

## A long great ethnic terror in the Volga

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# Eva Toulouze

## A long great ethnic terror in the Volga region: a war before The War

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### Introduction

In order to understand the Great Terror in a wider perspective, and to situate ethnical groups within its logic, it is useful to concentrate on its “predecessors”, i.e. systematic attacks against ethnicity in previous years, and to widen its geography to regions far away from the Union’s borders. From this point of view, the Volga region is in itself an interesting as well as a fruitful field for historic analysis. Moreover, since its integration into the Russian space<sup>1</sup>, it has been a complicated region to rule, where regular protests against Moscow took place<sup>2</sup>.

The Volga region is a mosaic of nationalities. But, unlike Caucasus, ethnic groups are strong and numerous there, while they represent two sets of linguistic, historic and religious traditions. The first, historically an important player in Russia’s history, is the Turkic family. The ethnical groups whose origins are connected with the Mongol occupation of Russia and the political power following its collapse, are very close to one another: while Tatars were at the core of the last Mongol state before its incorporation into Muscovite Russia, and Bashkirs were nomadic tribes difficult to control, they both spoke very close, mutually understandable languages and had a Moslem tradition. Tatars had a ruling tradition they had maintained after Russian occupation, which relied very much on the system set by Kazan Khanate and its civil servants; Kazan was a local metropolis, with a complex social structure and political life. On the contrary, the ethnical groups of the second set were more complicated and politically much weaker: there were several of them, mostly peasants in Russian dominated regions, without any ruling experience, speaking different and mutually incomprehensible languages belonging to the Finno-Ugric language group, living in more or less compact areas, more or less Christianised on the substrate of animistic world views. They were the Mordvins<sup>3</sup>, the Maris<sup>4</sup>, the Udmurts<sup>5</sup>, and the Komi<sup>6</sup>. There had never been any unity or connection within

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<sup>1</sup> With the conquest of Kazan in 1552, the lands that formed previously the Kazan’s Khanate were absorbed by Russia.

<sup>2</sup> The Cheremis wars in the 1560–1580; Ivan Bolotnikov’s (1605–7), Stepan Razin’s (1670–1671), Emelian Pugachev’s revolts (1773–74). These last movements threatened directly the imperial power.

<sup>3</sup> The Mordvins were (and are) divided between Erzya and Moksha Mordvins, whose languages are still not immediately understandable for each other. They were much Russified and dispersed on a wide area.

<sup>4</sup> Formerly called Cheremis. They were also divided into two groups speaking different dialects (fixed since the 1920s into two literary languages), the majority of Meadow Maris and a small active minority of Hill Maris and lived in a fairly compact area; while evangelised mostly between 1740 and 1767, they retained actively well into the 1930s animistic worldview and practices, which are being revitalised nowadays. Small groups of Maris had migrated eastwards to avoid heavy taxes and brutal Christianisation and they still dwell mostly in Bashkortostan.

these communities. None of them had ever ruled a state they had always been submitted to an ethnically different group. There were no cities in their territories, and political organisation was very weak<sup>7</sup>. They have thus never represented any challenging political danger for central power: even when they participated in the different historic revolts, they were never the initiators. It is thus interesting to follow their fate in Russian Stalinist repressions.

## The Soviet state and ethnicity in the Volgaarea in the 1920–1930s

One of the peculiar and unexpected ideological standpoints on which the Soviet state was actually built is the structural power of ethnicity (Slezkine 1994). The stress on ethnicity was not part of the Marxist dogma; ethnicity was viewed by strict Marxists as part of the so-called superstructure that was not at the core of the understanding of society. But strict Marxists had not a multicultural empire to manage, as had the Bolsheviks after 1917: “Nations might not be helpful and they might not last, but they were here and they were real” (Slezkine 1994: 415). They had to build support for their rule in complicated conditions and sought the support of the weakest of ethnic groups, which were not previously politicised<sup>8</sup>.

The weight of ethnicity in the building of the Soviet State must not be underestimated. Several authors have emphasised that the Soviet Union was a triumph for the principle of ethnicity. This understanding led to the establishing of a territorial network of ethnical groups who were “given” so-called autonomy at different levels.

