The Philosophers' Ship

The Repressive Tolerance of Early Leninist Cancel Culture

by [Andrei Znamenski](#) (July 2021)

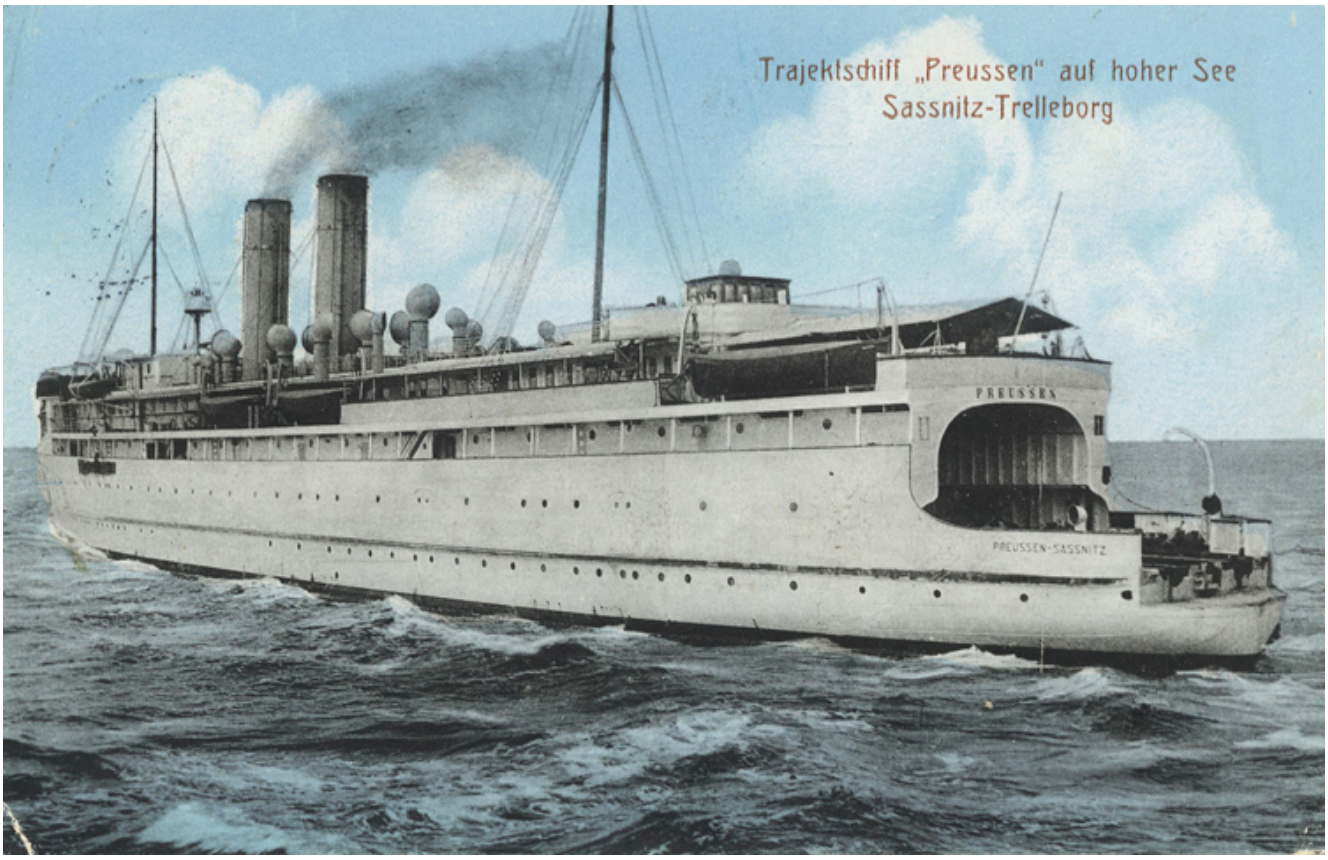
The first group of canceled scholars waiting to be shipped away, September 29, 1922, Artist Unknown

On September 29, 1922, a strange ship named *Oberbürgermeister Haken* left Petrograd (St. Petersburg) for Germany. Its only passengers were thirty university professors from large Soviet cities. Rounded up by the Bolshevik secret police (Checka-OGPU), they were forced into exile for expressing politically incorrect views regarding socialist policies. After their 1917 take-over, the Bolsheviks pursued two goals: omnipotent governmental control of the economy and the imposition of the totalitarian Marxist ideology onto society. The chief of Soviet communists Vladimir Lenin famously declared, "[The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true.](#)" Later, the same phrase was chiseled in stone on the Karl Marx granite sculpture composition (*right*) that was erected by the Soviets in downtown of Moscow in 1961.

