

THE TRAGIC LIFE OF A POLRUGARIAN MINISTER¹

POLRUGARIA need not be exactly located on the map. Enough that it lies somewhere in the eastern reaches of Europe. Nor need the name of Vincent Adriano, a high Polrugarian official, be looked up in any *Who's Who*, for he is a half-real and half-imaginary character. Adriano's features and traits can be found in some of the people who now rule the Russian satellite countries, and not a single one of his experiences related here has been invented. It need not be specified what post Vincent Adriano holds in his government. He may be the President or the Prime Minister or the Vice-Premier, or he may be only the Minister of the Interior or the Minister of Education. In all likelihood he is a member of the Politbureau, and is known as one of the pillars of the People's Democracy in Polrugaria. His words and doings are reported in newspapers all over the world.

It is common to refer to men of Adriano's kind as 'Stalin's henchmen', 'Russian puppets', and 'leaders of the Cominform fifth column'. If any of these labels described him adequately, Adriano would not be worth any special attention. To be sure, he is unavoidably something of a puppet and an agent of a foreign power, but he is much more than that.

Vincent Adriano is in either his late forties or early fifties—he may be just fifty. His age is significant because his formative years were those of the revolutionary aftermath of the First World War. He came from a middle-class family that before 1914 had enjoyed a measure of

¹ Written in 1950.

prosperity and believed in the stability of dynasties, governments, currencies, and moral principles. In his middle or late teens, Adriano saw three vast empires crumble with hardly anybody shedding a tear. Then he watched many governments leap into and tumble out of existence in so rapid and breathtaking a succession that it was almost impossible to keep account of them. On the average, there were a dozen or a score of them every year. The advent of each was hailed as an epoch-making event; each successive Prime Minister was greeted as a saviour. After a few weeks or days, he was booed and hissed out of office as a misfit, scoundrel, and nincompoop.

The currency of Polrugaria, like the currencies of all neighbouring countries, lost its value from month to month, then from day to day, and finally from hour to hour. Adriano's father sold his house at the beginning of one year; with the money he received he could buy only two boxes of matches at the end of that year. No political combination, no institution, no established custom, no inherited idea seemed capable of survival. Moral principles, too, were in flux. Reality seemed to lose clear-cut outline, and this was reflected in the new poetry, painting, and sculpture.

The young man was easily convinced that he was witnessing the decay of a social order, that before his very eyes capitalism was succumbing to the attack of its own deep-seated insanity. He was aroused by the fiery manifestos of the Communist International signed by Lenin and Trotsky. Soon he became a member of the Communist Party. Since in Polrugaria the party was savagely persecuted—the penalties for membership ranged from five years' imprisonment to death—the people who joined it did not do so, in those days, for selfish or careerist motives.

Adriano, at any rate, gave up without hesitation the prospect of a secure career in the academic field to become a professional revolutionary. He was prompted by

idealistic sympathy with the underdog and by something he called 'scientific conviction'. Studying the classics of Marxism, he became firmly convinced that private ownership of the means of production and the concept of the nation-state had outlived their day, and further, that they were certain to be replaced by an international socialist society which could be promoted only by a proletarian dictatorship.

Proletarian dictatorship meant not the dictatorial rule of a clique, let alone of a single leader, but the social and political predominance of the working classes, 'the dictatorship of an overwhelming majority of the people over a handful of exploiters, semi-feudal landlords, and big capitalists'. Far from disowning democracy, the proletarian dictatorship, so he thought, would represent its consummation. It would fill the empty shell of formal equality, which was all that bourgeois democracy could offer, with the content of social equality. With this vision of the future he plunged deep into the revolutionary underground.

We need not relate in detail Adriano's revolutionary career—its pattern was, up to a point, typical. There were the years of his dangerous work in the underground, when he lived the life of a hunted man without name or address. He organized strikes, wrote for clandestine papers, and travelled all over the country studying social conditions and setting up organizations. Then came the years of prison and torture and of longing in solitude. The vision of the future that had inspired him had to be somewhat adulterated with expedients, tactical games, and tricks of organization—the daily business of every politician, even of one who serves a revolution. For all that, his idealism and enthusiasm had not yet begun to evaporate.

Even while imprisoned he helped sustain in his comrades their conviction, their hope, and their pride in their own sacrifices. Once he led several hundred political prisoners in a hunger strike. The strike, lasting six or

seven weeks, was one of the longest ever known. The governor of the prison knew that in order to break it he had first to break Vincent Adriano. Guards dragged the emaciated man by his legs from a cell on the sixth floor down the iron staircase, banging his head against the hard and rusty edges of the steps until he lost consciousness. Vincent Adriano became a legendary hero.