Among them, the Volga peoples become nations. They are allowed to develop their culture within the Soviet framework, and all of them (except the Mordvinians) were allocated a territory<sup>9</sup> in which to develop their own cultural and political goals. A material contribution towards the achievement of this framework was the activity of the autochthonous peoples’ young and numerally small intelligentsia, whose aims were more cultural than political. They were given carte blanche to develop their people’s cultural building and required in return loyalty that was freely and gratefully given. At this stage, indeed, what the Bolshevik offered corresponded to the aims of the local intelligentsia. They came from a total absence of

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<sup>5</sup> Formerly called Votyaks, they live in a compact area. For centuries, the Southern group of Udmurts were incorporated in the Kazan Khanate while the Northern part was encompassed in the Russian Vyatka State. This has left traces on their respective cultures. On their territory, Russians developed since the 17th century metal and later weapon industries, while in the last decades oil has been found.

<sup>6</sup> Formerly called Zyrians and Permiak. The two Komi groups are separated by forest areas. The group, the Permiaks, were since Russian conquest under the rule of the Stroganov family. In the north, the Zyrians occupy a huge taiga area. They were evangelised in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and were thus better integrated than the others into the Russian world (cf. Toulouze 2010a; 2010b).

<sup>7</sup> Actually I have left apart another Volga ethnic group, the Chuvash, which presents hybrid features. While these descendants of the Volga Bulgars speak a Turkic language (but quite different from Tatar and not automatically understandable), the rest of their history is akin to the Finno-Ugric groups. As I have not studied this group, I will not dwell on its history.

<sup>8</sup> Just after the revolution, some of the most ethnically aware of Russia’s nationalities, the Western groups, either formed their own states (Finland, the Baltics, the Poles), or remained within the borders of the Soviet State, but with difficult relations (the Ukrainians). The Tatars were, as I mentioned, highly politicised, and they were uncomfortable allies for the Bolshevik.

<sup>9</sup> Mari and Udmurt Autonomous oblast’ were created in November 1920, the Komi A.O. in August 1921.

recognition and were provided the means to build a cultural life, to develop school in their languages, to express themselves and to gain for their communities a dignity those never had.

Still, both in Udmurtia and in the Mari region (the two areas I am going to focus on), the intellectuals that enthusiastically worked with the Bolshevik, were usually members of the party, while the Communist Party was smart enough to integrate them at post-soviet responsibility<sup>10</sup>. Some joined the party later. Others never did, but this did not lessen their enthusiasm. In this remarkable period, which starts as soon as the Civil War is over (or even before), the promotion of the natives was one of the party's concerns, which is well expressed with the policy of indigenisation, *коренизация*, whose aim was of developing vernacular language's knowledge by the non-native, alias mainly Russian population and to ensure the recruiting of native managers and executive, for "nationals" were weakly represented at leading positions (Egorov 1929: 8, Kulturnoe 1970: 149, Sidtikova 1990: 38). Moreover, in some conflicts that emerged in the 1920s, Moscow regularly supported the local national leaders against the Russian-minded party or state officials<sup>11</sup>. It still followed Lenin's approach, who was definitely hostile to Russian nationalism (Slezkine 1994: 414) and sympathised with mere cultural building, according to the best missionary traditions<sup>12</sup>.

While following these regions' political developments in the 1920s, it is clear that two tendencies co-existed in the party's leadership: one dominates at the moment and inspires the party's policy towards the Volga nationalities and is quite friendly and supportive of the intellectuals' involvement in promoting their culture within the socialist system. The other is at the beginning of the 1920 a minority, strongly Russian-minded and hostile to nationalities' promotion; according to their understanding, these policies divert the party from the main goals, the building of a proletarian nationless society. In the party's discourse, all over two decades, these tendencies appear in the opposition against two extremes that are considered as menaces against the party's righteous policy. One is the "great-power chauvinism"<sup>13</sup>, the other, the "local nationalism"<sup>14</sup>. While at the beginning, the first was considered as the main peril (Pesikina 1956: 96), the second becomes, in the 1930s, the most subtle and dangerous enemy of the Soviet power (Lallukka 1990: 65).

This Russian-friendly tendency, which is contained by Moscow policy at the beginning of the 1920s, is very much present, especially in Udmurtia (with the strong proletarian Izhevsk' factory party organisation). The newspapers report many protests within the party against indigenisation, and numerous refusals to learn Udmurt; moreover, as soon as 1926, the leader

<sup>10</sup>This, for instance, Kuzebay Gerd, the main Udmurt poet, who was called to be the editor-in-chief of the party's daily newspaper. He asserts: "The February Revolution writers changed immediately their orientation and passed unanimously to the camp of the new literature" (Gerd 1929: 21).