Lenin assumed that the contemporary scholarly consensus was that Marxism represented the only true guiding knowledge and the only true science of society. If people did not follow this "scientific" dictum, they were ignorant fools who were to be re-educated for their own good. In the event that they spoke against that ideological uniformity, they were automatically considered reactionaries to be shut down and phased out. Not only in Soviet Russian but also in many Western countries in the 1920s-1950s, there were millions of

committed true believers and “useful idiots” who sincerely shared this viewpoint and who believed in the omnipotent nature of Marxism and socialism as the way of the future.

Oberbürgermeister Haken was followed by another German ship *Preussen* (below) that carried away from Soviet Russia 17 more scholars on November 16, 1922. Then, on December 3 of the same year, 60 more intellectuals were added to that number and deported to the West from Black Sea ports. Moreover, there were also two special trains loaded with scholars, scientists, and writers who were shipped away to Riga, Latvia. The number of these exiles reached 228. The greater part of the deported intellectuals represented various social science and humanities disciplines, which made sense because politically incorrect social scholarship represented a direct ideological threat to the regime. Still, there were several dozens of scientists who were also canceled because they publicly chastised government censorship and totalitarian control of the economy.



For example, among the exiles one could find Nicholas

Berdyaev (1874-1948). In 1918, this philosopher, who later became a celebrity scholar in the West, created the Free Humanities Academy. Along with the Free Philosophical Association, another loose group of heterodox intellectuals, the academy refused to toe the politically correct line prescribed by the Bolsheviks. Both groups angered the Soviet authorities because they became magnets that drew hundreds of students and provided a "safe space" for both dissident Marxist and non-Marxist intellectuals. The list of exiles also included Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) *(right, with family)*, a would-be dean of American sociology, and economist Boris Brutzkus. As early as 1920, the latter debunked the predatory Bolshevik command and control regime by showing that, economically speaking, it "had no clothes." Along with Ludwig von Mises, the author of the famous essay "Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth" (1920), Brutzkus was among the first to point out that the socialist economy contained a self-defeating systemic failure due to the lack of normal price mechanisms. In its turn, Sorokin's essay "Militarization and Communism," a devastating analysis of the emerging Soviet totalitarian regime, as the product of war and societal degeneration, added fuel to the Bolsheviks' anger.[1] Soviet ideologists noted how Sorokin tore apart the neatly woven Leninist theory that the 1917 Revolution was the pinnacle of human progress and the natural outcome of the laws of history. In fact, Sorokin's and Brutzkus's essays, which

were published in the independent journal *Ekonomist*, aroused the personal wrath of Lenin.

On March 12, 1922, in the major Bolshevik magazine *Under the Banner of Marxism* (*Pod znamenem Marksizma*), Lenin published "On the Significance of Militant Materialism" where he attacked the *Ekonomist* and outlined the program of overhauling the entire educational system of Russia. Particularly, Lenin invited Communist party activists and industrial workers to exercise their power to remove "bourgeois" professors and scientists and relegate them "to the countries of western 'democracy'." Incidentally, one can find a vivid description of that early 1920s' hijacking of Russian academia by the regime's ideological hacks and radical activists in *We the Living* (1936), the first novel of the famous libertarian author Ayn Rand.

Among the exiles there were also members of the Committee for Helping the Hungry. These volunteers solicited and distributed domestic and international food aid to alleviate the consequences of the deadly hunger that plagued Soviet Russia in 1921 which resulted from the civil war and the total nationalization of the economy by the Bolsheviks. The committee and its head, Ekaterina Kuskova (1869-1958), a democratic socialist, who advocated independent charity activities, aroused the anger of the Bolshevik regime that hated any independently sponsored welfare that operated outside of communist governmental control.

