

## **5 The Purge of the Academy of Sciences**

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, when I returned from Ulaanbaatar to Ulan-Udè in August of 1929, I learned that a purge of the Academy of Sciences was imminent. I decided to cut short my research and return directly to Leningrad. My trip, however, proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Chinese troops under the command of Chang Tso-lin, the warlord of Manchuria, had attacked the Soviet-owned Chinese Eastern Railroad which had been built across Manchuria by Russian engineers during Tsarist times. As a consequence of the war in Manchuria, train schedules on the Trans-Siberian railroad were seriously disrupted, and I had to wait many hours for a train. When it finally arrived in Ulan-Udè, it was already thirty-six hours behind schedule and it was not the express train for which I had waited, but a very slow train. It took me along the southern Trans-Siberian route through Chelyabinsk, and eleven days later I finally reached Leningrad. Under normal conditions, the same trip would have taken only five or six days. I learned from the newspapers that fighting between the Red Army and the Chinese warlord troops had been heavy and that the Soviet Union had decided to sell the Chinese Eastern Railroad to the Chinese central government. In 1929 the Soviet Union was not ready for a serious confrontation with its eastern neighbor and therefore sold the railroad at a very low price. The Russian railroad employees were mostly refugees from revolutionary days and they were promised identical jobs in the Soviet Union. In 1937, however, most of them were

## *Chapter 5*

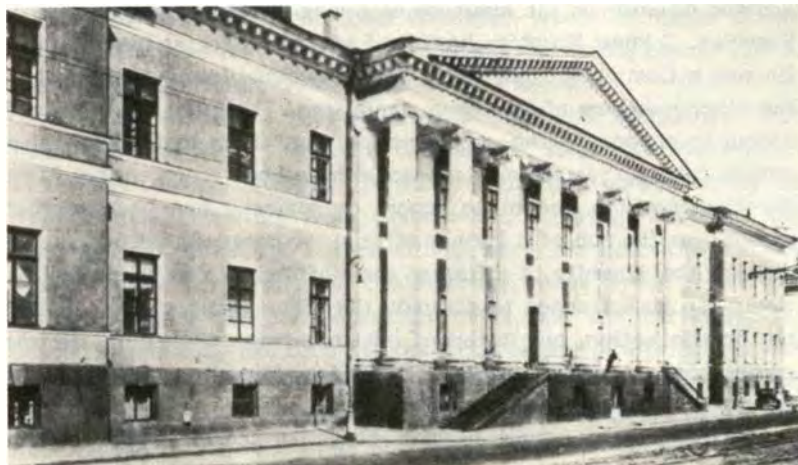
accused of spying for Japan and other "imperialist" nations and thrown into concentration camps.

Very soon after my arrival in Leningrad the purge began. It was still summer and many scholars were either on vacation or expeditions. The permanent secretary of the Academy of Sciences, Sergei Fedorovich Ol'denburg, was in France discussing cooperation between scholars of the French and Soviet academies. Many scholars were worried that the purge might begin without the actual head of the academy present. My former professor and immediate superior at the Asian Museum, Professor Vladimirtsov, was in the countryside not far from Leningrad. Nataliya and I went to see him in order to discuss the situation and to see what he thought about it all. At Vladimirtsov's cottage we also met Fedor Aleksandrovich Rozenberg, nominally the deputy director, but actually the real director of the Asian Museum because Ol'denburg was too busy as secretary of the academy to spend much time at the museum. We discussed the situation, and both Rozenberg and Vladimirtsov expressed the hope that those in charge of the purge would not really dare to do too much damage to the academy, even in Ol'denburg's absence. They were greatly mistaken because purges had already begun in many other scholarly institutions as well as in offices and factories, and what we read in the newspapers did not give us much confidence that our purge would be any less bloodthirsty. Even eminent, and in some cases irreplaceable, specialists were fired or exiled. Being by nature mistrustful and rather inclined to pessimism, I viewed the situation as grave. The events of the next few weeks proved me right.

