



Chapter Eight

The Ship of Philosophers

Background

On the morning of September 28, 1922, the German steamer *The Oberbuergermeister Hacken* set sail from Petrograd. Its passengers included the cream of Russian intellectual life—writers, poets, journalists, scientists, and philosophers. The best known of them, philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, strolled the deck in his broad hat and galoshes, holding a thick cane. He and other passengers were given a “Golden Book” to sign to memorialize the famous Russians traveling on the ship. On the book’s cover was a picture of bass Fedor Shaliapin, a passenger on the previous voyage.

This “Ship of Philosophers” was carrying Russian intellectuals banished by the Bolsheviks from Russia. They had been arrested, investigated, and sentenced as enemies by the secret police, then called the OGPU. Most, like Berdiaev, would never see Russia again.

This is the story of the Bolsheviks’ repression of intellectuals. It began in May of 1922 as one of Lenin’s last major acts shortly before a first stroke that left him partially paralyzed. No longer able to speak after his third stroke in March of 1923, Lenin retired from active politics, but his anti-intellectual policies continued unabated. Lenin’s May 1922 initiative resulted in the exile, imprisonment, and internal banishment of hundreds of leading intellectuals, representative of the “Silver Age” of Russian intellectual life. Under Stalin, the policy con-

tinued but was applied to a much larger numbers of intellectuals and specialists in the late 1920s and, even more broadly, during the Great Purge of 1937 to 1938.

Lenin is often portrayed sympathetically as a leader who was willing to tolerate open discussion and debate, leading to speculation that the Soviet Union would have developed a more humane form of socialism had Lenin lived. Lenin's writings took contradictory positions as he maneuvered the Bolsheviks through the civil war and the New Economic Policy introduced in March of 1921. Lenin, however, was consistent on "democratic centralism," the principle that power should be concentrated in a monopoly communist party that was only "democratic" in the sense that the party made its decisions by votes of party leaders.

This chapter shows the stark distinction between Lenin's democratic centralism, which allows some discussion within the party, and democracy, which allows open discussion among members of society at large, including intellectuals. The story begins with Lenin's repression of "non-communist" physicians and then moves to his purge of intellectuals. These purges took place during the "liberal" New Economic Policy period, and they show that the Bolsheviks could not tolerate any type of independent assembly or thinking.

Lenin: Learning How to Purge

Lenin's purge of anti-Soviet intellectuals was sparked by a letter from the minister of health (since 1918), N. A. Semashko. Semashko, himself a physician, was upset by the "anti-Soviet" attitude of the Congress of Physicians in May of 1922, prompting him to send, on May 23, 1922, the following letter to Lenin:

To Comrade Lenin and Members of the Politburo:

Respected comrades. The recent All-Russian Conference of Physicians took such a significant and dangerous turn that I consider it necessary to inform you about tactics being used with success by Kadets, Monarchists, and Social Revolutionaries [three opposition parties]. My information suggests this tendency is wide-spread not only among doctors but among other specialists (agronomists, engineers, technicians and lawyers). Even responsible persons do not recognize the danger.

What went on at the Congress can be summarized as follows: 1. A movement against Soviet medicine, 2. The demand for “freely” elected officials and grassroots independent organizations (an exact resolution of the Congress) according to formulations advanced by Kadets, Monarchists, and Social Revolutionaries, 3. A clear intent to remain outside the professional worker movement, and, 4. An intent to organize independent publishing organizations.

Semashko proposed limiting the independence of professional organizations, banning independent publishing, and imposing the obligation to practice “Soviet” medicine. He ends his letter to Lenin: “The removal of those Monarchist and Social Revolutionary doctors [gives their names] making presentations from positions of leadership should be agreed with the OGPU.” In other words, the offending “anti-Soviet” physicians were to be dealt with by the secret police.

Lenin directed the letter to Stalin, who, in his position as General Secretary of the Central Committee, submitted it to the Politburo. Lenin’s handwritten “question” for the Politburo reads:

Comrade Stalin. I believe it necessary to show this letter to Dzerzhinskii [the head of the OGPU] with extreme secrecy (no copies) and to all members of the Politburo and to prepare a directive: “To direct Dzerzhinskii’s OGPU to work out measures with the assistance of Semashko and to report to the Politburo (two-week deadline?)”

