Earlier this year the joint secretaries of the Communist Party of Australia, Eric Aarons, Joe Palmada and Mavis Robertson, signed an appeal initiated by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, addressed to the Soviet government. The appeal requests reopening of the case of Nikolai Bukharin, his rehabilitation, and a public explanation of the circumstances which led to his wrongful conviction.

The initial signatories include many well known communists, socialists, and social democrats from a dozen or more countries. Among them are: Noam Chomsky, twelve British Labor MPs, Giuseppe Boffa, Paolo Spriano, Giuliano Procacci, Manolis Glezos, Michael Raptis, Lady Amalia Fleming, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, Ernst Mandel and Dr. Gunther Anders.

The appeal follows a request from Yuri Larin, son of Bukharin, received by the Foundation and addressed to Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the Italian Communist Party. The letter of Yuri Larin appears below.

The Italian Communist Party responded on June 16 through a long article in L'Unita by Paolo Spriano and later that month in an even more detailed article by Giuliano Procacci in Rinascita. The latter article, translated by Dave Davies, is reprinted here. Procacci, Professor of History at the University of Florence, has recently visited Australia at the invitation of the Frederick May Foundation to participate in the first Australian Conference on “Italian Culture and Italy Today”. During his stay he spoke to meetings in Sydney and Melbourne sponsored by Australian Left Review.

These are by no means the first appeals on behalf of Bukharin. As his son records, he and his mother have been making appeals since 1961, the year of the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Four old Bolsheviks also made an appeal at that time. They included a former secretary of Lenin and of the Comintern, E. Stasova. According to Larin, as late as June 1977, an official of the CPSU Central Committee informed him that the verdicts against Bukharin had not been set aside.

Why rake up old sores?

This year, ALR has recorded several important anniversaries, mostly of a decade ago. We wrote of the Tet offensive in Viet Nam, the “May Days” in Paris, the birth and defeat of the “Prague Spring”.

It is not that anniversaries, as such, are important, but if the events have historic significance it can be valuable to recall things which influence present practice. This year marks the ninetieth anniversary of Bukharin’s birth and the fortieth anniversary of his execution.
Bukharin joined the Bolshevik Party when he was eighteen. He was elected to its Central Committee in 1917 and remained a leader throughout the next twenty years. During much of this time (Dec. 1917 until 1929) he was editor of Pravda. From 1926 to 1929 he was at the head of the Communist International. The communists of the '20s and '30s knew him as both a theorist and an organiser. Later, he became, with others, a "non-person", yet in Lenin's testament he was called "the favorite son of the party".

As late as 1936, he had been sent abroad to negotiate the purchase of the archives of the German Social Democratic Party. These were at risk following Hitler's rise to power and contained many writings of Marx.

He was arrested early in 1937. Together with Rykov and nineteen others he was indicted in February 1938. The trial of the "Rights and Trotskyites" opened on March 2. Present in the court were large numbers of Soviet citizens and many foreign observers. The defendants were charged with entering into relations with foreign states to gain arms, engaging in espionage, wrecking the economy and participating in terrorist acts. Bukharin was specifically accused of the murder of Gorki. It was also said that he conspired to murder Lenin. The trial lasted eleven days. One defendant was sentenced to 25 years in prison, two were sentenced to a 15-year term, eighteen were sentenced to death. They were shot on March 15.

No communist party challenged the verdict at the time. Each communist party was then a section of the Communist International which, not surprisingly, fully supported the result. It was not only communists, however, who accepted the guilt of the accused.

After 1956 the situation changed. Not only had Khrushchev confirmed the massive illegalities of the Stalin period, but a range of rehabilitations began. At least seven of the defendants in the Bukharin trial were rehabilitated.

To say that some had not been guilty is to cast strong doubts that any were guilty, since the "plot" involved all twenty-one. Moreover, in 1962 a member of the Central Committee of the CPSU told a Conference of Soviet Historians unequivocally that Bukharin was no terrorist or spy. Further, the trial record itself shows that Bukharin made few admissions. The only evidence against him is the confessions of others, some at least of whom are now admitted to have been pressured into making false admissions.

