

RESEARCH REPORT IREX SHORT-TERM GRANT

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1. TOPIC

“Education and the Struggle for Russia’s Future: V. A. Gerd and the Fate of the Putilovskoe kommercheskoe uchilishche”

My research trip was taken during the period June 6 through July 30, 2002, divided between Moscow and St. Petersburg. In the course of previous research, I came to understand the centrality of the tsarist-era Ministry of Trade and Industry’s network of “kommercheskie uchilishcha” to progressive secondary education. One such school, founded in 1912 by Vladimir Aleksandrovich Gerd and his wife Luliia Ivanovna, aimed at providing a classless venue where children of Putilov factory workers and engineers could learn together. More importantly, the school was designated as a place where the working-class children (boys and girls, as the commercial schools were pioneers in coeducation) could be exposed to a high-quality education that sought to empower by equipping students with language skills, analytical tools, and rich cultural capital.

One aim of my research was to find out more about the circumstances surrounding the arrest of Vladimir Gerd (onetime head of the All-Russian Teachers’ Union and briefly a Menshevik), his assistant director, and thirty Putilov workers in June 1923 by the Petrograd GPU, and about the subsequent fate of the school and of other former kommercheskie uchilishcha.

2. RESEARCH STRATEGY

I had already read Gerds own account of his stewardship of the school, his arrest, and his subsequent exile, but I wanted to learn the viewpoint of those who arrested him. Consequently, the first place that I looked was in the personal archives of Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinskii, first head of the Soviet secret police (Cheka-GPU), located in RGASPI (Moscow). There I was the beneficiary of a stroke of very good luck, and was able to locate the document collection concerning the arrest of V. A. Gerd, which ran to about 150 pages. Interestingly, I was challenged by the archivist to justify why I wanted to examine documents from Dzerzhinskii’s fond, as my officially recorded topic was “Russian education, 1890-1930.” Luckily, my persuasive powers carried the day, and I was able to find the listing for the “Delo V. A. Gerda” in opis’ 3 of the collection.

Other important collections in Moscow included the archives of the Russian Academy of Education (NA RAO), now relocated to Gorki Leninskie (beyond Domodedovo), and the Ushinskii Pedagogical Library, which has an amazing collection of old textbooks and pedagogical periodicals. In the NA RAO I used materials from the collection of V. N. Soroka-Rosinskii, founder of the famous Shkola im. Dostoevskogo (“Respublika ShKID”), who had been inspired by his two-year employment under Gerd’s aegis at the Putilov School’s koloniia or boarding school for homeless youths. I also examined materials of other teachers connected with Gerd, such as Ol’ga V. Sinakevich (Iafa) and Emilia Orestovna Vakhterova.

In St. Petersburg, I was confronted with a terrible disappointment. The St. Petersburg Branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ARAN), where the Gerd family's papers are housed, had just closed for a major structural repair, and the repository was "sealed" (zapechatano). It will be closed at least until May 2003. However, I found very useful document collections in the Manuscript Division of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Russian National Library (including its branch, Dom Plekhanova), particularly the papers of Petr Andreevich German, longtime director of the Vyborgskoe kommercheskoe uchilishche in St. Petersburg, and those of Ol'ga V. Sinakevich (lafa), Ol'ga Ivanovna Ver, and others. I was also able to perform a comprehensive search of the relevant opisi in RGIA, TsGA Sankt-Peterburga, TsGIA Sankt-Peterburga, and TsGAIPD Sankt-Peterburga. Finally, I had the good luck to locate Gerd's grandson, a professor at St. Petersburg University, who will provide me with access this October to family papers he recently deposited with the A. I. Gertsen Pedagogical University.

Currently (October 2002) I am in Moscow and St. Petersburg to follow up on the leads revealed in this summer's research.

3. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Vladimir Aleksandrovich Gerd, whose father was director of the gimnaziia attended by Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaiia, was an early member of Russia's Marxist circles, joining with his brother-in-law Petr A. Struve, in the mid-1890s. At one time close with Krupskaiia, Martov, and Potresov, Gerd and his wife Iuliia, following Gerd's return from exile in 1900, taught in the new progressive schools of the capital, the Taganskaia and Stoiunina gimnazii, and then later, after 1905, the new commercial schools. As noted above, they founded the Putilov Commercial School in 1912. Gerd's account of his arrest, which I had already read in an archival collection in ARAN, identified resentful local raion party, komsomol, and education functionaries as the prime movers of his arrest on June 15, 1923 and the eventual destruction of his school.

What I found in the Dzerzhinskii archive was very interesting evidence of the degree to which the Party was split between Old Bolsheviks, who had been socialized into radical intelligentsia culture, and the newer, more rough-hewn administrative cadres who rose to positions of local power during the Civil War and the early 1920s.

Gerd's arrest was confected locally in Petrograd, motivated by the shared animus of the secretary of the Petrograd Oblast gubkom, Petr Zalutskii, the local GPU, and local functionaries noted above toward former members of non-Bolshevik political parties, especially Mensheviks, and intellectuals, often the same. A purge commission was formed in May 1923 and two waves of arrests followed. Gerd, arrested during the second wave, was accused of fomenting wildcat strikes at Putilov and of trying to organize a workers' mutiny.