A few days after our visit with Vladimirtsov the purge began. All scholars and employees were suspended from work and were required to gather every morning in the academy's large meeting hall at exactly ten o'clock. This became the routine for about two weeks. The committee conducting the purge consisted of four men. Its chairman was a certain Figatner, an employee of the Commissariat of Workers' and Peasants' Inspection which supervised the work of the government. The other members were the GPU (secret police) official Sadovskii, the director of the Hermitage



*The Purge of the Academy of Sciences*



Illus. 15. The Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union



Illus. 16. The Meeting Hall of the Academy of Sciences

## *Chapter 5*

Museum Kiparisov who was either Communist or pro-Communist, and the director of the Institute of Living Oriental Languages P. I. Vorob'ev. I knew Vorob'ev because I was professor at his institute. He was a Communist but rather reasonable and less dangerous than the other members of the purge committee. I doubted that he would denounce anyone to the secret police even if he learned anything compromising. Serious matters would have been reported, but I felt Vorob'ev was too decent to report on someone just because that person was the son of a former official, or because that person had married the daughter of a former army officer. I also hoped that he would use his influence to dissuade the other members from taking too drastic action, but it turned out that I was mistaken. He was evidently in no position to oppose them for after all, as a Communist he, too, was subject to party discipline.

I had never witnessed such disgusting scenes as those which occurred during our purge. The individuals being interrogated tried to please the members of the purge committee. Sometimes they were servile and acted in a very degrading manner. I remember an employee in the administrative office of the Academy of Sciences, who had been a member of the Tsarist police and during Tsarist times had published some anti-Semitic brochures in which he advocated pogroms. He now tried to exonerate himself by inventing all kinds of excuses. He was humble and almost ready to kiss the boots of the members of the purge committee. In spite of this he was, of course, fired from his position and arrested. What happened to him afterwards I do not know. I must say that none of us felt any pity for him. In fact, we found him doubly revolting, first because of his shameful anti-Semitic activities in the past and now because of the undignified manner in which he tried to exonerate himself. I think that he might have fared a bit better had he answered the questions put to him in a more forthright manner. At least he would have made a better impression on us. By contrast, Nataliya, who was librarian at the Institute of Oriental Studies, chose quite a different attitude. When her name was called, she stood up and was asked, "Is it true that you are the daughter of a Tsarist general?" "Yes, I am," she answered. The next question was, "What can you add to this?"



*The Purge of the Academy of Sciences*

"Nothing," she replied, "why should I?" There were no further questions. She was told to sit down and later, when the names of the purged ones were read from a list, she was not among them. I think that everyone should have behaved the way she did.

Many of those purged aroused pity and sympathy. For instance, there was a scholar by the name of Tsarevskii who worked in the Institute of Zoology. He was a priest in a church during his spare time, conducting Holy Communion, baptizing children, and performing other church duties without pay. His activities had not brought harm to anyone; on the contrary, many dying people got consolation and the last sacrament from him and certainly felt better than if they had died without the presence of a priest. It was unbelievable how the members of the purge committee ridiculed him. Even some of the academy's own employees made fun of him and treated him in the most disgusting manner. One of them, a certain Il'inskii of the Antireligious Museum, asked him, "Say, Holy Father, is it true that you believe in this nonsense?" Another would cite some unimportant passage from the Old Testament, such as Noah's Ark, and ask, "Do you, as a zoologist, really believe that there were only so few species of animals in the world that seven pairs of each could be crammed into an ark?" Of course the poor man did not respond to these mocking questions. It was quite obvious that the victim of this mockery suffered deeply not so much for himself but because of the revolting blasphemies which would disgust even a cultured atheist. It is everybody's right to object to religion but no one has the right to hurt the religious feelings of others. Tsarevskii was purged and arrested. Then he disappeared.

Many great scholars suffered the same fate. The well-known zoologist and corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences Byalynitskii-Birulya was also fired, arrested, and disappeared. The same fate befell the geologist P. V. Vittenburg, the head of the Yakut Commission of the Academy of Sciences, who had for many years conducted geological research in the Yakut Republic which led to the discovery of enormous amounts of oil, diamonds, gold, and various minerals. Even harmless old ladies who had been working at menial tasks in the library were not spared. A certain Mrs.

## Chapter 5

Gundelach, of German extraction, was fired and later disappeared because she had been the tutoress in an institute for daughters of the nobility. The director of the library, F. A. Martinson, was questioned and actually examined in Marxist-Leninist literature. As the director of a scholarly library, why should he have been versed in journalistic articles on Leninist problems? He was also arrested and disappeared.

Another scholar who suffered a tragic fate was a Dr. Skribanovich who had been active in the German community of St. Petersburg under the Tsars. He had given popular lectures on various subjects in history and literature and wrote articles in newspapers. His tragedy was that immediately after the revolution he had emigrated to Latvia and had lived in Riga for several years. In 1925 or 1926 he decided to return to the Soviet Union where he got a job at the library of the academy from which he was now purged. One of the things that incriminated him was that he had returned to the Soviet Union, obviously having been sent by his foreign masters as a spy. Without any hard evidence, he was arrested and disappeared. The archeologist Lemeshevskii, who was a well-known scholar at the Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology, should also be remembered. In order not to fall victim to the GPU, he had illegally procured a Portuguese passport. It did not save him, however, as he was fired and arrested as a foreigner secretly living in the Soviet Union.