With some of his comrades, he at last managed to escape from prison and make his way to Russia. Inasmuch as he spent several years in Moscow, it is now often said and written about him that he belongs to that 'hard core of Moscow-trained agents who control Polrugaria'. Such words, when he happens to read them, bring a sadly ironical smile to his lips.

When Adriano arrived in Moscow in the early 1930's, he was not among the chief leaders of the Polrugarian party. Nor was he greatly concerned with his place in the hierarchy. He was more preoccupied with the confusion in his own mind that arose when he first compared his vision of the society of the future with life in the Soviet Union under Stalin. He hardly dared admit, even to himself, the extent of his disillusionment. This, too, has been so typical in the experiences of men of his kind that we need not dwell on it. Typical, too, were the truisms, the half-truths, and the self-delusions with which he tried to soothe his disturbed communist conscience. Russia's inherited poverty, her isolation in a capitalist world, the dangers threatening her from outside, the illiteracy of her masses, their laziness and lack of civic responsibility—all this and more he evoked to explain to himself why life in Russia fell appallingly short of the ideal.

'Oh,' he sighed, 'if only the revolution had first been victorious in a more civilized and advanced country! But history has to be taken as it is, and Russia is at least entitled to the respect and gratitude due the pioneer, whatever that pioneer's faults and vices.' He did his utmost not to see the realities of life around him.

Then came the great purges of 1936-8. Most leaders of the Polrugarian party who had lived as exiles in Moscow were shot as spies, saboteurs, and agents of the Polrugarian political police. Before they died, they (and even their wives, brothers, and sisters) were made to bear witness against one another. Among the dishonoured and the executed was one who more than anybody else had aroused Adriano's enthusiasm and sustained his courage, who had initiated him into the most difficult problems of Marxist theory, and to whom Adriano had looked up as a friend and spiritual guide.

Adriano, too, was confronted with the usual charges. By a freak of fortune, however, or perhaps by the whim of the chief of the G.P.U., Yezhov, or of one of Yezhov's underlings, he was not made to face a firing-squad. Instead, he was deported to a forced-labour camp somewhere in the subpolar north. With many others—Trotskyites, Zinovievites, Bukharinites, kulaks, Ukrainian nationalists, bandits and thieves, former generals, former university professors and party organizers—he was employed in felling trees and transporting them from a forest to a depot. Frost, hunger, and disease took their toll of the deportees, but the ranks were constantly filled with newcomers.

Adriano saw how people around him were first reduced to an animal-like struggle for survival, how they next lost the will to struggle and survive, and how finally they collapsed and died like flies. Somehow his own vitality did not sag. He went on wielding the axe with his frostbitten fingers. Every third or fourth day it was his turn to harness himself, along with fellow prisoners, to the cart loaded with timber and to drag it across the snow- and ice-covered plain to the depot several miles away. Those were the worst hours. He could not reconcile himself to the fact that he, the proud revolutionary, was being used as a beast of burden in the country of his dream.

Even now he still feels a piercing pain in his heart

whenever he thinks of those days—and that is why he reads with a melancholy smile the stories about the mysterious ‘training in fifth-column activity’ he received in Russia.

With a shred of his mind he tried to penetrate the tangle of circumstances behind his extraordinary degradation. At night he argued about this with the other deportees. The problem was vast and confused beyond comprehension. Some of the deported communists said that Stalin had carried out a counter-revolution in which every achievement of Lenin’s revolution had been destroyed.

Others held that the foundations of the revolution—public ownership and a collectivist economy—had remained intact, but that instead of a free socialist society, a terrifying combination of socialism and slavery was being erected on those foundations. The outlook was therefore more difficult than anything they could have imagined, but there was perhaps some hope, if not for this generation then for the next. Stalinism, it was true, was casting grave discredit upon the ideal of socialism, but perhaps what was left of socialism might still be salvaged from the wreckage. Adriano could not quite make up his mind, but he was inclined to adopt this latter view.

