country – I will speak here only of France. Lack of knowledge of this ideology of that nature can cause – in fact it does cause – serious misunderstanding.

Do not expect from the public in France, even the sympathizers, such “dialectic” of thought, which has become second nature in the U.S.S.R. By temperament the French are accustomed to an abstract logic of reasoning along a straight line, less experimental than deductive. One must know it well in order to overcome it. They are a people, an opinion, who are accustomed to reasoning. One must always give them reasons for their action.

In my opinion, in its policies the U.S.S.R. is not concerned enough with giving its foreign friends the reasons for certain of its actions. But it does not lack just and convincing reasons.

But it seems uninterested, and that is, I think, a serious mistake, because it can and does lead to misinterpretations or deliberately false interpretations, of certain facts which sow confusion among thousands of its sympathizers. It is because I have

recently seen this confusion among many good people of France that I bring it to your attention.

You tell us that it is the role of our intellectuals and sympathizers to explain these actions. We are not fully up to this task – and first of all, because we ourselves are poorly informed: we are not provided with the necessary means to make them understood and to explain them.

It seems to me that there should be in the West an office of intellectual understanding – a little like the V.O.K.S.¹ – but of a more political character. Otherwise, misunderstandings pile up, and with no accredited office of the U.S.S.R. there is no one concerned to clarify them.

One may think that it is enough to let the confusion dissipate over time. But they do not dissipate, they condense. From the beginning one must act and make them dissipate as they occur. Here are some examples:

As is its sovereign right, the government of the U.S.S.R. makes decisions, whether of sentences, judgments in trials or laws reforming the usual penalties. In some cases, the issues or persons involved led to a general interest and impact; and for one reason or another, foreign opinion is passionate. It would be easy to avoid problems. Why don't we do so?

You were right to vigorously punish the accomplices of the conspiracy of which Kirov was the victim. But in striking against the conspirators, let the public in Europe and the world know the overwhelming responsibility of the condemned. – You sent Victor Serge to Orenburg for three years, and this was a much less important matter; but why was it allowed to develop so long, for two years, among European public opinion?

Serge is a French writer whose worth is established; I do not know him personally, but I am a friend of several of his friends. They bombard me with questions about his exile to Orenburg and the treatment that he is getting. I am sure that you would not have acted this way without serious reasons.

But why did you not explain the reasons from the beginning, in the eyes of the French public, which is claiming his innocence; it is always very dangerous, in the country of the Calas and Dreyfus Affairs² to allow a person convicted to become the center of a movement of general protest. Another case of a very different nature: the Soviet government has promulgated a law on the punishment of criminal children above the age of 12 years. The text of the law is not well known; and even if it were known, it leads to a formidable backlash.

The death penalty seems to have been suspended for these children. – I well understand the reasons why one has to instill fear in those who are irresponsible

and in those who want to profit from this irresponsibility. But the public does not understand this. It sees the threat made, or in the hands of judges who can use it according to their mood. This can become the source of a very large protest movement. It is necessary to counter this without delay.

Finally, I come to the big current misunderstanding caused by the problem of war and the attitude to take towards it. I think this problem should have been studied a long time ago in France.

Many years ago I talked with Barbusse and with my communist friends about the danger of an unconditional campaign against war. To me it seems necessary to study the different cases of war that may arise and to distinguish the attitude to take to each of them. As I understand it, the U.S.S.R. needs peace, it wants peace. But its cause is not identified with pacifism. Pacifism may in some cases be a surrender to fascism, which in turn breeds war.

In this respect, I am not satisfied with certain directives of the movement put out by the Amsterdam International Congress against war and fascism in 1932, because its resolutions, a little too vague, are causing doubts on the question of tactics against war. Right now, the opinion not only of French pacifists, but of many friends of the U.S.S.R., with a socialist and almost communist spirit, is confused. It clashes with the military alliance between the U.S.S.R. and the government of French imperialist democracy.

This causes confusion in the mind. This is one of the great questions of dialectics and revolutionary tactics to be clarified. This should be done in public, with all the frankness and clarity possible.

These are the main things I had to say. I apologize for having talked too long.

Stalin: No, no! I am very glad to listen to you. I am entirely at your disposal.

Now if I may answer, let me do so on all the points.

First of all, on the question of war. Under what conditions have we concluded our agreement with France in the field of mutual aid?