Our acting director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, as the Asian Museum had been renamed in 1925, F. A. Rozenberg, or Uncle Teddy, as many of us called him, was not exactly fired, but it was strongly suggested that he retire. He did and lived in his apartment for about another year or two with nothing to do. He evidently could not stand such a life and died of what I would call *taedium vitae*. In other words, he was fed up with life. A well-known anthropologist and ethnographer, A. M. Mervart, and his wife, both research scholars at the Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology, were also arrested. They had spent the war years in India and in 1925 they returned to the academy. In 1927 they received exit permits for a trip to visit their parents in the Netherlands. Two



### *The Purge of the Academy of Sciences*

years after their return they were arrested. I wondered why they had not remained in Holland. I was already at that time firmly resolved never to return from abroad, if I should ever be so lucky as to get an exit permit for myself and my family. To conclude the list of those purged and arrested there was the secretary of the Institute of Oriental Studies, M. M. Girs, who had served under the Tsar as a diplomat in Persia.

One morning the purge committee announced that a conspiracy had been uncovered in the academy. A large number of incriminating documents had been found in the archives. These documents had been obtained from the headquarters of the Constitutional Democratic Party which had ceased to exist shortly after the revolution, since most of its members had fled from Leningrad to destinations abroad or elsewhere in Russia. In fact there was absolutely no conspiracy because the documents had been officially sent by a Soviet agency to the academy. Nevertheless, as punishment for this "plot" the permanent secretary, Ol'denburg, was relieved of his duties and retained only his membership in the Academy of Sciences. The job of permanent secretary was given to a certain V. P. Volgin who had been an associate professor at Moscow University and whose sole "scholarly" work had been a history of the socialist movements in the world. The famous scholars S. F. Platonov, the greatest authority on the history of Russia, especially the history of the early seventeenth-century "Time of Troubles," E. V. Tarle, historian of Western Europe, and N. P. Likhachev, whose specialty was paleography and ancient Russian literary works, were all immediately arrested and exiled. Both Platonov and Likhachev died in concentration camps. Tarle survived and was later freed because he had always been rather anti-German and as a historian he ascribed the guilt for World War I solely to Germany. At the time of the purge the British and French were regarded as the greatest enemies of the Soviet Union, but Germany, being rather weak during its Weimar Republic days, was seen as less vicious. Therefore it was politically unacceptable that Germany should be made the scapegoat of the war. When Hitler came to power, of course, the situation changed drastically, and Tarle was released. He again became a

## *Chapter 5*

member of the Academy of Sciences where his anti-German attitude was then remembered and he became a kind of court historian of the Soviet Union, winning the Stalin Prize three times.

New members of the Academy of Sciences were elected very soon after the purge to replace those arrested and liquidated. Among them was the notorious Trofim Denisovich Lysenko who claimed to have developed new strains of vegetables by using Marxist methods. What he actually did was plant potatoes in flower pots in his room. With special fertilizers the potatoes grew to the size of cabbages which he then passed off as a new kind of potato. He was an outspoken enemy of true geneticists, such as the great N. I. Vavilov who fell victim to Lysenko's intrigues, was arrested and died in a concentration camp.

The Academy of Sciences had always been a research body, but now it had to train so-called aspirants, candidates for a kind of master's degree, who spent a couple of years taking courses as well as doing actual work under the guidance of a specialist. I later received some of these aspirants, and they were rather poorly qualified. We scholars also had to attend Marxist-Leninist courses. The kind of nonsense we were told by our instructors was unbelievable. For example, in December 1936 the so-called Stalin constitution was promulgated. One of our lecturers announced that the Soviet Union was now a multi-national state. He then proceeded with an attempt at a definition. "A multi-national state," he intoned, "is not the same as a patchwork of various nationalities who have nothing to do with one another, like the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy. It contained the Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Rumanians, Greeks, and many other nationalities. Since they had nothing in common, the state fell apart." Of course, neither Rumania nor Greece had ever belonged to Austro-Hungary, but such elementary facts were quite beyond the ken of our learned instructors.

