CRIME RECEDES IN THE U.S.S.R.

By A. VYSHINSKY
ORDER OF LENIN
PROCURATOR OF THE U.S.S.R.
MEMBER OF THE SUPREME SOVET OF THE U.S.S.R.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW 1939
The combat with crime represents a highly important and far-reaching problem which has engaged the minds of philosophers, jurists, statesmen and others active in political life.

Criminologists in their study of crime carefully analyze such statistical material as helps to ascertain the state of crime in general, and of its various categories in particular. From these data they construct certain theories and endeavor to formulate special laws of the genesis and development of crime, as if its origin and dissemination could really be subject to special laws which differ from the general laws of development of human society.
The study of crime, including transgressions such as prostitution, procuring, keeping disorderly houses and suicide, as well as the phenomenon of drunkenness, has become the subject matter of a special science perversely called "moral" statistics, though these statistics deal with matters most immoral.

The "father" of moral statistics is A. Quetelet, a Belgian, who, in his "Man and the Development of His Faculties," wrote:

"Society bears in its womb the embryo of every crime that will be perpetrated, because it is the vessel that contains the conditions which facilitate the development of crime: it paves the way for the crime, so to speak, while the criminal is merely the tool. Consequently, every state of society presupposes a certain number and character of criminals as a necessary consequence of its organization. This observation, which at first blush might seem to be fraught with gloom, is, however, on closer examination, full of bright promise. For it points out the possibility of improving mankind by changing its institutions, habits, education and everything else that influences its mode of existence."

Quetelet, like numerous other savants engaged in solving the problem of crime (Ferré, Adolph Prince) was unable to get to the bottom of the whole subject, i.e., to ascertain the real causes which engender crime, nor did he find effective means of eradicating these causes.

They pointed to no remedy that would result in such an improvement of "institutions, habits, education," etc., as would preclude the very inception of crime.

Philanthropists and penologists have vainly grappled with this problem which only the entire nation is competent to solve.

In petty, narrowly-conceived reforms confined to police and administrative measures
they see the clue to the solution of this problem of paramount importance, yet no solution is possible without a radical change in social relations.

Unable and frequently also unwilling to discern the real causes of crime, criminologists and legislators focussed their attention on the punishment to be meted out.

Punishment was the panacea, the patent medicine universally to be applied to prevent and root out crime.

But, alas, no prison system, however numerous and varied the scorpions used to chastise its victims, can possibly make any headway in the battle against crime unless it has been preceded by a radical change in the system of social relations, unless a social system is established which by virtue of its entire organization, of the very principles underlying this organization, is capable of removing the causes that give rise to crime.

A comparative analysis of crime in tsarist Russia and in the U.S.S.R. will be highly instructive.

Comparative statistics, which characterize the state of crime, and, what is more important, the trend of development of crime in any particular historical epoch, show clearly the decisive role played in this field by the country’s social and political system, by its economic and cultural conditions and by the general and special interests, ideas and principles prevailing in its society.

Despite the defects and even vices of the method they applied, the works of Mayer, Tarde, Berg, Tarlovsky and others who have investigated the subject confirm the premise that there is a very intimate connection between crime, on the one hand, and, on the other, the economic and political condition of a country, such factors as crops, famine, the price of bread, or war.

Mass poverty, the huge army of unemployed, the corruption of the privileged circles of society, and the speculative frenzy of shoe-string merchants and fly-by-night stockbrokers with the thousands upon thousands of criminal manipulations, forgeries and frauds to which they lead—these are the
hothbeds that breed crime, responsibility for which must be laid at the door of the very system of social relations under which private property reigns supreme and innumerable vices and abuses are practised with impunity.

This is confirmed by the voluminous scientifically established data applying to pre-revolutionary Russia.

A study of these data discloses a general upward trend in various crimes and crime in general.

Thus, according to the official statistics of the tsarist Ministry of Justice, crime increased with every year in the thirty-three provinces of Russia proper, this growth being even in excess of the increase in population.

During the two decades of 1874 to 1894, there was a 55 per cent increase in the number of persons convicted of crimes against the person.

There was a particularly great increase in seduction and rape—150 per cent, while homicides increased almost 50 per cent.

Nor was there any change for the better thereafter. Between 1899 and 1908 grave offences within the jurisdiction of general courts almost doubled in number, the increase in arson, aggravated robbery, robbery and homicide being particularly great.

The last five years before the war (1909 to 1913) offer the same picture—a rise in the 'curve of criminal offences.

Crimes against property take a prominent place. Theft, fraud, embezzlement and forgery are constantly among the most numerous offences. Homicides show an enormous increase. The same is true of recidivism, which is also not accidental. In 1908, 18 per cent of all persons convicted by general courts were previous offenders. In 1909 they constituted 19.3 per cent; in 1910, 21.4 per cent; in 1911, 21.9 per cent; in 1912, 23 per cent.