Bukharin did say that he was "guilty" in a moral-political sense, and it is widely believed that this admission was designed to save the lives of his wife and son. His last message, learnt by heart by his wife in the prison, confirms that he regarded his life as devoted to socialism and that "Pravda prints the filthiest lie, that I, Nikolai Bukharin, have wishes to destroy the triumphs of October, to restore capitalism".

Many students of communism and many communist parties have considered the Stalin period and, in the words of l'Unita "have defined aberrant judicial enquiries, trials, condemnations and repressions for what they truly were". Consideration of the period ended within the Soviet Union after 1964, but others, not least the Italian Communist Party, have tried to evaluate all of Bukharin's work.

So long as the mistakes and deformations of the period are not fully faced it is difficult to conceive a flowering of democracy in the Soviet Union. Until the lessons of the past are recognised, the positive achievements of socialism will be heavily conditioned. And those who refuse to face their past cannot hope to develop a present and future practice free from authoritarianism or develop their theory free from dogma.

In this sense, Giuliano Procacci correctly titles his article "Reckoning With All Our Past" and indicates that it is necessary to re-establish historical truth not only for Bukharin but for "all those who shared that tragic fate, from Tomsky to Trotsky".

It may be said that some would rather let the past sleep, but it will not and cannot. It is nonsense that great leaders of the Russian revolution are unknown in their own country, that their pictures cannot be displayed or their writings read. Could one understand the Russian revolution without reading Lenin? How then can one understand it, and the civil war, without reading Trotsky? And is it possible to understand the strengths and weaknesses of Soviet policies in industry and agriculture without Bukharin?

Moreover, distortions of socialism continue. Such distortions are used by the enemies of socialism not only to contain the Soviet Union but to denigrate socialism, to present socialism as a system which restricts rather than enhances social rights and, especially, individual liberty. In the past, as now, it is not a matter of endorsing all the views of those labelled "enemies" or "dissenters" but of creating the conditions where views are subject to genuine debate and to the test of practice, so that "incorrect" views are detested by political means, not by administrative acts.

For such reasons it is appropriate to call for the reopening of the case of Bukharin and to commend the appeal of his son, which concludes with the last, moving and challenging, words of his father.
Yuri Larin’s letter to Enrico Berlinguer:

Respected Comrade Berlinguer,

I am writing this letter to you on the eve of the 40th anniversary of the tragic death of my father, Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. At that time I was only two years old and naturally was unable to remember my father. But my mother, who had spent many years in Stalin’s prisons and camps, miraculously survived and told me the truth about my father. Later G.M. Krzhizhanovsky, one of V.I. Lenin’s closest friends, and old Bolsheviks, who had lived through the terror and who had known Nikolai Ivanovich in one circumstance or another, told me about him. In addition I read many Bolshevik books (which are banned in our country even today and have been preserved only by chance by certain Old Bolsheviks) including books by Nikolai Ivanovich himself and the works of foreign researchers. The information which I obtained in this way helped me to fully appreciate the character and the social and political activity of my father. I understood the enormity of Stalin’s crimes, the extent to which he had falsified the history of the Party, the absurdity and stupidity of the accusations levelled against my father at the Plenum of the Central Committee of February March 1937 and the trial of the so-called “Right-Trotskyist Bloc”. However, on the basis of these absurd charges (espionage, treason, sabotage and murder), my father was expelled from the Central Committee and from the Party and condemned to death.

Beginning in 1961 my mother A.M. Larina and then I myself persistently raised with the highest Party-State organs of the country the question of the withdrawal of the monstrous allegations against N.I. Bukharin and his restoration to Party membership. This question was also raised with the Party leadership by the most senior of the Old Bolsheviks led by the former secretary of the Central Committee of the Party, E.D. Stasova. They died some time ago without receiving an answer and it was only last summer (1977) that we at last received some response in the form of a telephone call. An official of the Commission of Party Control of the Central Committee of the CPSU informed us by telephone that the accusations made at the trial of Bukharin had not been withdrawn as the process of examining the documents relating to the trial had not been completed; the question of the restoration of his Party membership could not, therefore, yet be resolved. This means that 40 years after the execution of my father we have received an answer, which, in effect, confirms the monstrous charges of Stalin. My approach to the Courts (the Supreme Court of the USSR) has been fruitless: the simple truth is they don’t answer me.