In fact, a significant portion of those exiled included left-wing opponents of the Bolsheviks' who were preoccupied with the quest for "better" and "humane" forms of socialism. For example, like Kuskova, the previously mentioned Sorokin considered himself a democratic socialist. Moreover, he served as a secretary to Alexander Kerensky who headed a moderate socialist government that took over in February of 1917 and that paved the way to the Lenin dictatorship by opportunistically courting the radical left and their Red

Guard storm troopers. Prior to 1917 and during that year, such naïve people as Sorokin and Kuskova did not see that by their activities they were opening the totalitarian Overton window, which later was turned into a dark Stalinist vortex that eventually consumed not only "reactionaries" and "incorrect" democratic leftists but also the mass of wayward Bolsheviks. This was a natural outcome of all social justice revolutions that Jacques Mallet du Pan (1749-1800), a Geneva journalist, prophetically compared to mythological Saturn who devoured his own children.

The "Philosophers' Ship" project was initiated in earnest on May 19 when Lenin sent out a special memo to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chief of the Soviet Secret Police (Cheka), insisting on shutting down *Ekonomist* and squashing its authors. Lenin used strong words, insisting that the "gang" of bourgeois scholars who "wove their nest in *Ekonomist* should be rounded up and kicked out . . . The Petrograd magazine *Ekonomist* . . . I think this is clearly a whiteguard centre. Its No. 3 (only No. 3!!! this nota bene!) carries a list of its members on the cover. These, I think, are almost all the most legitimate candidates for deportation. These are all patent counter-revolutionaries, accomplices of the Entente, an organisation of its servitors and spies and corrupters of the student youth. We should make arrangements to have these 'military spies' caught and once caught constantly and systematically deported." The anger of the top Bolshevik was understandable: the seemingly academic journal, which refused to sing praises to the utopia in power, suddenly became very popular among the learned public. Soviet ideologues were stunned that more than 3,000 copies were sold in cold and hungry Moscow and Petrograd. Thus, the *Ekonomist* affair became one of the major triggers of the deportation campaign.

Apparently, the secret police were not quick enough to react to the demand of the dictator. For this reason, on July 17, 1922, Lenin wrote another letter, which this time was

addressed to Stalin who was already taking over as the chief Bolshevik administrator. Lenin instructed him to order the secret police to "submit a list of several hundred such gentlemen, who must be deported abroad without mercy. We will purge Russia for a long time to come." Lenin listed specific names, which also included rival left-wing intellectuals and again the *Ekonomist* collective, which he defined as "the most ruthless enemies." Lenin instructed that the deportation "must be done at once. Arrest several hundred and without stating the reasons—out with you, gentlemen!"[2]

Although partially dysfunctional after a bad stroke, on December 13, Lenin nevertheless wrote another follow up letter to one of the bosses of the secret police to make sure that one Nikolai Rozhkov (1868-1927), a democratic socialist critic, be exiled to a remote area of Russia.[3] Infuriated, Lenin wanted to cancel this ideological rival who had guts to repeatedly write to him personally, questioning the legitimacy of the Bolshevik regime and describing it as a premature "political baby." At that time, many democratic socialists in the West and their Russian counterparts (then called "Mensheviks") religiously believed in the classical evolutionary Marxian formula that a country was to be economically advanced and ripe for the "better future" to have a socialist revolution. With its backward, predominantly peasant, economy, the Russian Empire did not fit that paradigm.

By September, 1922, the secret police did prepare the list of intellectuals with "incorrect" views and conducted with them instructive talks, explaining to these heretics how and when they would be deported. In the 1920s, the Soviet regime was still at its early stage and could afford such "mild" treatment of dissenters. The candidates for exile were not beaten or roughed up in the middle of the night as would later routinely happen during Stalin's Great Terror in the1930s. Moreover, Leon Trotsky, second in command after

Lenin, noted that the Bolsheviks could have easily shot the reactionary professors, but to show their good will and to build bridges with the imperialist West (the Bolsheviks desperately needed Western technology to build up their industry), they allowed these harmful elements to sail abroad in peace.

In fact, Trotsky took a special effort to provide an ideological back up for the deportation project. On June 2, 1922, using as a strawman one Yuly Eichenwald (1872-1928), a popular literary scholar, Trotsky came up with a large article "Dictatorship, where is Your Whip?" that was featured in *Pravda*, the premier communist newspaper. Eichenwald, who was among the first to be shipped away, at first sympathized with socialism. Yet, when he got the full taste of it under the Bolsheviks, the literary critic began having second thoughts. In his *Our Revolution, Its Leaders, and Those Whom They Lead* (1918), Eichenwald noted how quickly the country was losing the freedom of speech that it had gained if only for a brief while in the spring of 1917 (under Kerensky after the tsar was ousted).