Stalin submitted Lenin’s proposal for a Politburo vote (for repression of physicians) on the same day. Lenin’s proposal, which opened the door for the suppression of any type of independent thinking or inquiry, received approval from all Politburo members (Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, Aleksei Rykov, and V.M. Molotov) except the handwritten abstention from Mikhail Tomskii (the trade union head): “I withhold my vote because the issue of the Congress of Physicians needs to be presented in a different framework. We are guilty ourselves for much of this and Semashko is the most guilty.”

Following the Politburo decree, Dzerzhinskii submitted to the Politburo (within the required two-week period) his OGPU report “About Anti-Soviet Groupings Among the Intelligentsia,” which identified a wide range of “anti-Soviet activities in professional organizations,



Poster of Lenin sweeping away marginals and former people, entitled "Lenin purges the land of the unclean."

universities, scientific societies, administrative conferences, and in trusts, cooperatives, and trade organizations.”¹

On the basis of Dzerzhinskii’s report, the Politburo issued a “Decree About Anti-Soviet Groupings Among the Intelligentsia” of June 8, 1922, which called for “filtering” incoming university students with strict limits on non-proletarians and checks of political reliability, restrictions of meetings of students and of professors, and bans on independent publishing activities. These checks were to be carried out by the OGPU, the personnel administrations of the higher education ministry, and the political department of the state publishing office.

The June 8, 1922, Politburo decree created a special “conference” comprised of representatives of the ministry of foreign affairs and justice department empowered “to exile abroad or to points within Russia, if a more stern punishment is not required.” A commission comprised of a Politburo member (Kamenev), a ranking OGPU official (Unshlikht), and a high official of the revolutionary-military tribunal (Kurskii) was to do the final review of the list of leaders of hostile intellectual groups to be punished and the list of publishing operations to be closed.

What started as an operation against “non-communist” physicians broadened into a general witch hunt against intellectuals and professionals.

The Politburo received the list of offending physicians on June 22. It took until July 20 for the special conference to submit the names of anti-Soviet intellectuals, but the Politburo declared its work “unsatisfactory because of the small size of the list and insufficient substantiation.” On the same day, Stalin received an urgent request from the OGPU to speed things up because word of impending arrests was circulating both within the country and in émigré circles.² A list of 186 names of anti-Soviet intellectuals was submitted on August 2, 1922, by the OGPU representative, apparently based upon a selection committee meeting of July 22. They were scheduled for arrest and then were to be deported.

The list of 186 doctors, engineers, professors, and literary figures does not follow a uniform format. The most complete cases give the name and address, the charge, and the vote of the commission, often based upon the recommendation of the personnel department of

the organization for which the person worked. The sentence, in the majority of cases, was exile abroad, although a number, particularly physicians, were exiled to remote regions where they were to practice medicine. In some cases, the commission decided that the person represented no danger and was not scheduled for punishment, but the name remained on the list anyway ("The commission is against exile because he is harmless"). With these few exceptions, the others were scheduled for internal or external exile. Among the names were:

No. 23 (in the list of those investigated under case 813). ABRIKOSOV, V. V.: A priest of the Roman Catholic Church in Moscow. The son of the owner of a confectionary factory. The initiator of illegal meetings of Catholics in his home for the unification of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. A close friend of the Patriarch Tikhon and the head of the Catholic congregation in Petrograd. Carry out a search and arrest and send him abroad. He lives at Prechistenskii Boulevard House 29, Apartment 3.

No. 9 (in the list of "anti-Soviet intelligentsia" in Petrograd). ZAMIATIN, E. I.: A concealed White Guardist. Author of an illegal resolution, which he presented at the House of Literature, in which he defamed Andrei Bely for his defense of the fatherland. He is fully against Soviet power in his writings. He is a close colleague of the enemy Remizov, who has already fled. Remizov is a known enemy and Zamiatin is as well. If he is sent abroad, he could become a dangerous leader. It is necessary to send him to Novgorod or Kursk; in no case can he be sent abroad.