<sup>11</sup> It is very clear in the case of the Udmurt executive committee chairman Trofim Borisov, an ethnic Udmurt, physician and party member (for his biography, Pavlov 1991). He was expelled from the party by Izhevsk's factory Russian lobby and accused of rape. While he was actually expelled from the Udmurt Communist Party, he was immediately after rehabilitated by the centre and sent as party leader in Kalmykia (Kulikov 1997: 42; Kuznetsov 1994: 27)

<sup>12</sup> As emphasised by Isabelle Kreindler, Lenin, whose father was missionary school's supervisor in the Volga region, might have been inspired by their implementation of vernacular languages' tuition, provided that the contents was Christian (Kreindler 1977).

<sup>13</sup> In Russian: великодержавный шовинизм.

<sup>14</sup> In Russian: местный национализм.

of the Udmurt intelligentsia, who is also the leader of the newly created Udmurt writers' Union, is compelled to resign, because of a row with the party leadership. These are marginal, but clear signs that the official place given to ethnicity, and especially non-Russian ethnicity, is not willingly accepted by many Communists.

During the second half of the 1920s, this Russian-minded wing of the party becomes the leading one. The rhetoric of the two dangers does not disappear immediately, but it is used in order to show the enemy's cunningness: local nationalists hide themselves speaking deceitfully against Great-Russian chauvinism (Dimanshteyn 1937: 7).

On the general level, collectivisation in 1928 is a brutal aggression against the ethnic groups that are mainly rural (as the Volga Finno-Ugrians), with the elimination of the rural society more active members, who are repressed as kulaks; but while *de facto* it endangers their vital strength, it does not target directly ethnic groups as such. Still, the impact is huge and may be assimilated to terror. In Udmurtia, for example, while according to the statistics, the wealthy peasants represented 2,3% of the rural population, more than 30% was eliminated for being kulaks (Nikitina 1998: 164). Another field in which repressions started with collectivisation is the spiritual domain. Until the end of the 1920s animism was tolerated partly because the Russian Orthodox Church had fought against it. With collectivisation everything changes. Among other things animistic rituals are prohibited as something that wastes state commodities (e.g. animal sacrifices. This aspect of collectivisation, undoubtedly, may be assimilated to ethnic repression (Nikitina 1998: 130–131).

Attacks explicitly against ethnicity are to be noticed in the last years of the 1920s and the very beginning of the 1930s, before they transform into a calculated enterprise of national intelligentsia's elimination. We shall follow now, after these first contextualising chapters, the forms of this war against the Volga nationalities on the example of the Finno-Ugrians.

I add a last contextualising comment about the notion of "Finno-Ugric". It is clearly a linguistic notion: the languages spoken by these peoples are of the same remote origin and connect them to the westernmost languages of the group –Estonian, Finnish, and Hungarian. Language, for the three state-building communities, is the leading identity factor. Since the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Finnish and Hungarian scholars have been looking for language kin in Eastern Russia and Siberia. While being situated far from Russia's borders, the Volga people speaking a Finno-Ugric language were intellectually and emotionally connected with these countries, whose political sympathies were nevertheless not with the USSR. While the intellectuals of those minorities in Russia were sincerely devoted to the Bolshevik cause and looked towards Hungary or Finland, not because of their present politics, but because of their history and patrimony, trying to develop meaningful links and relations. Some examples: the Komi writer and linguist Vasilii Lytkin (who wrote under the Komi name of Illya Vas') received a scholarship in 1926–27 to study in Helsinki and Budapest (Turkin 1995: 210–212; Turkin 1997: 22–25); Kuzebay Gerd<sup>15</sup>, who, besides being a writer, was also a student in Moscow, was able to get in touch with Finnish scholar Yrjö Wichmann, who had

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<sup>15</sup>Gerd wanted also to receive the same kind of scholarship. But to him, some years later than for Lytkin, it was refused (Kuznetsov 1994:104).

visited Udmurtia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and who had collected oral poetry. Gerd was keen on returning the treasures of oral culture Finnish scholars had gathered from his people. He wished to dialogue with his Finnish colleague, publishing an article in Finland through the Finnish embassy (Haltsonen 1964: 359, Kuznetsov 1994: 36, 82–89). Moreover, Finland was in some sense a model for Udmurt intellectuals: the discovery of a collection of Finnish poems translated into Russian showed Gerd the way he had to follow in order to develop Udmurt modern culture (Shklyayev 1982:141). In his motives, there was nothing political, nothing threatening towards the policy of Soviet Russia. But it will be interpreted otherwise...