What particularly disgusted Trotsky was Eichenwald's comments on the poem *The Twelve* (1918) by the popular Bolshevik fellow-traveler poet Alexander Blok (1880-1921), who sympathetically depicted street violence and pogroms in 1917 revolutionary Petrograd. The poem is focused on the characters of twelve Red Guards (paramilitary revolutionary workers and soldiers) who walk through the streets of the capital city, doing social justice work.

Formally on a mission to patrol the streets, Blok's "Red apostles" act more like storm troopers who issue justice according to their own norms, randomly shooting at buildings (just in case) and accidentally murdering a prostitute; to Block, this was an unavoidable collateral damage in a noble fight for a better future:

To the grief of all bourgeois
We'll fan a worldwide conflagration,
A conflagration drenched in blood—
Give us Your blessing, O Lord!

Sympathetic to the mayhem raised by the "apostles," Block portrayed these Red Guards as the instruments of the world's renewal. In 1917-1918, Petrograd was indeed an unsafe place to live. The impotent provisional government of democratic socialist Alexander Kerensky was not able to keep law and order and the streets were ruled by gangs of criminals, who looted stores and broke into private apartments to rough up the "privileged people." Amidst this chaos and mayhem, Lenin and his Bolshevik Red Guards eventually took over in November of 1917. Poetically endorsing social justice violence against "the old world," Blok wrote,

Hey, hey!
It's no sin to have some fun!
Lock up the apartments all,
Looting there will be today!
Open up the cellars all—
Today the rabble will have fun!

Rather than seeing the "Red apostles" as the spearheads of a noble cause, Eichenwald viewed them as merely thugs, the "gang of criminals, dark and drunk mob." Appalled by this "reactionary" interpretation, Trotsky, who, like the rest of the Bolsheviks, officially endorsed revolutionary terror, took issue with the "bourgeoise" writer, literally smearing Eichenwald with dirt. Moreover, in contrast to many other Trotsky writings, this essay is especially marked by its loose language that borders on what the current liberal mainstream would have qualified as hate speech. To the Bolshevik commissar, Eichenwald was a "philosophical, aesthetical, literary, religious creep, or, in other words, scum and garbage," who "brought to literature his long ears, his devilish literary hoofs, and angry creaking sounds of his

worn-out trunks."[4] Concluding his essay, Trotsky issued an ideological call for deportation, "We need to use that whip [of the dictatorship of the proletariat, author's comment) to make all these Eichenwald types go to hell, to that camp of their benefactors to where they rightfully belong." Trotsky's essay was accompanied by follow-up propaganda media pieces written by Bolshevik scholar-bureaucrats[5] of a lower rank. The goal was to prepare public opinion for the mass exile of the intellectuals.

The candidates of the exile were forbidden to take any money and valuables with them. Besides, they had to sign a pledge that in case they would attempt to return to the Soviet Union, they were to be executed. Almost thirty years later, by sheer bad luck, medieval historian Lev Karsavin (1882–1952), who, like Eichenwald, was among the first to be shipped away, had to experience the power of that menace during his involuntary "return" to the USSR. After his deportation to the West in 1922, Karsavin was hired to teach history at Kaunas University, Lithuania, which was later occupied by the Red Army in 1944. Formally still an enemy of the Soviet state, aged and sick Karsavin received a "humane" treatment from the regime. Instead of being executed, in 1949 he was arrested and confined for a ten-year term in a concentration camp in Western Siberia where he soon died from tuberculosis. My assumption is that the prison term might have been a "reward" because, after the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany, Karsavin began to publicly express naïve and nostalgic pro-Soviet sympathies.

Overall, those who were deported and eventually settled in Germany, France, and the United States turned out to be very lucky because they were able to avoid the slaughterhouse of Stalin's Great Terror of the 1930s. To be exact, in 1922, all politically incorrect intellectuals who were to be cancelled were separated into two groups: the most "reactionary" were to be deported to the West, whereas mildly

dangerous individuals were to be exiled from capital cities (Moscow, Petrograd, Kazan, Kiev) to remote towns and villages in Soviet Central Asia, where they were allowed to work in their professions under police supervision. Unfortunately, for that second group of exiles such “generous” treatment later turned into a mortal “blessing.” In the 1930s, when the regime ran out of its enemies, Stalin’s secret police used these unreliable scholars and scientists to fill out their arrest and execution quotas.