No. 31 (in the list of agronomists and workers of cooperative enterprises). KONDRAT'EV, N. D., Professor: Noted and close collaborator of "Journal of Agricultural Economics"—an organ of anti-Soviet agronomists. A Social Revolutionary involved in the case of the "Tactical Center." Sentenced to death for participation in the "Union of Rebirth." Death sentence changed to prison. Maintains ties with Social Revolutionaries although he officially left the party. Arrest and exile abroad. The entire commission is in favor.³

Eight days later (August 10), the Politburo accepted the list, ordering the OGPU to arrest the most dangerous and place the others under house arrest.⁴ On August 22, the ever accurate OGPU submitted a

budget to Stalin for the projected cost of exiling 217 persons abroad. On August 22 and again on August 26, 1922, the OGPU sent Stalin reports on the progress of the exile campaign with statistics on arrests, exiles, and numbers held in prisons, house arrest, or released on their own recognizance after agreeing to pay the cost of exile.

Not all sentences were carried out. Kondratyev, instead of being sent abroad, was held in a prison. According to OGPU reports, of the 67 Moscow intellectuals scheduled for exile, 12 were under house arrest, 14 were in prisons, six had not been arrested, and 21 were on their own recognizance. The most active and dangerous intellectuals were exiled in convoys of six.⁵

The Story of Berdiaev

The most famous name on the list of 186 was Nikolai Berdiaev, the world renowned philosopher of mystic non-orthodox Christianity and critical philosophy, an opponent of the close link between church and state under the czars.⁶ The charge against him and suggested sentence read:

NO. 55. BERDIAEV, N. A.: Close to the publishing house "Bereg." He is being investigated as part of the cases "Tactical Center" and the "Union of Rebirth." A monarchist and a Kadet of the rightist persuasion. A member of the Black Hundred, inclined to religion, taking part in the religious counter revolution. Ionov and Poliansky are for internal exile. The Commission with the participation of Bogdanov and others is for foreign exile.

Berdiaev's story has been reconstructed from his case file and is representative of what happened to other intellectuals.⁷

Although in the early days of Soviet power, Berdiaev was allowed to continue to teach at Moscow University and to gather intellectuals in his Free Academy of Religious Culture, he was closely watched by the secret police. On February 18, 1922, Berdiaev was forced to haul scrap metal in freezing weather but was arrested after one day of work. His apartment was thoroughly searched and his manuscripts and correspondence confiscated, although he freely admitted to the

arresting officer that he was an “ideological opponent of the idealization of communism.” Berdiaev’s arrest was based on the information of an informant (who got his name wrong), that he was a member of the “Council of Social Activists.”

Berdiaev’s imprisonment ended after a nocturnal interrogation by none other than the OGPU head Dzerzhinskii, his deputy Menzhinskii, and Politburo member Kamenev. In his memoirs, Berdiaev describes Dzerzhinskii: “He gave the impression of a dedicated and honest person. He was a fanatic. There was something terrifying about him. Earlier he wanted to be a Catholic monk but he transferred his fanaticism to communism.” After a lengthy conversation, Dzerzhinskii told him he was free to go but that he could not leave Moscow without permission.

On August 16, Berdiaev was awakened by the OGPU’s knock on his Moscow apartment door. The OGPU detachment searched his apartment from one o’clock to five o’clock A.M. and then took Berdiaev to its Lubianka headquarters. In his interrogations, Berdiaev did not hide his antipathy to communism: “Any class organization or party should be subordinated to the individual and to humanity.” And: “No party past or present arouses any sympathy in me.” The OGPU’s verdict: exile abroad for anti-Soviet activity. Berdiaev refused to sign any confession, stating “I do not declare myself guilty of engaging in anti-Soviet activity and I particularly do not regard myself as guilty of engaging in counter-revolutionary activity during a period of military difficulties for Russia.” After rejection of his protest of the verdict, Berdiaev was forced to sign a pledge not to return to Russia without permission and that he would pay the cost of his travel. Within a month, he was sailing to Germany on the “Ship of Philosophers.” Berdiaev died in Paris in 1948, a world-renowned philosopher and historian whose major works were translated into many languages.

The Less Fortunate

The passengers on the Ship of Philosophers did not know so at the time, but they could count themselves as fortunate. Many intellectuals remaining in Russia, who refused to kowtow to the party, were eventually imprisoned in the Solovetskii Camp of Special Designa-

tion, which housed primarily political prisoners. Located on a remote northern island, the Solovetskii camp was noted for its cruelty and harsh conditions.