Thus, general criminal statistics of Russia under the tsars show convincingly the tendency of crime to rise, a tendency which neither life sentences, exile nor capital punishment could bring to a halt. Saddest of
all was the circumstance that juvenile delinquency was a major component of the grand total of crimes committed in tsarist Russia. In 1910 almost twice as many crimes were committed by minors between the ages of ten and seventeen as in 1901, the exact figures being 7,483 and 3,543, respectively. Juvenile delinquency was fiercely but vainly combated with every available means of intimidation. Here tsarist Russia differed in no wise from other countries, such as France and Germany.

Neither the schools of criminal anthropology nor the schools of sociology gave a satisfactory reply to the question of what were the causes or what conditioned juvenile delinquency. They went no further than to offer such primitive explanations as the influence of heredity or elementary economic factors which themselves require explanation.

In the struggle against crime the prison with its terrible solitary confinement played the chief role under the tsar.

In fascist countries the old-type prisons have been replaced by concentration camps of the Dachau type and by so-called “modernized” prisons which have been made to conform to the fundamental principles of the fascist “penitentiary system.” Freisler, a secretary in the German Ministry of Justice, formulated the principle governing this system in the following terse and telltale language: “to make the punishment so drastic and deterrent that no one will ever want to taste prison life again.”

Life however has proven this “theory” absolutely untenable. Prisons and concentration camps cannot be built fast enough to hold the swelling ranks of offenders, for the root of the evil lies deeply embedded in the social base of the modern capitalist state.

***

The Great October Socialist Revolution effected a radical change in social relations in the U.S.S.R. It was but natural that the question of crushing the resistance of the exploiting classes which had been overthrown, and of re-educating the masses of
the people in the spirit of Socialism should arise at the very beginning.

Criminal statistics for Soviet Russia after the October Socialist Revolution supply interesting material in proof of a recession in crime year after year.

Thus, from 1909 to 1913, the average number of criminal cases heard annually by Justices of the Peace was 1,302,525, the increase during this period having been 28 per cent. But statistics show that as early as 1920, the People’s Court, whose jurisdiction has always been much larger than that of the former Justice of the Peace, had 1,248,862 criminal cases to try.

Beginning with 1922 the statistical data become more specific.

If we take the number of criminal cases handled by the Procurator’s Office in 1922-23, when the first Soviet Criminal Code was published, as 100, we find a considerable drop in the index for the succeeding years. Thus, in 1926 the index figure was 63; in 1929, 60.

1929 and 1930 have gone down in the history of the U.S.S.R. as the years in which the collectivization of agriculture, one of the most important and difficult tasks of the Socialist Revolution, was, in the main, accomplished. The solution of this problem meant that tens of millions of peasants had definitely won over to Socialism, that the peasantry had once and for all effected the change to the new, Socialist system of society. The achievement of this task had far-reaching consequences, as it signified the end of the age-old struggle between the toiling masses of the countryside and the rich peasantry.

The collectivization of agriculture was a profound revolutionary transformation.

In May, 1930, 40-50 per cent of all peasant farms in the principal grain districts of the country had been collectivized. In that year the collective farms grew more than half of all the grain produced for the market. The collective-farm peasantry became a staunch, solid support of Soviet power. The victory of collective farming meant that no less than twenty million poor peasants were saved
from poverty and ruin, from bondage to the rich peasants, the kulaks.

This victory of Socialism in the U.S.S.R. evoked a new frenzied outburst of malice and hatred on the part of the “have-beens,” the kulaks and their ilk, who made every endeavor to destroy the collective farms. To this end they resorted to the theft of public, Socialist property, and to wrecking activities aimed at the destruction of the cattle of the peasants, particularly of the collective farmers.

As a result there was an increase during these years in several categories of crime, particularly in the stealing of public property. This occasioned the publication of the now well-known law of August 7, 1932 on safeguarding Socialist property.

The theft of public property is a particularly dangerous offense, as it tends to subvert the Soviet system which is based upon public property.

The law of August 7 is therefore a keystone in the system of revolutionary legislation, the observance of which is the chief concern of the Soviet Government and the Soviet people.

This law administered a crushing blow to the counter-revolutionary attempts of the kulaks, the rich peasants, to steal Socialist property.

Simultaneously, the strengthening of the collective-farm system and the increasing material welfare of the masses dealt a heavy blow to the kulaks and their henchmen. They lost every vantage point that they had held, and this category of crime began to dwindle rapidly.