## Finno-Ugric ethnicity as a danger

At the beginning of the 1930s, history and ethnography are thoroughly reviewed by the party, which decided that “bourgeois” tendencies had to be eradicated. Discourse about national issues apparently has not changed: local nationalism and “great power chauvinism” are still in focus. But great-power is no longer Russian: in a programmatic 1931 article, Matorin presents as “great power chauvinism” what he defines as Ukrainian ethnographers protecting Ukrainian kulaks against Russian proletarians (1931: 25–27). Another category emerges, “national-chauvinism”: the peoples that are “national-chauvinistic” are the Fennic peoples<sup>16</sup>, supported by Finland, whose aim, allegedly, is to conquer Karelia and to create a “Great Finland” up to the Urals (31). This is a very important theme that appears it publicly for the first time.

While intellectuals, mainly Komi and Udmurt, tried to develop relations with the Western Finno-Ugrians, for the sake of scientific cooperation or to develop knowledge of their own culture, other scholars attempt, in the 1920s, to develop Finno-Ugric studies within the Soviet Union. They are aware that nothing exists in Russia, while research is quite advanced in Hungary, Finland and Estonia (LOIKFUN 1929: 3). For this goal, they create in Leningrad in November 1925 a Society of Researchers of Finno-Ugric Cultures (LOIKFUN<sup>17</sup>) and try to coordinate the scholarly activities in the field<sup>18</sup>.

The most active scholars in Russia in the Finno-Ugric field, who are also involved in LOIKFUN, are Mordvinians, like Markelov<sup>19</sup>, and Komi, like Nalimov<sup>20</sup>. It is not surprising: both Mordvinians and Komi had been interated into the Russian world long before the other Central Russia communities, which had long been encompassed into Kazan Khanate, and thus

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<sup>16</sup> The Fennic peoples are communities speaking closely related languages in a continuum between the Curland coast (Livonians), Estonia, Finland and Karelia. In Russia, the Fennic communities are mostly (with the exception of Karelians, smaller communities: Votes, Ingrians, Ingria Finns, and Vepsian.

<sup>17</sup> In Russian: Ленинградское Общество Исследователей Культуры Финно-угорских Народов

<sup>18</sup> The leader is Vyacheslav Egorov, a senior researcher whose course about History of Fennic peoples had just been suppressed at Leningrad’s University; he will not be allowed to pursue his research after 1929 (<http://www.ethnology.ru/biobib/Result.php?fnc=459>).

<sup>19</sup> Mikhail Timofeevich Markelov (1899–1937); for more details, see Churakov 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Vasily Petrovich Nalimov (1873–1938), komi ethnographer.

kept at distance from Russian influence. In the 1920s, Udmurts<sup>21</sup> and Mari<sup>22</sup> start to develop scholarly research: they cannot ignore Finno-Ugristics, for the discipline has collected huge amounts of precious materials. The creation of LOIKFUN allows older and newer generations to conceive a development plan for Finno-Ugristics within Soviet Russia. LOIKFUN published at least one collection of articles, in 1929, in which scholars from the different areas presented their works in different fields (for example, Kuzebay Gerd wrote there the first article, about contemporary Udmurt literature, cf. Toulouze 1996). LOIKFUN's idea was one that would be realised later post-War Soviet Union: to organise regular congresses (LOIKFUN 1929a: 1) that would coordinate Soviet finno-ugristics, associating several local and cultural organisations (Kuznecov 1994: 300). The first congress was to take place in Leningrad in 1931. The preliminary text contained nothing provocative, it emphasised the study of Soviet realities as shows the theme proposed: "Report and needs of socialism construction by Russia's Finno-Ugric peoples" (Loikfun 1929:2). No hint is made of any foreign scholar's possible participation. The project is accepted by the Udmurt party in 1929 (Kuznecov 1994: 430-431). This is the last spark of hope.

In 1931 everything changes, as announced by Matorin's article in *Sovetskaya Etnografiya*. LOIKFUN is severely criticised for its "bourgeois" tendencies and its board is renewed (p.156). The union's orientations lose independence and are just harmonised with the all-over goals of Soviet organisations. Attacks against Finland are multiplied. One goal is "to fight against Finland's fascist territorial ambitions"... (Kulikov 1997: 108). In the same issue of journal, the new chairman, M. Pal'vadre claims that "the aim of Finnish ethnography is to create the scientific preconditions for/implementing/the idea of Great Finland" (Pal'vadre 1931: 41). These attacks against Finland are soon completed by attacks against "Great Estonia", presented as a parallel to "Great Finland"(Kulikov 1997:109). The foreign dimension of Finno-Ugristics is explicitly formulated. At the same time, while political relations between the two countries are not the best, diplomatic relations stabilise a status quo: in 1932, a non-aggression pact was signed between the two countries. But what we are interested in, in the Volga is not foreign policy or diplomacy. It is instrumentalisation. Actually, the Finnish situation<sup>23</sup> is interpreted according to the principle that led Soviet

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<sup>21</sup>Grigoriy Vereshchagin (1851–1930) was the first Udmurt ethnographer and writer; but he was quite isolated, and no other Udmurt acquired, before 1917, scientific reputation.