In a country where the greater part of the population has been brought up on the mendacious “Short Course” there are many who still consider my father as a traitor and a hireling-of-Hitler although in reality the truth is that he was an outstanding fighter against fascism and in his last years he devoted all his energies to the exposure of fascism and to warnings against the growing fascist threat.

Leaving home for the last time for the Plenum of February March 1937 (from which he never returned) my father said to my mother “don’t become embittered: there are sad errors in history. I want my son to grow up as a bolshevik”. He looked on the events which had occurred as tragic but transient; he believed in the ultimate victory of the forces of socialism.

I am not a member of the Party but for my father the word “Bolshevik” undoubtedly means a fighter for social justice. And we are unable to obtain such justice in our country for a man whom Lenin before his death called “the favourite of the whole Party”. For my mother, who lived through the horrors of Stalin’s camps, who knew many of Lenin’s comrades-in-arms, representatives of the old Bolshevik Party — people about whom she preserves in her memory the happiest recollections and of whom she always speaks with tenderness and love — life in such a situation is becoming more and more intolerable. It is inconceivable that people who still carry on their shoulders the burden of Stalin’s crimes and have not cast it into the dustbin of history can fight for high ideals.

I am approaching you, Comrade Berlinguer, not only because you are the leader of the largest communist party of western Europe and have...
thrown off this burden but also because N.I. Bukharin was a Communist-Internationalist, an active member of the International Workers’ Movement. He was known to Communists of many countries: they always recalled him with warmth. Some of them are still living and working in the ranks of the Italian Communist Party. I particularly have in mind Comrade Umberto Terracini.

I am approaching you to ask you to participate in the campaign for the rehabilitation of my father, in whatever form seems to you to be most appropriate.

Not long before his death Nikolai Ivanovich wrote a letter “to the future generation of leaders of the Party” in which he appealed to them “to unravel the monstrous tangle of crimes”. My mother learnt the text of this letter by heart in the dark days and after her rehabilitation she passed it on to the Central Committee of the Party. This letter ended with the words:

“Know Comrades that on the banner which you will carry in your victorious march towards communism there is a drop of my blood.”

Yours sincerely, Yu. Larin (Bukharin) 12.3.78.

Bukharin’s last testament:

I am leaving life. I am lowering my head not before the proletarian axe, which must be merciless but also virginal. I feel my helplessness before a hellish machine, which, probably by the use of medieval methods, has acquired gigantic power, fabricates organised slander, acts boldly and confidently.

Dzerzhinski is gone; the remarkable traditions of the Chekha have gradually faded into the past, when the revolutionary idea guided all its actions, justified cruelty to enemies, guarded the state against any kind of counter-revolution. That is how the Chekha earned special confidence, special respect, authority and esteem. At present, most of the so-called organs of the NKVD are a degenerate organisation of bureaucrats, without ideas, rotten, well-paid, who use the Chekha’s bygone authority to cater to Stalin’s morbid suspiciousness (I fear to say more) in a scramble for rank and fame, concocting their slimy cases, not realising that history does not put up with witnesses of foul deeds.

Any member of the Central Committee, any member of the Party can be rubbed out, turned into a traitor, terrorist, diversionist, spy, by these “wonder-working organs”. If Stalin should ever get any doubts about himself, confirmation would instantly follow.

Storm clouds have risen over the Party. My one head, guilty of nothing, will drag down thousands of guiltless heads. For an organisation must be created, a Bukharinite organisation, which is in reality not only non-existent now, the seventh year that I have had not a shadow of disagreement with the Party, but was also non-existent then, in the years of the right opposition. About the secret organisations of Ruin and Uglanov, I knew nothing. I expounded my views, together with Rykov and Tomskii, openly.