Now, in Europe, in the whole capitalist world, two state systems have arisen: a system of fascist states, where everything that is alive is suppressed by mechanical means; where the working class and its thought are stifled by mechanical means; where one cannot breathe – and another state system, which are the remnants of old times – the system of democratic bourgeois states.

The latter would also be willing to stifle the workers' movement, but they do it by other means: they still have a Parliament, some free press, legal parties, etc.

There is a difference! It is true that these democracies also practice limitations of freedom; but still, there remains a degree of freedom, and one can more or less breathe. – Between the two systems there is an international struggle.

And we see that this struggle is becoming more bitter day by day. A question is posed: under these circumstances, should the government of the workers' state remain neutral and not become involved in any way? – No! It should become involved, because to remain neutral would make it easier for the fascists to achieve victory; and the victory of the fascists is a threat to the U.S.S.R. and therefore a threat to the working class worldwide.

But if the government of the U.S.S.R. should become involved in the struggle, on which side should it line up?

Naturally, on the side of the bourgeois democratic governments, who are not trying to breach the peace. Therefore, the U.S.S.R. is interested that France should be well armed against possible attacks by the fascist aggressor states.

By getting involved, we are throwing ourselves on the scale in the fight between fascism and anti-fascism, between aggression and non-aggression; one more weight that tips the scale on the side of anti-fascism and non-aggression. That is the basis for our agreement with France.

I am speaking from the point of view of the U.S.S.R. as a state. – But should the Communist Party in France take the same position on the question of war? – I think not! In France, it is not in power. In France the capitalists, the imperialists are in power; the French Communist Party is only a small opposition group.

Is there a guarantee that the French bourgeoisie will not use the army against the French working class? Certainly not.

The U.S.S.R. has an agreement with France for mutual assistance against an aggressor, against an attack from outside. But this is not and cannot be an agreement that ensures that the French government will not use its army against the French working class.

As you see, the situation of the Communist Party in the U.S.S.R. is not the same as that of the Communist Party in France. It is evident that the position of the Communist Party in France cannot coincide with that of the Communist Party in the U.S.S.R., which is in power.

That is why I understand that the position of the French Communist Party should at its core remain the same as it was before the agreement of the U.S.S.R. with France. This does not mean, however, that if, despite the efforts of the communists,

war is imposed, the communists should boycott war, sabotage the work in the factories, etc.

We Bolsheviks, though we were against the war and for the defeat of the tsarist government, never rejected arms. We have never been supporters of sabotage of work in the factories, or of boycott of war. On the contrary, when the war became inevitable, we went into the army, we learned to shoot, to use arms; and then we directed these arms against our class enemies.

As to the question of whether it is permissible for the U.S.S.R. to conclude agreements with bourgeois states, this question was resolved in the positive way when Lenin was alive, and on to his initiative. Trotsky then was a big proponent of this solution; but now he has obviously forgotten that...

You said that we should guide our friends in the West. I must say that we are afraid to take on such a task. We do not take it upon ourselves to guide them, because it is difficult to establish guidelines for men who live in a quite different environment, under altogether different conditions.

Each country has its own conditions; and to direct these other people from Moscow would be too pretentious on our part. We limit ourselves to give the most general advice. Otherwise, we would take upon ourselves a responsibility that we would not be able to carry out.

We ourselves have experienced what happens when foreigners lead from afar. Before the war – or rather, in the beginning of the century, German social democracy was the core of the social-democratic International, and we Russians were its disciples. At that time they tried to lead us.

And if we had given them the opportunity to lead us, we certainly would not have had the Bolshevik Party or the 1905 Revolution; therefore, we would also not have had the 1917 Revolution. The working class of each country must have its own communist leaders. Otherwise, it is impossible to lead.

Certainly, if our friends in the West are poorly informed of the reasons for the acts of the Soviet government and if they often do not know how to respond to our enemies, this means that our friends also do not know how to arm themselves better than our enemies. This also means that we are not sufficiently arming our friends. We will try to remedy this.

You say that our enemies are hurling many slanders and stupidities against the Soviet people without our refuting them. This is true.

Every kind of nonsense and slander has been invented by the enemies of the U.S.S.R. Sometimes we are embarrassed to refute them, because they are too

fantastic and too obviously absurd. They write, for example, that I marched with the Red Army against Voroshilov, that I killed him; and six months later, they forgot what they said, and they wrote in the same newspaper that Voroshilov marched with the Red Army against me and killed me – and to this they added later that Voroshilov and I had come to an agreement... Is there a reason to refute all this?