After arrests were made at the Putilov factory and the school, workers held a mass meeting demanding to learn the reasons for the arrests, while teachers from the commercial school traveled to Moscow to lobby personally with Krupskaiia and Dzerzhinskii for Gerd's release. The very first document in the file is a note to Dzerzhinskii's secretary, telling him to phone the Petrograd GPU with an order for Gerd's release absent compelling material evidence of his guilt, which, if present, had to be forwarded to Dzerzhinskii personally. He explained to his secretary that Krupskaiia personally vouched for Gerd's political reliability. He accepted her surmise that the

cause for Gerd's arrest was the fact that his sister was married to Struve, who now lived in Paris and polemicized against the Soviet regime.

Further documents testify, however, to the likely existence of a fronde in the former capital. Not only did the Petrograd GPU continue to keep Gerd and the workers under arrest without sending Dzerzhinskii any evidence justifying the charges against the detainees, but the gubkom secretary Zalutskii sent Stalin a remarkably bold letter, copied to Dzerzhinskii, in which he noted the receipt of an order "from Moscow" to release the "vicious counterrevolutionary Menshevik Gerd" and wondered whether members of the Central Committee had decided to form a "Society for the Rescue of Mensheviks" (Obshchestvo spaseniia menshevikov). At the conclusion of the letter, Zalutskii further wondered whether his task was to vigilantly defend Soviet power, or "to serve as an auxiliary for those polite and compassionate people who feel awkwardly about wounding the feelings of their former acquaintances." (RGASPI, f. 76, op. 3, d. 297, l. 15ob.). Clearly, Zalutskii was able to gain intelligence about the twenty-five year-old ties between Krupskaja, Gerd, and the other teachers and sought Stalin's aid to politically undermine these intelligentsia protectors.

Dzerzhinskii himself was further lobbied when a teacher from Putilov hand delivered a letter from another teacher, Margarita Nikoleva, who not only had been in Krupskaja's kruzhok but who had shared exile with Dzerzhinskii in 1899 (and, I later learned, had kept up an extensive correspondence with him for a year that only came to light after her death in 1966). In her letter, Nikoleva averred that the charges were fabricated and noted that Petrograd teachers were aware that Dzerzhinskii had issued an order for Gerd's release that was being flouted.

Threatened by Zalutskii and shamed and moved by Nikoleva, Dzerzhinskii demanded that the Central Committee create a commission to investigate Zalutskii's allegations and the facticity of the charges against the detainees. Amazingly, such a commission was organized and immediately sent to Petrograd, where they conducted extensive interviews with detainees and other actors in this drama. Even more amazingly, they reached the conclusion that the charges were indeed fabrications and harshly criticized the gubkom for discrediting the Party in the eyes of workers, especially nonparty ones. The investigators discovered that the wildcat strikes were exclusively responses to a pattern of delayed payment of salaries. Responding to Dzerzhinskii's requests, the final version of their conclusions also chastised the local Petrograd GPU for insubordination and mandated that any further purges of "counterrevolutionary elements" had to be cleared with him in Moscow.

When Zalutskii, backed by the Central Committee Orgburo, demanded that Gerd be exiled to Turkestan, Dzerzhinskii first tried to have Gerd permitted to choose his own place of exile – Tver', and then, after that was vetoed by the hard-liners, to give him a choice of more equitable places of exile within European Russia in light of his age and health.

This episode suggests a number of new insights about Soviet history. First, it reveals the enduring sentimental concern on the part of Old Bolsheviks to former comrades of their youth, despite the fact that they took different political paths. After all, they were all part of an emotionally compelling revolutionary-intelligentsia culture, and continued to see important commonalities in each other. Even Lenin could not bring himself to execute his old comrade, Iulii Osipovich Martov, and exiled him abroad instead. These Old Bolshevik attitudes elicited anger, frustration, derision, and cultural discomfort

among the newer cadres in the Party's middle ranks. Zalutskii's letter suggests that they looked to Stalin to assist their local efforts both to remove those intellectuals protected by Old Bolsheviks and to embarrass or even compromise the Old Bolsheviks politically into the bargain. In other words, "Stalinism" was perhaps as much a constituency in search of a leader as it was the creation of a master manipulator.

Secondly, my research shows the enthusiastic reception by workers and their children of an "intelligentsia" model of education, when academic culture is presented respectfully as a tool for self-knowledge, for knowledge of one's surrounding social and natural world, and as a means of enriching meaning in one's life. Russian workers were not "naturally" anti-intellectual (as late tsarist historians well know).

Thirdly, this research suggests that Feliks Dzerzhinskii, while a fanatical Bolshevik, may be unfairly blamed for excesses he not only did not order, but which he actually opposed. I found further confirmation of this in another case in Dzerzhinskii's archive, in which Dzerzhinskii sought to remove a GPU agent for the unauthorized examination of a case file and an attempt, on the basis of that, to "terrorize a citizen," whose guilt had not been established. Dzerzhinskii also played a key role in clearing the way for the publication of Vikentii Veresaev's novel *V tupike* (Dead End), in which (actual) atrocities committed by the Cheka during the Civil War are depicted in fictionalized form.