I have been in the Party since I was eighteen, and the purpose of my life has always been to fight for the interests of the working class, for the victory of socialism. These days the paper with the sacred name Pravda prints the filthiest lie, that I, Nikolai Bukharin, have wished to destroy the triumphs of October, to restore capitalism. That is unexampled insolence, that is a lie that could be equalled in insolence, in irresponsibility to the people, only by such a lie as this: it has been discovered that Nikolai Romanov devoted his whole life to the struggle against capitalism and monarchy, to the struggle for the achievement of a proletarian revolution. If, more than once, I was mistaken about the methods of building socialism, let posterity judge me no more harshly than Vladimir Illich did. We were moving towards a single goal for the first time, on a still unbathed trail. Other times, other customs. Pravda carried a discussion page, everyone argued, searched for ways and means, quarrelled and made up and moved on together.

I appeal to you, a future generation of Party leaders, whose historical mission will include the obligation to take apart the monstrous cloud of crimes that is growing ever hungrier in these frightful times, taking fire like a flame and suffocating the Party.

I appeal to all Party members! I am confident that sooner or later the filter of history will inevitably sweep the filth from my head. I was never a traitor; without hesitation I would have given my life for Lenin’s, I loved Kirov, started nothing against Stalin. I ask a new young and honest generation of Party leaders to read my letter at a Party Plenum, to exonerate me, and to reinstate me in the Party.

Know, comrades, that on that banner, which you will be carrying in the victorious march to communism there is a drop of my blood.”

N. Bukharin.

Settling Accounts with the Past
by Giuliano Procacci

The appeal which Yuri Larin, son of Nikolai Bukharin, has launched for the rehabilitation of his father has evoked a wide response in Italy. The press has featured the fact that communist scholars and militants,
including the writer, have signed it and expressed their support.

The request addressed to the Soviet government calls for a review of the iniquitous sentence of death on one of the most eminent and prestigious people in the leading group of Bolsheviks and the removal of the infamies and calumnous accusations which have weighed upon his memory for so many years. It is an act of justice which imposes itself and calls out for action.

I would like, however, to emphasise that the communist scholars certainly have not waited for this opportunity to dissociate themselves from the aberrant judgements of the Short Course of 1938 [i.e., The History of the CPSU(B) — trans.] and to approach the person of Bukharin in the spirit of historical objectivity. Paolo Spriano in his article in l'Unita has already recalled the contribution of scholars like Ernesto Ragionieri, Giuseppe Boffa and others to the study of the thought and political action of Bukharin in the framework of an analysis of the general phenomenon of Stalinism. For my part, I can recall that 15 years ago Editori Riuniti [a publishing house — trans.] published a collection of texts on the debate around the problems of permanent revolution and of socialism in one country in the years 1924—1926. As well as texts of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Stalin, a piece by Bukharin was also reproduced. Recently the same Editori Riuniti published an Italian translation of a work by Moshe Lewin in which he devotes great attention to the person of Bukharin and emphasises the topicality of his thought. I should like also to recall that we are indebted to Alberto Ponsi, a young communist scholar, for an accurate analysis of the role played by Bukharin in the preparatory stages of the 1936 Constitution.

This interest in the person of Bukharin is easily understood. Among the Bolshevik leaders who stood at the head of the Soviet state after the death of Lenin, Bukharin was probably the most gifted in capacity and richness of political elaboration, as Lenin himself recognised in his testament.

The name of Bukharin is usually closely associated with the battle he conducted in the years 1928—29 against the options taken by Stalin in agrarian and economic policy which led to forced collectivisation in the following years. Certainly, this battle was the central and most important episode in Bukharin’s political career, but it would be an error not to set it in a wider framework. The political development of Bukharin goes back much further, unfolding in an extremely complex and contradictory manner.

Naturally it is impossible here to trace even a profile in summary, and I will limit myself to drawing the attention of the reader to several more important and less known points.

To Bukharin is attributed the first formulation of the process of world revolution as a conquest of the “city” by the countryside, of the metropolis by the colonies, a formula which, as is known, was taken up again in China in the years of the “cultural revolution”. This latter expression also recurs in the writings of Bukharin, and one of his best-known works is devoted to it.