Events now took a turn so fantastic that even the most fertile imagination could not have conceived it. One day, towards the end of 1941 (Hitler’s armies had just been repulsed from the gates of the Russian capital), Adriano was freed from the concentration camp and taken with great honours straight to Moscow. The Kremlin urgently needed East and Central European communists capable of broadcasting to the Nazi-occupied lands and of establishing liaison with the underground movements behind the enemy lines. Because of their country’s strategic importance, Polrugarians were especially wanted. But not a single one of the chief leaders of the Polrugarian party was alive. The few less

prominent ones who had been dispersed in various places of deportation were hurriedly brought back to Moscow, rehabilitated, and put to work. The rehabilitation took the form of an apology from the Security Police to the effect that the deportation of Comrade So-and-So had been a regrettable mistake.

Several times a week, Adriano, facing the microphone, shouted into the ether his confidence in the Land of Socialism, extolled Stalin and his achievements, and called on the Polrugarians to rise behind the enemy lines and prepare for liberation.

He sensed sharply the incongruity of his situation. He was now a propaganda agent for his jailers and torturers, for those who had denigrated and destroyed the leaders of Polrugarian communism, his friend and guide among them. At heart he could neither forget nor forgive the agony and the shame of the purges. And with a part of his mind he could never detach himself from the people he had left behind in the north.

But he could not refuse the assignment. Refusal would have amounted to sabotage of the war effort, and the penalty would have been death or deportation. Yet it was not merely for life's sake that he was doing his job. He was eager to help defeat the Nazis, and for this, he felt, it was right to join hands 'with the devil and his grandmother'—and with Stalin.

Nor was this merely a matter of defeating Nazism. Despite all he had gone through, he clung to his old ideas and hopes. He was still a communist. He looked forward to the revolutionary ferment that would spread over the capitalist world after the war. The more severe his disillusionment with the Soviet Union, the more intense was his hope that the victory of communism in other countries would regenerate the movement and free it from the Kremlin's faithless tutelage.

The same motives prompted him to agree to a proposal, which Stalin personally made to him a few months later, that he should organize a Polrugarian Committee of

Liberation and become its secretary. It was certain that the Red Army would cross into Polrugaria sooner or later. The Committee of Liberation was to follow in its wake and to become the nucleus of a provisional government.

Adriano's hands were full of work. He was now in charge of liaison with the Polrugarian Resistance. He issued instructions to the emissaries who penetrated the enemy lines or were parachuted behind them. He received reports from the guerrillas in the occupied country and transmitted them higher up. He arranged that leaders of the non-communist and even anti-communist parties be smuggled out of the country and brought to Moscow. And he induced some of them to join the Committee of Liberation.

The sequel is known. The Committee of Liberation became the provisional government, and then the actual government of Polrugaria. The non-communist parties were squeezed out one by one and suppressed. Polrugaria became a People's Democracy. Adriano is one of the pillars of the new government, and so far nothing seems to foreshadow his eclipse. He has not found the way out of the trap; neither has he been crushed in it.

There are two Vincent Adrianos now. One seems never to have known a moment of doubt or hesitation. His Stalinist orthodoxy has never been questioned, his devotion to the party has never flagged, and his virtues as leader and statesman are held to be unsurpassed. The other Adriano is almost constantly tormented by his communist conscience, a prey to scruple and fear, to illusion and disillusionment. The former is expansive and eloquent, the latter broods in silence and hides even from his oldest friends. The former acts, the latter never ceases to ponder.

From 1945 to 1947 the two Adrianos were almost reconciled with each other. In those years the Polrugarian party carried out some of the root-and-branch

reforms that for decades had been inscribed in its programme. It attacked the problem of Polrugarian landlordism. It divided the large semi-feudal estates among the land-hungry peasants. It established public ownership of large-scale industry. It initiated impressive plans for the further industrial development of a sadly underdeveloped country. It sponsored a great deal of progressive social legislation and an ambitious educational reform. These achievements filled Adriano with real joy and pride. It was, after all, for these things that he had languished in Polrugarian prisons.

In those years, too, Moscow, for its own reasons, was telling the Polrugarians that they should not look too much to Russia as their model, that they ought to find and follow their own 'Polrugarian road to socialism'. To Adriano this meant that Polrugaria would be spared the experience of purges and concentration camps, of abject subservience and fear. Communism, intense industrial and educational development, and a measure of real freedom to argue with one's fellow and to criticize the powers that be—this seemed to be the achievement of an ideal.

What disturbed him even then was that the people of Polrugaria were showing little enthusiasm for the revolution. To be sure, they saw the advantages and on the whole approved them. But they resented the revolution that was being carried out over their heads by people whom they had not chosen and who did not often bother to consult them and who looked like stooges of a foreign power.