Romain Rolland: But it is precisely the complete absence of refutations and explanations that encourages this stupid clamour and allows them to spread their slander.

Stalin: Maybe. You may be right. Certainly, we could react more aggressively against this clamour.

Now let me respond to your remarks about the law on the punishment of children from the age of twelve.³ This decree has a purely pedagogical sense. We wanted to instill fear in them, not only the criminal children (bandits), but especially the organizers of this banditry among children. One should know that in our schools we discovered groups of 12-15 child bandits, boys and girls, who try to kill or corrupt the best students, the shock-workers.⁴

In some cases, these groups attract girls to the homes of adults, they make them drink and turn them to prostitution.

In other cases, the boys who learned well at school and who were shock-workers were drowned in wells, or injured, or terrorized in some way.

It was discovered that these groups of small bandits were organized and led by adult bandits. It is clear that the Soviet government could not ignore these crimes. The decree was published to frighten and disorganize the adult bandits and protect our children from them. At the same time as this decree, another decree forbids the sale, purchase and possession of Finnish knives and daggers.

Romain Rolland: But why do not you publish these facts? That way one could understand the reasons for your decree.

Stalin: This is not as simple as you think. In the U.S.S.R. there are still many corrupt people, police, tsarist officials, their children, their relatives, etc.

These people are not accustomed to work, they are angry, and they are fertile soil for all kinds of crimes. We are afraid that, for these elements, taken from their normal environment, the publication of these escapades and crimes of the young bandits would have a contagious effect and push them into similar crimes.

In addition, could we have explained publicly that our decree was made with a pedagogical (preventive) intent, to scare the criminal elements? Of course we could

not do this, because in that case, the law would have lost all force in the eyes of the criminals.

Romain Rolland: That is right. You could not do that.

Stalin: I should add that, so far, there has not been a single case of application of the most severe articles of this decree on criminal children; and hopefully there will be none.

You ask why we do not try the terrorist criminals in public.

Take for example the case of the assassination of Kirov. Perhaps here we have, indeed, been urged on by the feeling of hatred that had surged in us against the murderers. Kirov was a great man.

Kirov's murderers committed the most heinous of crimes. We could not ignore the emotion of such a crime.

In truth the hundred people we shot⁵ did not have a direct relationship with the murderers of Kirov from a legal point of view.

But they were sent from Poland, Germany and Finland by our enemies; they were all armed and given the task to carry out acts of terrorism against the leaders of the U.S.S.R. and among them Comrade Kirov. These hundred people, white guard Russians, did not even think of denying their terrorist intentions before the military tribunal.

“Yes, many of them said, we wanted to and want to eliminate the Soviet leaders; we do not have to talk with you; shoot us if you do not want us to eliminate you!”

It seemed to us that it would give these gentlemen too much honour to examine their crimes before a public tribunal, with the help of their defenders. We knew that after the abominable murder of Kirov, the terrorist criminals would try to carry out their heinous plans against other leaders.

In order to prevent them, we took upon ourselves the unpleasant duty of shooting these gentlemen. Such is the logic of power. In such cases, power must be strong, firm and fearless. Otherwise, it is not a power; it will not be accepted as a power.

The French Communards⁶ did not understand this; they were obviously too soft and irresolute: that is what Karl Marx blamed them for. And that is why they lost and the French bourgeois did not spare them. This was a lesson for us.

After having applied the supreme punishment for the murder of Kirov, we did not want to have to apply it again in the future. But unfortunately this does not depend entirely on us.

You must also consider that we have friends not only in the West but also in the U.S.S.R., and while our friends in the West recommend to us the maximum leniency towards our enemies, our friends in the U.S.S.R. demand firmness; they demand, for example, that Zinoviev and Kamenev be shot, as they are the inspirers of the murder of Kirov. We also cannot ignore this.

I would like to bring your attention to the following. The workers in the West are working eight, ten and twelve hours a day. They have families, wives and children; they must provide for their livelihood. They do not have time to read books and draw rules of conduct from them.

They do not believe much in books, because they know that the bourgeois writers often deceive them. This is why they only believe in facts, only in such facts that they see themselves and that they can touch with their hands.