<sup>22</sup> Mari intellectuals before the Revolution dedicated their efforts to education; the first Mari to become a recognised scholar is Valerian Vasilev (see later).

<sup>23</sup> Let us add some background information. Both Finland and Estonia are successor states and former parts of imperial Russia. Both states are anti-communist, hence anti-Soviet in their own political orientations, and Communist parties are marginalised or excluded from social life. The Soviet Union, either as a proletarian state and the coloniser, could not attract much sympathy from these states. On the other hand, in the national awareness that leads to independence ambitions, the language element is crucial: both Finnish and Estonian identities are language-centred. And language is also the core of Finno-Ugric research. In the new states, some part of public opinion wants to develop particular links towards the other analogous countries – newly independent, with strong patriotic feelings. In the three Finno-Ugric nations, motivated societies form the so-called Finno-Ugric movement, which is rooted in society and not only in academic circles: *hõimuliikumine*, *heimotyö*, *rokonnépek mozgalma*. The focus of these civil society elements is not the Soviet Union's Finno-Ugric part. They are keen on developing relations among themselves, and as the Soviet Union is a closed country, they leave it apart of their activities. But within this movement, especially in Finland, there are more political wings. Triggered by historic Karelia's position, and seeing in Karelia the actual roots of the Finns, this extreme groups of

ethnography: the political dimension and even instrumentalisation of science to State superior interests (Toulouze 2006: 35): the main scholarly organisations – SKS and SUS – are considered as fascist organisations. Still, the most interesting point of view expressed in these surrealistic articles is that Soviet science is not strong enough to confront its Finnish and Estonian counterparts. Is it an appeal to security services to take in charge the problem scientists could not deal with? Is it a preparation to what is to follow?

What is happening at the beginning of the 1930s is still not terror, but it is the beginning of the path leading to it.

## **The first manifestations of national repression**

While the overall atmosphere was becoming tenser and tenser, in the national regions authorities turned explicitly against the intellectuals of the eponymous Finno-Ugric population. The first example ever of an operation against Finno-Ugric intelligentsia as such, with charges of nationalism and worse, takes place in the Mari region.

We shall now focus on this first faked process, which is interesting for several reasons. It is the first example of something that would become, in the following years, a most common experience. Moreover, it seems to be a rehearsal for a much wider operation two years later: all the mechanisms have already been identified and implemented.

At the end of January 1931, six Mari intellectuals are arrested<sup>24</sup>. They are not members of the party, they all belong to the older generation and are accused of nationalism. Moreover, they are charged with “having organised a counter-revolutionary group, helped by Finnish secret services” (Tragediya 1996: 26). These people are among the most respected activists of Mari autonomy and Mari culture. The first to be arrested is the director of the regional museum, Timofey Evsev’ev, who recognises only that he had contacts with Finnish scholars (Kulikov 1997: 111). The elder of them, Valerian Vasilyev (called Üpö-Mariy, the Mari from Ufa), a teacher in Kazan university, is arrested some days later, as well as Leonid Mendiaryov (who worked at the Museum in Kozmodemyansk), A. Sayn (who was married to an Estonian) and some others (Tragediya 1996: 111).

The arrested men are examined and they are asked to reveal their opinions of the situation in the Mari oblast and about their connections with Finland. They are interrogated for two weeks, both in Yoshkar Ola and in Nizhniy Novgorod (Kulikov 1997: 111–113). They are finally accused of wanting, with their group “1. to separate Mari autonomous oblast’ from the Soviet Union and 2. To gather intelligence for Finland” (Tragediya 1996: 113), and other charges.

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people, who are not the most influential ones in societies, may express some ultra nationalistic positions that may provoke the Soviets’ concerns.

<sup>24</sup>Actually at the same time, a smaller operation is led against some Hill Mari “nationalist” group. But we do not know its links with Mari intelligentsia (Tragediya 1996: 27).



In december, the file is examined in Moscow and the charges fizzle out. Moscow refuses the accusation of the Mari being spies, and the Mari intellectuals are “only” exiled for three years for anti-Soviet activities (Tragediya 1996: 115). This ending, as well as the knowledge we have of the future, is probably why we interpret this episode as a rehearsal of what follows.