In the U.S.S.R., repression is not the decisive factor in combating crime. The mighty growth of Socialist construction, and the abolition of exploitation, unemployment and poverty create conditions that necessarily lead to a constant drop in crime. This becomes apparent if we examine, for instance, the number of prosecutions under the law of August 7, 1932. In 1936, convictions under that law were only 30 per cent of the 1935 total, while in 1937 the percentage dropped to 10.
The successes achieved in the U.S.S.R. under Socialism, the triumph of the collective-farm system in the countryside, the complete and irrevocable abolition of unemployment and the transformation of public, Socialist property into the dominant economic force have had the effect of steadily lowering the crime index of the country.

In 1937, sentences for crimes against the state administration constituted only 48 per cent of the number of like sentences in 1933, for crimes committed in the discharge of official duties the ratio was 37.1 per cent, and 39.7 per cent for crimes against property.

Of great interest are the changes in the total of crime. Here we find a reduction of 52.1 per cent for the R.S.F.S.R. during the last quinquennial period (1933-37). For the whole U.S.S.R. there was a reduction of 28 per cent during the last triennial period (1935-37).

Statistical changes in juvenile delinquency deserve special note. If we take as 100 the number of convictions, in 1935, of juveniles from twelve to eighteen years of age inclusive, we obtain the following comparisons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1936 (first half)</td>
<td>102.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936 (second half)</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937 (first half)</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The drop in crime is obvious and quite sharp. This is the verdict of statistics, showing that a cardinal change has taken place in the U.S.S.R. as a result of the historic victory of Socialism.

Another striking example of how things have changed with regard to crime in the U.S.S.R. is the frequency with which offenders appear voluntarily before the prosecuting authorities—the Procurator’s Office—and narrate their crimes, admitting their guilt and asking that they be helped to lead a life of honest toil. The Procurator’s Office is always ready to assist in the placement of offenders who are determined to break with their criminal past. For instance, during twenty days in April 1937, six hundred criminals voluntarily appeared in Moscow alone to make a clean breast of their offenses.
Although many had been previously convicted, jobs were found for 530 of them.

About 1,000 persons voluntarily came to confess their guilt to the Office of the Procurator of the U.S.S.R. Many of these voluntary admissions concerned offenses that had not been known to the authorities, or the perpetrators of which had not yet been ascertained.

Again, many criminals write directly to the Procurator of the U.S.S.R., soliciting his aid to secure a new start in life.

Here is one such letter written by a certain Brevnov:

"My name is Brevnov. I am a former criminal with a long record of convictions, but earnestly request you now to grant me an appointment at your office to explain matters personally. I am very, very anxious to speak to you about many things and ask you not to refuse my request.

A job was found for Brevnov. After some lapse of time he again wrote to the Procurator:

"I hasten to inform you that I am ever so grateful to you for the excellent treatment which I, a former thief, have received from you. . . . Now I see and am fully convinced that the Soviet Government knows how to reform people for good if only they want to lead a proper life. I advise all thieves and other law-breakers to walk straight and become honest workers, and hope they will follow my advice. The Soviet Government has made it possible for me to become an auto-mechanic. . . ."

The majority of those that were placed have kept their jobs and are working conscientiously. Many, like Brevnov, sent letters of thanks to the public authorities for the personal care and attention which they received at their hands. Many former criminals who in capitalist countries would be treated as outcasts, as the scum of society, are in the Soviet Union encouraged to take part in the economic development of the country and thus become in time active builders of Socialist society. Thus, the erection of the
White Sea-Baltic Canal and of the Moscow-Volga Canal was of vast educational value for hundreds of criminals employed on these projects. It changed their whole outlook on life and brought them to earn their livelihood by honest toil.

The Soviet system of economy makes it possible for all to earn an honest living. Socialism, which establishes a new culture, re-educates people, changes their psychology, induces them to adopt a new attitude to the world that surrounds them, to other people, to society.

The right to work, which in the U.S.S.R. has become a matter of honor, glory, valor and heroism, is inscribed in the Soviet Constitution and is insured by the whole might of the Soviet state as a fundamental right of Soviet citizens, as one of the greatest achievements of the Socialist Revolution.

The great Constitution of the U.S.S.R., which bears the name of Stalin, its initiator and author, embodies the victories of Socialism in the form of a legal enactment which guarantees to the millions of the Soviet people a maximum of prosperity and material well-being, the final disappearance of the “birthmarks” of the old world, the final vanquishment of the survivals of the old, of ancient vices and crimes.

The reason for the success of the struggle against crime in the U.S.S.R. is to be found in the very organization of the new, Socialist society, a society which rests upon a new economic basis and is protected from the ulcers and corruptions of the old world by a new, Socialist culture, by Socialist democracy and Socialist law.