When the Great Terror began in 1937, the Solovetskii camp received an execution “limit” of 1,200 but the ambitious camp commander executed 1,615, mostly political prisoners. Lists of victims were prepared from inmate records and from informer reports. The Solovetskii commander, upon receiving approval of his execution protocols, executed two echelons (1116 and 509) in October and November of 1937.

An eyewitness account describes the departure of the second echelon marching in columns of four through the archway to the wharves:

There I saw the face of Professor Florensi, there was white-bearded Professor Litvinov, holding his head high. There was Kotliarevskii (in a new leather cap) and Vanegengaim (in a black coat and a deerskin shirt). They see me and nod; their hands are occupied with their bags. Kotliarevskii tries unsuccessfully to smile. . . . More than a thousand were taken away that evening. . . . later there were terrible rumors that they had all been drowned.

The executions were duly reported to Moscow:

To Major Garin, Deputy Department Head NKVD: I hereby report that, on the basis of the order signed by the head of the administration of the NKVD, Commissar Zakovskii of October 16, 1937, No. 189852 for the “highest measure of punishment” according to protocols No. 81, 82, 83, 84, and 85—1,116 persons have been executed. Signed: Capitan State Security, Matveev, November 10, 1937.⁸

Independent Organizations and Independent Thinkers

The first purge of intellectuals and other “anti-Soviet” thinkers set up a formal machinery for identifying those who did not agree with the Bolshevik regime. A special conference was established that could recommend anyone they felt was exhibiting signs of dissent or unlike thinking for jail or exile. The conference worked on the basis of em-

ployer records and recommendations, meaning that persons on poor terms with their colleagues or employers could be singled out. There was no legal recourse for those arrested. Their only review was by a committee headed by a Politburo member and an OGPU official.

Intellectuals were an early target of Bolshevik repression for fear that they would present an alternative view of reality, different from the “truth” enunciated in the official party line. The only real truth with respect to politics, economy, arts, and literature was supposed to be that enunciated by the party. “Soviet” artists, physicians, scientists, and poets were those who were prepared to accept the infinite wisdom of the party line. Anti-Soviet intellectuals were those who were prepared to disagree with the party line. Kondrat’ev, as an example, was an economist-statistician, who spent his career collecting economic data and relating what he felt these statistics had to say about economic reality. Berdiaev believed in the superiority of the individual over any party or state. The writer Zamiatin wrote allegories that might be critical of the Soviet system, but party authorities could not know for sure. Such intellectuals posed a formidable threat because their version of the truth differed from that of the party.

Soviet fear and hostility toward intellectuals continued until the end of the Soviet regime. The longest serving state-security chief, Yury Andropov, who headed the KGB from 1967 to 1982, was the party’s chief warrior in its battle with intellectuals, such as Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Notably, Andropov’s methods were the same as Dzerzhinskii’s—internal and foreign exiles, harassment, the compiling of compromising materials—anything to neutralize their influence on Soviet society.⁹



Chapter Nine

Who Is the Prisoner Here?

Background

The Holocaust provided the classic image of the concentration camp guard: A cruel and sadistic SS officer impeccably dressed in black jackboots, indifferently sorting incoming Jewish prisoners for the gas chamber or work brigades. The Nazi concentration camps were basically extermination camps in which prisoners were either executed immediately or worked to death. The men and women who guarded these camps belonged to the fanatical SS-Totenkopfverbände or were recruited (such as female guards) into associated organizations by racist appeals. In 1945, the Nazi concentration camps held around 700,000 inmates guarded by 55,000 guards.

At the time of Stalin's death in March of 1953, his concentration camps held 2.5 million prisoners. While the Nazis operated hundreds of camps, primarily in Eastern Europe, Stalin's Gulag administration operated 3,274 labor camps and colonies, 52 prisons, 120 children's work colonies, and 748 orphanages and hospitals spread throughout the vast territory of the Soviet Union. To run this empire, the Gulag administration employed 446,000 persons, of whom more than half (234,000) were in the militarized guard division.¹

This chapter tells the story of the quarter-million guards who manned the sentry outposts, who escorted inmates to work, and who