This is the first example we have of clear criminalisation of being a national intellectual in a Finno-Ugric region. The accused Maris are all highly respected intellectuals, whose merits are directly connected with Mari nation-building. They are all involved in cultural “construction”. Moreover, their loyalty towards the Soviet power, their sincere gratefulness cannot be doubted.

### **The first great process against Finno-Ugric intellectuals: the SOFIN**

In the 1920s, the Udmurt leadership, as mentioned above, was reluctant to implement the pro-Udmurt policy promoted by Moscow – the party was dominated by Izhevsk plant communists, a dominantly Russian proletarian organisation. The position of the Udmurt leadership had not changed, but Moscow had now chosen more Russian-oriented policy. But there were tensions within the oblast. Can they be explained by this new support local authorities received from the centre? Certainly, positions that were just hinted at in the previous decade, are now explicitly asserted. The party leadership can express their dissatisfaction against intellectuals who felt involved in the Udmurt cause. Tensions accumulated around the poet number one, Kuzebay Gerd, who became the focus of harsher and harsher attacks and finally the victim of the first big process announcing wider and more systematic terror. The SOFIN affair is often called also the Gerd Affair (Kulikov 1997: 9).

Who is Kuzebay Gerd? Kuz'ma Pavlovich Chaynikov (1896–1937) was trained as a school teacher and participated enthusiastically in the revolutionary events. He was extremely active: he contributed to the establishment of Udmurt borders, wrote in the press articles and poems, played his plays in the countryside, lead an orphanage, was in charge of the party's paper “Gudyri”. After this extraordinary period, he studied poetry in Moscow with Valeri Bryusov and came back in 1925 to fulfil several tasks in Udmurtia: director of the museum, leader of the writer's union. After some tensions he went back to Moscow in order to prepare two doctoral dissertations (in ethnography and folklore). He was called back in 1931 and, before he was arrested and tried, he was a university teacher. In those years, he published three collections of poems and several other works (textbooks, one short story, plays, collections of songs and folklore).

### **The crescendo against Gerd**

The first sign of serious disapproval of Gerd was given as soon as 1926 at a teachers' meeting, through a row with the party's secretary, who accuses Gerd, the chairman of the

Writers' Union, of having bourgeois attitudes<sup>25</sup>. Certainly the poet's open, extrovert personality, his charm and charisma, may have provoked personal jealousy and enmity all his life long. After this row, the party dismissed him from his positions at the editing board of the literary journal *Kenesh*, as head of the Writer's Union and of the Udmurt Museum (Emelyanov 1988: 182–183). Later, he went to Moscow, where he spent some studious years in relative quiet and published in Kazan (not in Izhevsk...), his second collection of poems, whose reception was not very enthusiastic (Shklyayev 1988: 9; Ermakov 1988: 231)

But some of his fellow students denounced him to the Udmurt Communist Party and he was called back without completing his dissertations (Ermakov 1998: 14; Ermakov 1994: 36–37). I have not found any reason for this hostile attitude against a personality that was so appreciated by many. Two main hypotheses may be brought forth: envy may be the first, i.e. personal reasons. The other may seem paranoiac. But if Gerd had already been chosen as the culprit to eliminate, the letter may have been inspired by local authorities to students willing to please. But these are only conjectures.

While going back home, Gerd is more and more targeted both in public speeches by party officials and in the press, and accused of committing more and more political errors. After a public letter in 1931 by Udmurt Bolshevik Nagovitsyn, which is quite critical of Gerd's political positions (Shumilov 1998: 217), in 1932, party secretary Elts'ov in a speech expresses the official position: "the mouthpiece for national bourgeoisie in literature is a well-known poet, Gerd. Gerdism highly praises all our enemies, what remains of the kulak class, which we have eliminated, opposes all our initiatives, socialist construction (...) In our press, this kulak fights against Russian, against Russian workers and he calls backward Udmurts not to learn Russian" (Kulikov 1995: 75–76). This is a clear sign. Articles against Gerd, often signed by several persons, by colleague writers, become more and more frequent (Kuznetsov 1994: 150, Shklyayev 1990: 30).

His recent works are attacked. While clearly Gerd's wish not to provoke leads him to more and more conventional works – his third<sup>26</sup> and last collection of poems, *Grades*<sup>27</sup> (1931) is not as original as the previous, both in form and in contents; while he sings the successes of the new life, his detractors find in his works negative metaphors against the party's policies. For example in the poem "Storm in the village", an obsessive work with short verses, he is accused of slandering collectivisation (Shklyayev 1979: 79–80). But that's not all. All his poems are analysed from the point of view of the party's policy and dogma, even those that were written before 1917: he is accused of idealising the past, praising the rich, exalting solitude and individualism, being melancholic, writing against the Russians (Shklyayev 1979; 1990).