Adriano knew to what extent the presence of the Red Army in Polrugaria had facilitated the revolution. Without it, the forces of the counter-revolution, with the assistance of the Western bourgeois democracies, might have reasserted themselves in bloody civil war, as they had done after the First World War. But he reflected that a revolution without genuine popular enthusiasm behind it is half defeated. It is inclined to distrust the

people whom it should serve. And distrust may breed dark fear and terror as it had done in Russia.

Yet, although he saw these dangers, he hoped that through honest and devoted work for the masses, the new Polrugarian government could eventually win their confidence and arouse their enthusiasm. Then the new social order would stand on its own feet. Sooner or later the Russian armies would go back to Russia. Surely, he thought, there must be another road to socialism, perhaps not exactly a Polrugarian one, but not a Russian and a Stalinist road either.

In the meantime, Vincent Adriano did a few things that were understood only by the initiated. He sponsored in Polrugaria a cult to glorify the memory of his old friend and guide who had perished in Russia, although Moscow had not officially rehabilitated the latter's memory. The biography of the dead leader can even now be seen displayed in Polrugarian bookshops, side by side with the official life of Stalin. Since the circumstances of the martyr's death are not mentioned in the biography, only the older communists are aware of the hidden implications of this homage.

Adriano has also set up a special institute which looks after the families of all the Polrugarian communists who perished in Moscow as 'spies and traitors'. The institute is called the Foundation of the Veterans and Martyrs of the Revolution. Such gestures give Adriano a measure of moral satisfaction, but he knows that politically they are irrelevant.

As the two camps, East and West, began to marshal their forces and as the leaders on both sides, each in their own ways, confronted everybody with a categorical 'who-is-not-with-me-is-against-me', Adriano's prospects darkened. If he could have had his way, Adriano's answer would have been a hearty 'plague o' both your houses'. He who has been an outcast in Stalin's Russia, a beast of burden in one of his concentration camps, he to whom every copy of *Pravda*, with its demented hymns to Stalin,

gives an acute sensation of nausea, has watched with a shudder as his 'Polrugarian road to socialism' has become more and more the Stalinist road. Yet he does not see how he can depart from it.

He takes it for granted that all the West can offer to East and Central Europe is counter-revolution. The West may extol freedom and the dignity of man (and who has explored the meaning of these ideals as tragically and thoroughly as Adriano?), but his gaze is fixed on the gulf he sees between Western promise and fulfilment. He is convinced that in his part of the world every new upheaval will bring more rather than less oppression, more rather than less degradation of man.

He is willing to concede that those who speak for the West may be quite sincere in their promises, but he adds that he has retained his old Marxist habit of disregarding the wishes and promises of statesmen and of keeping his eyes on social and political realities. Who among the Polrugarians, he asks, are ready to rally to the banners of the West? There may be a few well-meaning people among them, but these will be the dupes.

The most active and energetic allies of the West in Polrugaria are those who have had a stake in the old social order, the privileged men of the pre-war dictatorship, the old *soldateska*, the expropriated landlords and their like. These, should the West win, will form the new government, and, in the name of freedom and of the dignity of man, let loose a White terror the like of which has never been seen. Adriano had known *their* terror once, also. But that was at a time when the old ruling class believed that their rule would last for ever, and when their self-confidence prevented their terror from becoming altogether insane. Now, if they came back, they would be mad with fear and revenge. The real choice, as he sees it, is not between tyranny and freedom, but between Stalinist tyranny, which is in part redeemed by economic and social progress, and a reactionary tyranny which would not be redeemed by anything.

At times Adriano would be happy to give up his high office and withdraw into obscurity. But the world has become too small. He cannot seek asylum in the West. This, in his eyes, would be not much better than treason—not to Russia, but to his ideal of communism. Nor can he withdraw into obscurity. Resignation and withdrawal on his part would be a gesture of opposition and defiance, and this the régime he has helped to build would not allow.

How much is there in common between the young man who once set out with Promethean ardour to conquer history's insanity as it manifested itself in capitalism and the middle-aged Cabinet Minister who vaguely feels that history's irrational forces have overpowered the camp of the revolution, too, and, incidentally, driven him into a trap? He does his best to bolster his own self-respect and to persuade himself that as statesman, dignitary, and leader he is still the same man he was when he championed the cause of the oppressed and suffered for it in the prisons of his native land. But sometimes, while he solemnly receives delegations of peasants or salutes a colourful parade, a familiar sharp pain pierces his heart; and suddenly he feels that he is merely a pathetic wreck, a subpolar beast of burden.