The fate of Lubov Horowitz-Vlasova, a scientist who received her doctorate from Sorbonne, France, and who became a leading Soviet bacteriologist is a good example. In 1922, during an annual congress of health workers, she raised her voice against growing government domination of the national health system; instead, she advocated a locally controlled decentralized option. Regarding such suggestions, N. A. Semashko, the Soviet secretary of health, wrote to Lenin that the Bolsheviks must “burn out with iron the very idea of locally autonomous self-services. Any attempts to replace the Soviet class-based health services [tilted toward catering to the protected classes of people, author’s note] with local (“people’s”) and insurance-based (“non-Soviet”) health services should not be permitted.” In fact, people like Horowitz-Vlasova never suggested that the government health system be eliminated. Their only crime was that they argued that this system should co-exist with other forms of health care.

In the summer of 1922, Horowitz-Vlasova was arrested and exiled to the town of Orenburg, northern part of Soviet Central Asia, where she continued her work in a local research institute. In 1927, she was briefly arrested again but soon released. Yet, the final call came in 1938 when she was arrested as part of a made up “microbiologists plot”: for the Soviet secret police the bacteriologists represented an attractive human material to be used in a number of invented

cases about imagined “germ” plots against the regime and the Soviet populace. After a month of intensive interrogations and torture, the scientist literally lost her mind and was “released” into a psychiatric hospital where she died in 1940.

Those who were shipped to the West and the ones who were forced into domestic exile never actively resisted the Soviet regime. Their guilt was simply public criticism of economic and censorship policies of the Bolsheviks and comments on Lenin’s “war communism.” Another liability of those who were exiled was their middle-class origin, with several of the intellectuals being aristocrats by birth. For example, Karsavin was born into a family of ballet dancers, Berdyaev was a hereditary aristocrat; whereas Brutzkus and Sorokin came from families of craftsmen. The regime sought to empower workers and poor peasants who were declared to be protected classes of people. According to the Soviet affirmative action policies, in order to reach equity these two classes were singled out as groups that were historically “oppressed” and were to enjoy priority in hiring, promotion, college admissions, and judicial hearings.

The “privileged” (people who came from the ranks of the middle class or those who originated from families of merchants, manufacturers, aristocrats, and clergy) were to be stripped of their right to vote and denied a voice in the public space. On the Bolshevik grading scale of classes, it was the industrial workers (proletarians) who were considered the “salt of the earth” and the best candidates for empowerment. As full-fledged victims of capitalism, they were simultaneously viewed as the revolutionary saviors of humankind from oppression. On this ideological spectrum, peasants were expected to act as allies because they were not “completely” progressive, still suffering from false consciousness and “petty-bourgeoise” sentiments. In that scheme, exceptions were made for the Bolshevik top bureaucrats (Lenin, Dzerzhinsky, and the like). Although originating from

a privileged background, they were considered red missionaries or “enlightened masters” who knew the laws of history, who could see the future, and, who, as social engineers, were expected to navigate the Soviet society in the correct direction.

Further Readings

Lesley Chamberlain, *Lenin’s Private War: The Voyage of the Philosophy Steamer and the Exile of the Intelligentsia*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007

Paul R. Gregory, “The Ship of Philosophers: How the Early USSR Dealt with Dissident Intellectuals,” *The Independent Review*, 13, no. 4 (2009): 485–492.

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[1] Stuart Finkel, “Sociology and Revolution: Pitirim Sorokin and Russia’s National Degeneration,” *Russian History*, 32, no. 2 (2005): 162-164.

[2] Richard Pipes, ed., *The Unknown Lenin: from the Secret Archive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 169.

[3] Ibid., 176.

[4] Leon Trotsky, “Diktatura, gde tvoi hlyst? [Dictatorshiop, Where is Your Whip]” *Pravda*, June 2, 1922, quoted after M. G. Gkavatsky, *Filosofskii parakhod god 1922: istoriograficheskie etiudy* [*Philosophers Ship of 1922: Historiographical Essays*] (Ekaterinburg: izdatelstvo Uralskogo universiteta, 2002), 83.

[5] I borrowed this term from George Enteen, who examined the emergence of a class of ideologically engaged left-wing activist scholars in the early Soviet Union. Sponsored by Bolshevik ruling ideologists, mass propaganda, and Sovietized HRs departments, they took over Soviet colleges in the 1920s.

George M. Enteen, *The Soviet Scholar-Bureaucrat: M. N. Pokrovskii and the Society of Marxist Historians* (1991).

Table of Contents

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