And now these workers see that in the East of Europe a new state has appeared, a workers' and peasants' state, where there is no more room for the capitalists and landlords, where labour rules, and where working men enjoy unprecedented honours.

From this the workers conclude: – “So one can live without exploiters. So the victory of socialism is entirely possible.” – This fact, the fact of the existence of the U.S.S.R., is crucial for revolutionizing the workers in all the countries of the world.

The bourgeois of all countries know this, and they hate the U.S.S.R. with a bestial hatred.

This is precisely why the bourgeoisie in the West would like us Soviet leaders to die as soon as possible. That is why they organize terrorist gangs; they send them into the U.S.S.R. through Germany, Poland and Finland, without sparing any money or other means for this...

And here: very recently, we discovered terrorist elements among us in the Kremlin. We have a government library, and there are librarian women who go to the homes of our comrades in charge in the Kremlin to keep their libraries in order.

And we discovered that some of these librarians were recruited by our enemies to carry out terrorist acts! It must be said that most of these women are the vestiges of the bourgeois and landlord classes, classes that were formerly ruling and have been crushed today.

And now we discovered that these women carried poison on themselves, and that they intended to poison some of our comrades! Of course we arrested them; we did not want to shoot them, but we isolated them. This is one more fact that shows the ferocity of our enemies and the need for the Soviet people to be vigilant.

You see: the bourgeoisie is fighting quite fiercely against the Soviets; and then, in their press, they cry out against the ferocity of the Soviet people. On the one hand, they push on us terrorists, murderers, bandits and poisoners; and on the other hand, they write articles about the inhumanity of the Bolsheviks...

As for Victor Serge, I do not know him, and I do not have the opportunity to inform you immediately.

Romain Rolland: I was told that he was prosecuted for Trotskyism.

Stalin: Yes, now I remember... He was not just a Trotskyist; he is a scoundrel, a dishonest man.

He tried to undermine Soviet power, but he did not succeed. In regard to him, the Trotskyists just started a debate in the Congress for the Defence of Culture in Paris.

Victor Serge has now been set free in Orenburg and I think he works there. He has of course not suffered any torture, any abuse, etc. All that is rubbish! We don't need him, and we can let him go to Europe at any time.

Romain Rolland: I have been told that Orenburg is a kind of desert.

Stalin: It is not a desert but a beautiful city. I spent four years in exile in a desert, in the Turukhan region. There it is 50° to 60° cold.... So what, I bore it!

Romain Rolland: I would like to say two more words to you on another topic that, for us the intelligentsia in the West, and for me especially, is of particular importance – that is to know about the new humanism, which you, Comrade Stalin, proclaimed. If you remember, in a recent beautiful speech, you said that the most valuable and decisive of all the existing capital in the world are people.⁷

The new man and the new culture that comes from him. Nothing can better win over the spirit of the world for the goals of the Revolution than to offer him these great new roads of proletarian humanism, this synthesis of the strengths of the human spirit.

The heritage of Marx and Engels, the intellectual aspect, the enrichment of the spirit of discovery and creation, is perhaps the least known in the West; and this is nevertheless what is known to have more effect on the peoples of developed culture such as ours.

I am glad to see that, very recently, our young intelligentsia has begun to gain a greater and more intimate knowledge of Marxism.

Until recently, the teachers and historians tried to keep the doctrine of Marx and Engels in the shadows or to discredit it.

But today, a new trend is emerging, even in the prestigious universities. A very interesting collection of lectures and discussions has just been published with the title “In the light of Marxism” under the direction of Professor Wallon⁸ of the Sorbonne: the main theme of this book is the role of Marxism in scientific thought today.

If such a movement develops, as I hope, and if we know how to propagate and popularize the ideas of Marx and Engels in that way, it will reverberate most deeply in the ideology of our intelligentsia.

Stalin: Our final aim, the aim of Marxists, is to free people from exploitation and oppression, and thus make the individual free. Capitalism, which envelops people in the nets of exploitation, deprives the individual of that freedom.

Under capitalism, only very few people, the richest ones, can become more or less free. The majority of people under capitalism cannot enjoy personal freedom.

Romain Rolland: This is clear.

Stalin: By breaking the chains of exploitation, we will free the individual. As Engels said very well in *Anti-Dühring*, communism, when it breaks the chains of exploitation, will make us go, in a leap, from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.