In my judgement, the major contribution of Bukharin in the period preceding the polemics on collectivisation consists in having been the first, along with Palmiro Togliatti, to advance the watchword of the “defence of peace” and to foreshadow the hypothesis that war could be avoided as a general strategy of foreign policy of the Soviet Union and the international communist movement. As is known, this watchword and this prospect which Bukharin and Togliatti advanced as early as 1928 were then taken up again by Dimitrov at the VII Congress of the International in 1935 and with great force by the XX Congress of the CPSU in 1956. It is very probable that the taking of this position is not unconnected with the removal of Bukharin from the presidency of the Communist International immediately after the VI Congress.

One can also advance the hypothesis that Bukharin was in a certain sense one of those who anticipated the turning point (with the VII Congress) in Soviet and Communist International diplomacy after Hitler came to power. Whatever else is certain, it is sure that once this change was made Bukharin was one of its most decisive and intelligent supporters. If one takes into consideration all his political activity from January 1933 when he returned to be a front-rank political figure as editor of Izvestia, it becomes evident that Bukharin was one of the Soviet
leaders with a clear perception of the danger of Nazism and fascism and the necessity to combat and isolate them. In Bukharin’s activities as a publicist, the insistence on the necessity of a political and ideological struggle against fascism constitutes without doubt one of the dominant and frequently recurring themes. To this vision and conception of international problems is welded firmly his conception of the internal problems of the Soviet Union. He was fully conscious of the dangers which menaced his country, and he used the formula of capitalist encirclement then current. He believed, however, that as well as providing for military security the Soviet Union had to prepare itself for eventualities by consolidating its internal cohesion, and that to this end it was necessary to relieve the very serious social and political tensions provoked by the traumatic experiences of collectivisation and the first five-year plan. The road pointed out by Bukharin to realise this objective was that of the strengthening of socialist democracy. In this light, we must see his final battle to introduce into the 1936 Constitution elements which would assure a major articulation of democracy in the Soviet system. It was a battle conducted with liberality and ingenuity. It was, however, a battle lost. The Stalin Constitution which was finally approved did not take up the proposals of Bukharin, and the Plenum of February 1937, was one of the most dismal pages in the whole of Soviet history, bordering on a coup d’état. It put an end not only to the career of Bukharin but also to the hopes of renewal and democratisation which seemed to make progress between the XVII Congress of the CPSU and the assassination of Kirov. After the Plenum of February 1937 came the purges and the trials which cut down the whole leading group of the Bolshevik party.

The tragic fate of Bukharin, while involving particularly touching human aspects, did not differ from that of many other Bolshevik leaders who shared or opposed his political positions, oppositionists of right or left, of Tomsky and of Trotsky. Today’s demand for the rehabilitation of Bukharin is also a demand for justice for all those who shared his tragic fate, and for a process to re-establish historical truth. It seems to me that this must be said not only for obvious reasons of equity and justice, but also to dispel in anticipation the doubt that behind the request for Bukharin’s rehabilitation there are strictly incidental reasons.

There exists in fact a tendency, of which the book by Moshe Lewin is probably the most genuine evidence, to emphasise the topicality of the political thought of Bukharin and to see in him the forerunner and inspirer of the reforming tendencies which are present today in Soviet society and which found expression in the discussions on economic reform in 1965. Personally, I must say that this type of approach to history and the Soviet reality seems to me more firmly based and therefore more convincing than that, for example, which is expressed in workerist or Trotskyist tomes, such as in the works of Charles Bettelheim, to quote the best known example. In any case I believe that this kind of approach can evoke reservations and criticisms as in fact has happened in Italy. It is a matter of complex questions which we have long sought to discuss and on which the debate certainly cannot be considered closed. However, I repeat, this is not the point which is now in question. The appeal of Yuri Larin offers to us rather the opportunity to re-affirm a principle which is general and not incidental; that the history of the communist, Soviet and international movement is a great and tragic history; that to it belongs in full the right of all those who, like Bukharin, have fought in its ranks and have paid with their lives for the courage of their ideals. The re-establishment of historical truth is not only an obligatory act towards these comrades who have fallen and been slandered, but also a necessity of our movement.