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<sup>25</sup> According to Ermakov, Baryshnikov said, when Gerd criticised the education authorities: "Gerd's behaviour is intolerable, he openly expresses contempt and disrespect towards the Education Office civil servants (...). Gerd has not changed his scornful attitude towards the Udmurts" (Ermakov 1988: 36). Gerd left the congress after this attack.

<sup>26</sup> The two first are *The citharist* (in Udm.: *Крезьчи*), Izhevsk 1922, and the second "The land in flower" (in Udm. *Сяськаяськисьмузьем*), Kazan 1927.

<sup>27</sup> In Udm.: *Лёзетъёс*.

## Arrests

In 1932 the pressure is such that it is almost a relief to be summoned by the NKVD to Nizhni Novgorod (Kuznetsov 1994: 48). On February 18, Gerd is asked to remain at the hotel and to write down all about himself. He is being interrogated for the next two months (Kuvshinova 1998: 68–69). After 1994, these documents have been found in KGB archives. As in other regions, a former Udmurt KGB official, Nikolay Spiridonovich Kuznetsov published a book in 1994 informing public opinion about what has been forgotten and tabooed. The documents do not reveal under what pressure they have been written. By what I know of their contents, I do not doubt that as far as the Gorki texts are concerned, they reflect Gerd's thinking. Gerd, who had been extremely wounded by the attacks against him, who did not understand what was happening, tried to get things clear for himself. His notes are extremely logical. He does not neglect self-criticism – but this is praxis of the period – at the same time he insists on his will to act and to be useful (Kuznetsov 1994: 16; 309). In the first stage of the procedure, probably he hopes that by an honest account of his thoughts he should be able to convince the prosecutors of his good faith. Now we understand that this first stage is probably meant to obtain materials that will be anyway turned against their author. Gerd is allowed to go back home, but as soon as May 13<sup>th</sup>, he is arrested as well as some other Udmurt intellectuals. Gerd will spend one year and seven months in an isolation cell in Nizhni Novgorod (Gerd 1998: 34; Kuznetsov 1994: 48). Later, other Finno-Ugric intellectuals are arrested as well.

If not all intellectuals are arrested, many are terrorised. Poetess and physician Akulina Vekshina, Ashalchi Oki, had stopped writing earlier, when she understood that it wasn't possible anymore to be honest in one's writings. But in 1933 she is interrogated (Kuznetsov 1993: 61). She disappears as a poet yet being able to go on living as a physician. But she is clearly traumatised, as she writes in the 1956 to Kralina<sup>28</sup>: “Who does write to a dead person? The Ashalchi Oki whom you address has been buried long ago. A quarter of century has passed since I wrote and I have forgotten everything. Anyhow, as long as I remember, I did not write anything since 1931. I have forgotten. I don't remember a single poem, or story. After a psychological trauma, I destroyed all the Udmurt literature that I had in my library” (Kralina 1990: 25).

## The SOFIN

The process starts in 1933 and finishes in 1934.

The files of this process cover thousands of pages that have not been opened to researchers, except some scholars in Udmurtia, like former KGB official Kuznetsov. The examination for Gerd is long and extremely detailed. He is even brought to Lyubyanka, where according to secondary information, he fell apart (Kuvshinova 1998: 70; Verner 1998: 227). There are several charges against the accused: ideological charges, reprehensible acts, intentions.

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<sup>28</sup>Kralina had just discovered the existence of pre-war Udmurt literature and that one of the main names was still alive, living as an ophthalmologist in Alnashi, and she addressed her a letter.

The ideological charges rested upon ambiguous elements, which, speciously put together, create the framework: a) nationalism, i.e. placing the interests of the Udmurts higher than the principle of class struggle; b) hostility to Russians or to Russian colonialism; c) antisovietism, i.e. hostility towards the power whose policy is not favourable to the Udmurts; d) sympathy towards other countries, i.e. Finland is seen as a model.