New work methods, like those used in factories, were now introduced in the Academy of Sciences. One such method was called socialist competition. This meant that everyone was urged to over-fulfill his quota. Instead of writing one article, two articles, instead of one book, two books, and so on. Likewise, instead of finishing an



### *The Purge of the Academy of Sciences*

article in one or two years, we were requested to write it in six months. I am not going to comment on this because everyone reading these lines knows that such methods have nothing to do with scholarly work. One can never know when one will make a discovery or how long an experiment may take. A solution may be found in a few days, but it is just as likely that years are required. For example, can a deadline be set for the solution of the cancer problem? These production techniques were rather like an undignified, senseless, and ridiculous game. The Academy of Sciences was still strong, however, because it had kept a number of excellent scholars and therefore good results were achieved—no thanks to the party and the Soviet government—even though it was obligatory to mention it each time one made a discovery. Rather, good work was done in spite of them.

Another new method introduced after the purge was team work. The institute's Mongolian department which I headed after Vladimirtsov's death, was ordered to compile a complete Mongolian-Russian dictionary. My closest aide in this project was K. M. Cheremisov who later published several dictionaries of his own.<sup>1</sup> Also part of our team were G. N. Rumyantsev and B. I. Pankratov, as well as G. D. Sanzheev who was living in Moscow. The material was collected in the following manner. Each member of the team received several Mongolian books which he was to read, underlining each word which was to be included in the dictionary, and marking the context in which the word occurred with vertical lines. Later the book was given to a student who wrote the word concerned in the upper right-hand corner and the passage in which it occurred on a card. These cards were then returned to the team members who translated the word and its passage. Then master cards were made up, listing all the meanings of a word taken from the individual cards. Finally the information was typed on sheets of paper and edited by me. The dictionary was ready for publication in 1940, but it was never published because the Mongols abandoned their old script in 1941 and adopted the Cyrillic alphabet. This manuscript of more than 2,000 typed pages is still gathering dust in the Academy of Sciences.

After the purge, work at the Academy of Sciences became

## Chapter 5

difficult because of constant interference by the party cell. The director of the Institute of Oriental Studies became a mere figure-head, and the actual head of the institute was the secretary who was a member of the Communist Party. A vice-director in charge of finance and supplies was appointed, and on his second day he demanded to see the library. Our library contained about one million books as well as large numbers of manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Mongolian, and other languages. When he saw the huge rows of stacks, he asked, "Have all of these books been read?" "Oh, no, not all of them," was the answer. The new deputy director then decreed, "In that case no more books will be acquisitioned until all of these have been read." Fortunately this official did not last long. Even the party members must have realized that he was unsuitable for work in an academic institution, and he was replaced by a more educated person.

Because of the party's interference, some important work had to be discontinued. My Mongolian department was putting together an anthology of old Mongolian literary works. There were didactic works, including wise sayings and maxims attributed to Chingis Khan, epics, and excerpts from translations of Chinese novels such as *San Kuo Chih*. This collection was denounced to the party cell by my aspirant Artemov, and the party ordered our work to be destroyed since it was "incongruous with our times." Two hundred pages, about half of the book, had already been printed. They were sent to the paper mills.

Censorship also became a serious problem. In the 1930s I was working on the *Muqaddimat al-Adab*, an Arabic-Persian-Chaghatai Turkic-Mongolian dictionary of the fourteenth century. The censors found fault with almost every word. Thus the phrase "the tree was hung with fruit" aroused the censor's suspicion: "Could you not specify *who* hung fruit on the tree?" I replied, "Certainly not he whom you suspect would have hung it. The tree itself produced the fruit." "Then say so," he ordered. I had to explain to him that in a dictionary words must be translated precisely. He also insisted on eliminating all anatomical terms such as posterior and womb, but I agreed only to replace them with Latin equivalents.



*The Purge of the Academy of Sciences*

The work was finally published in 1938-39, but not quite as I had planned it. In addition to the changes caused by censorship, I had to change the word "Chagatai" in the title to "Turkic" because Samoilovich, who had helped me much with the Turkic part, objected to the term "Chagatai" and insisted on using "literary language of Central Asia." Ironically, I also had to omit Samoilovich's name from my list of acknowledgments because in the meantime he had been arrested and disappeared in the summer of 1938. Likewise, I had to drop all mention of F. A. Rozenberg, specialist in Iranian and particularly Sogdian, who had helped me with Persian words. He had been forced to retire and became a kind of "unperson." I also had to omit all mention of Fitrat and Gāzī 'Alī Yunusov, two Uzbek scholars who had been instrumental in procuring a copy of the dictionary. Both were arrested and shot during the liquidation of the Uzbek intellectuals in 1937.