I am in fact convinced that from knowledge of our past, of all our past, with its successes, its achievements, its errors, its crimes and its tragedies, our maturity and our socialist conscience will emerge reinforced.

— translated by D.D.

Who Was Bukharin

Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was 29 when the Russian revolution broke out in 1917, and already a well-known leader of the Bolshevik party. His political development had
traversed the path of many other revolutionary leaders: the student movement, 1905, prison, exile. Abroad he had engaged in intense publicist activity, above all in theory, making an important contribution to the development of “Bolshevism” as a distinct kind of European Marxism. Among his party comrades he was one who principally concerned himself with contemporary economic and sociological thought: his book *World Economics and Imperialism* anticipated some of the subsequent theses of Lenin on imperialism. Returning to Russia in May 1917 he played a prominent part in orienting the party towards Lenin’s positions. He became a member of the central committee and took part in the insurrection in Moscow where he became the most popular leader.

On the morrow of October he led, in polemics with Lenin, the opposition to the signing of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. During the Civil War he was the editor of *Pravda*, the official organ of the party, and distinguished himself above all for his publicist activities and anti-vulgarisation. In *The Economy of the Transition Period* (1920) he justified the methods of “war communism” and in *Historical Materialism* (1921) he earned the reputation of the official theoretician of bolshevism.

With the ending of “war communism” and the launching of NEP (1921) there began for Bukharin a phase of profound re-thinking which brought him in a short time to becoming one of the most passionate supporters of the New Economic Policy.

His role in Soviet history was one of the first rank after the death of Lenin (1924), when a struggle for power commenced within the leading Bolshevik group, and when there was a deepening of differences on the mode of development of the revolution and the industrialisation of the country. In those years, Bukharin elaborated, in polemics with the exponents of the “left” (Trotsky, Preobrazhensky and subsequently Kamenev and Zinoviev), a gradualist conception of the construction of socialism based on the NEP model and on the rejection of any coercive policy towards the peasants (the “dictatorship of industry”). Rejecting the thesis of the prolongation of the class struggle into the phase following the taking of power, he defended a “pluralist” concept of the transition society. It was he who elaborated theoretically the Stalin formula of “socialism in one country”.

After defeating the left opposition, from 1925 to 1928 it was Bukharin together with Stalin who established the main lines of Soviet policy: in those years, official Bolshevism was “Bukharinist”. From 1926 he was also at the head of the Comintern where he exercised a wide international influence, energetically drawing the attention of the communist movement to the revolutionary resurgence of the colonial world.

His name, however, is linked above all with the dramatic struggle in opposition to the methods of Stalinism. When, during the crisis of NEP, the idea was advanced of a five-year plan, Bukharin (in a hard battle which involved the whole party) defended, against the forced collectivisation of the countryside, the perspective of a plan which would respect fundamental economic laws and the free self-determination of the peasants. The struggle between Stalinists and Bukharinists involved the whole world communist movement: the theses of the VI Congress of the Comintern on “social fascism” were the result of the victory of the former over the latter.

After 1929, the year of the defeat of Bukharin and the beginning of the first five-year plan, the power of Stalin was not challenged again. Beginning with 1933 and ending in 1936, following terrible difficulties of the first attempts at planning, there was formed in the USSR an underground opposition to the methods of Stalin which took up many of the concepts of the Bukharinist “right”. At the XVII Congress of the party (1934) there was a significant affirmation of the moderate wing which brought about a new balance, albeit temporary, in the party. Bukharin spoke at the Congress, and was again reinstated into several positions of prestige. The turning point of the VII Congress of the Comintern (1935) was also a result of this new balance within the leading group of Bolsheviks.

In 1936, Stalin unleashed mass terror against the party and instigated the Moscow trials against the old opposition leaders. In 1938, Bukharin was arrested and tried for improbably accusations, condemned to death and shot.