Our task is to free the individual, to develop his abilities, to rekindle in him the love and appreciation for work. Currently, we are creating entirely new conditions of life, a completely new type of man is appearing, the type of man who loves and respects work.

We hate slackers and lazy people; in the factories, they are wrapped in bags (literally “in pieces of ‘rogoja’ [matting]”), and taken outside in wheelbarrows. The respect for work, love of work, creative work, “shock work” – that is the predominant tone of our lives.

The shock workers are those who are loved and esteemed; they are now the focus of our new life, our new culture.

Romain Rolland (stands): That’s fine. – I am sorry to have kept you so long.

Stalin: Don’t say that!

Romain Rolland: Thank you for having given me the opportunity to talk with you.

Stalin: Your thanks makes me somewhat confused. Usually one thanks people from whom one expects nothing good. Did you think that I would not receive you well enough?

Romain Rolland: Frankly, I may tell you that I'm not used to this. Nowhere have I received such a welcome as in Moscow.

Stalin: You plan to be with Gorky, tomorrow the 29th?

Romain Rolland: We have agreed that tomorrow Gorky will come to Moscow. We will go with him to his dacha; and later, perhaps, I will take up your offer to also stay a while at your dacha.

Stalin (smiling): I do not have a dacha. We Soviet leaders have no dachas. It is just one of many spare dachas that are the property of the State.

It is not I who am offering you this dacha; it is the Soviet government, that is: Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich and I. You would be very comfortable; there are no streetcars or trains. You can rest well there. The dacha is still at your disposal. And if you wish, you can enjoy it without fear of bothering anyone. Will you attend the festival of Physical Culture on the 30th?

Romain Rolland: Yes, I would like to. I ask you to give me the opportunity. – And perhaps you will allow me, when I get to Gorky's dacha, or to the dacha you kindly offer me, I could see you again and talk with you.

Stalin: Please do so. If you wish, I am at your full disposal, and I will gladly come to you at the dacha. And the opportunity for you to attend the parade will be guaranteed.

Official text of the interview of Stalin by Romain Rolland – 1935

◁> Reviewed by Stalin and Romain Rolland
June 28, 1935.

*Source: The original French text is taken from <http://www.centremlm.be/Texte-officiel-de-l-entretien-de-Staline-avec-Romain-Rolland-1935>. It can also be found in *Cahiers Romain Rolland*, vol. 29, *Voyage a Moscou (juin- juillet 1935)*, which contains his full notes on his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935.*

Translated from the French by George Gruenthal.

Endnotes:

- 1) All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries
- 2) Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish artillery captain in the French army who was falsely convicted in 1894 of passing military secrets to the Germans. He was only exonerated in 1904.

Jean Calas was a Protestant merchant who was executed in 1762 after being falsely convicted of murdering one of his sons who had openly converted to Catholicism. He was posthumously exonerated after his case was taken up by the French writer Voltaire, who was an advocate of freedom of religion.

3) This law lowered the age of criminal responsibility for certain serious crimes to 12 years. For an interesting study of Soviet laws relating to children, see the article by John N. Hazard in the *University of Chicago Law Review*, Volume 5, Issue 3, Article 7 (1938) especially pp. 442-444, available at: <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1567&context=uclrey>, especially pp. 19-21 of pdf.

4) Titles awarded to heroes of socialist labour in the Soviet Union.

5) “The persons recently executed in various towns of the USSR under sentences imposed by the courts... were found guilty of the planning and execution of acts of terrorism. The majority of them entered the Soviet Union illegally from abroad, and were found to have in their possession bombs, grenades, revolvers and other weapons. In court they openly admitted that they were enemies of the Soviet Union and confessed to the perpetration of the crimes with which they were charged”. (Ivan Maisky; Statement on Trial and Execution of Terrorists (2 January 1935), in: Jane Degras (Ed.): ‘Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy’, Volume 3; London; 1953; p. 100). Maisky was the Soviet Ambassador in London at the time.

6) Members of the Paris Commune of 1871. While praising their heroism in overthrowing the bourgeois government in Paris, Marx and Engels were critical of them for failing to seize the Bank of France and failing to march on the counter-revolutionary headquarters at Versailles. The Commune was defeated after a period of 72 days. See Marx: *The Civil War in France*, and Engels introduction to the edition of 1891.

7) The reference is to Stalin’s Address to the Graduates from the Red Army Academies of May 6, 1935.

8) Henri Wallon “A la lumiere du marxisme”

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