At that time of the academy's purge the well-known Marxist historian Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii was arrested for having ascribed too much importance to mercantile capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Any mention of trade, trading, or trade relations was forbidden, and so I had to delete in the preface to the dictionary just mentioned the sentence: "Trade relations and other contacts with Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries resulted in the compilation of glossaries and dictionaries." Another taboo was any discussion of the genetic relationship of the Mongolian languages because the party was afraid that awareness of this relationship might foster nationalistic ideas and bring about Pan-Mongolism. Consequently, in my comparative linguistic study which forms a part of my book dealing with that dictionary and which had already been set and printed<sup>4</sup> I had to eliminate all references to Buryat, Kalmuck, and Khalkha and replace "Buryat" with "North Mongolian" and "Kalmuck" with "West Mongolian." It was a simple change, but it meant resetting and reprinting eighty-eight pages.

While I watched these censors carrying on in this fashion, I thought, "How weak they must think the regime is if linguistic relationships are deemed politically dangerous. And how ignorant and primitive they are!"

## Chapter 5

Vladimirtsov was elected full member of the Academy of Sciences in 1929. Actually he was to be elected the year before, but a difficulty had arisen. The Sinologist Alekseev was Vladimirtsov's senior, and it was impossible for Vladimirtsov to bypass Alekseev. Thus in 1929 when two vacancies opened up, both men were elected. For the first time, Communist party leaders were also to be elected as full members, but their candidates, including N. I. Bukharin and A. M. Deborin, were voted down, and this created an enormous scandal. The party called for new elections and warned the academy that the party leaders must be elected or else. For the first time in its long and distinguished history, the academy was to acquire full members whose qualifications were far below those of full members in Tsarist times. Looking at the new members, one could only say, *sic transit gloria mundi*.

One of the most unpleasant consequences of the communist penetration into the Academy of Sciences was the frequent harassment of scholars whose works were at odds with the current political line. One such scholar was the geographer and historian G. E. Grum-Grzhimailo, well known for his travels in and works on Mongolia. I knew him well and we were on friendly terms, although I disagreed with his historical theories which Bartol'd had already rejected in highly critical reviews before the revolution. The forum for such attacks after the Soviet purge of the academy was the so-called meeting of criticism and self-criticism. The aspirants, i.e. graduate students working toward degrees roughly equivalent to M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, arranged such meetings. In Grum's case, it was Berlin, Artemov and Ulivanov, all communists attached to the Mongolian section of which I was the head. Also attending Grum's "trial" were members and aspirants of the related sections, such as China, Japan, and Turkey. Most of them were communist as well. The harangues against poor old Grum-Grzhimailo were mean, cruel and very unjust. As the head of the Mongolian section, I chaired that meeting and tried to make it less harmful to the "defendant." Fortunately, nothing untoward resulted from the meeting. Grum-Grzhimailo was never arrested, and he died from natural causes at his home a few years later.



*The Purge of the Academy of Sciences*

The most disgusting accusation concerned Grum's book on Northwestern Mongolia and the Uriangkhai region which had been written before the revolution. In that book, Grum argued that it would be unreasonable to grant independence to the Uriangkhai region, also known as Tuva, which was populated by a mere 70,000 primitive tribesmen. It would be much more sensible, argued Grum in his book, to incorporate that region into a modern, civilized nation. Unfortunately for Grum, in 1926 the Soviets decided to bestow upon the Tuvan region a semblance of independence, and for eighteen years that region existed by the name of the Tannu Tuva People's Republic. Therefore, at the time of Grum's "trial," his pre-revolutionary views ran counter to Soviet policy. In 1944, however, when world attention was focused elsewhere, the Soviets annexed Tuva and converted it into the Tuvan autonomous republic, an integral part of the Soviet Union. One is indeed justified to ask, "What was Grum-Grzhimailo's crime when the Soviet Union eventually did precisely what he had advocated before the revolution?" If the charges of imperialism hurled against Grum at that meeting were justified, they should have also been applied against the Soviet Union in 1944.

Before concluding this chapter, let me add that many famous scholars such as Platonov and Tarle were put in concentration camps to make room for those party newcomers. The irony of fate had it, however, that Bukharin and many others who had been added to the academy in 1929 were themselves shot or imprisoned during the Great Purge of 1937-38 when the revolution, like Chronos of yore, began to devour its children.