The deeds the prosecution brings forth against the accused are all derived from these ideological premises: everything they did since the Revolution is inspired by these ideas. So are interpreted Gerd's different activities as an organiser, from the Association of Udmurt Culture Bölyak founded in Moscow in 1923–24 (Kulikov 1991: 12) to the creation of the Udmurt writers' Union. But all of these acts are not condemnable *per se*. Here the prosecutors are compelled to rely on imagination and invention: the creation of SOFIN, the counter-revolutionary organisation, whose aim was to work for the interests of Finland and Estonia, in order to create a Finnish protectorate on Russia's Finno-Ugric regions. The SOFIN counterrevolutionary organisation is an invention. But it is well documented: we would call it a network. They reconstructed a Finno-Ugric network that existed in a non-formal way and replaced weak, occasional links, with strong party-like affiliation subordinate relations. All this is a paranoiac construction, but it is quite well structured: all groups that were interested in Finno-Ugrianness were related.

Within this construction, Gerd and his companions not only follow their own ideological beliefs, but had sold themselves to the enemy; they are also paid by Finland and Estonia to transmit intelligence about Izhevsk weapon plant. It is clear that the most solid charges, the acts, are not consistent enough to rely on facts. Inventions are unavoidable.

The third component of the prosecution is about intention. As every act is illuminated by the ideological crimes, every act is potentially dangerous because of its possible consequences, i.e. the separation of the Finno-Ugric zones of the URSS in order to have them joining Finland. Words have no connection with reality. They have a meaning and a symbolic of their own.

The verdict of the process was extremely severe: in a time where death penalty was rare, Gerd and his companion Yakovlev, whose sin was being a **SR** in the years following 1917, were actually condemned to death, while other "SOFIN members" were condemned to lighter camp penalties. Gerd's life, allegedly, was saved by Gor'ki's interference, who very much appreciated the Udmurt poet (Kuznetsov 1994: 67, Gerd 1998: 35). The death penalties were finally commuted into 10 years camps, and Gerd was in Solovki's camp when the Great Terror operations led to his execution among thousands of other prisoners in Karelia, at a place called Sandomokh (Loriya 1998: 152).

The other SOFIN accused have lighter penalties such as exile or some years in labour camps. The non-Udmurts are condemned to shorter periods in camp: the Komis Lytkin, and Nalimov are respectively condemned to two years and liberated; Markelov is only exiled from Central Russia (Kulikov 1997: 238).

## Conclusion

It is impossible to believe that Soviet authorities at the beginning of the 1930s were afraid of Finland in a territorial way. Hence this charge and the identity of the accused shows that what is under process is indeed Finno-Ugrianness, which is seen as a menace to Stalinist power. How can this be? The only possible explanation is a wish to control all kind of ethnicity more thoroughly than has been done before.

At the beginning of the 1920, the central authorities had given free hands to the ethnic intellectuals to work for them and to develop innocuous cultures. In the 1930s the situation has changed. The Bolshevik power is well rooted. The Bolsheviks can start to implement their actual project, in which ethnicity is not an issue. It was perhaps an important point for part of the old Bolshevik leadership (as Lenin, who was himself from the Volga region), but not for those who have survived and for the majority of the party, which is strongly Russian-minded. Great-Russian chauvinism is not only a political ideology: it is a default position of most Russians, who do not even question the righteousness of their supremacy on other, different, less “civilised” ethnic groups. Everything that is aimed at supporting a non-Russian nation becomes suspect. This analysis is not in contradiction with the importance of ethnically structured country: it allowed Bolsheviks to keep ethnicity but only under thorough control and to turn it towards their own goals. Too independent minds are dangerous for this project, because they would not be satisfied with only national “form”, and would demand corresponding content.

The SOFIN’s operation had deep consequences especially on the Udmurt population: one part of the national intelligentsia was silenced by physical elimination, another by fear; others were morally compromised and had lost their spiritual independence, although the few more years they had to live before they were also caught in the Great terror allowed some of them to produce important works for Udmurtness<sup>29</sup>. But the fear provoked by the SOFIN process answered in town to the fear caused by kulak repressions in the countryside: since 1928–1929, life was a succession of unpredictable blows. Gerd’s example showed that even writing conventional communist-minded works did not save from punishment. For Volga peoples, terror is part of life since collectivisation. For the succession of processes against Udmurts is fairly uninterrupted until the Great Terror. From the point of view of long-term political consequences, certainly collectivisation terror and intellectual terror against intellectuals are more relevant than the Great Terror: the latter was nothing new, fear had been long dominating the country, and while during the Great Terror repression touched indeed groups that had not been victimised in the previous years, they had lived as well under the empire of fear. Thus, the Great Terror did not bring anything totally new, except for its massiveness.

What are the conclusions we may draw from this experience?

- That the methods of the Great Terror had been thoroughly rehearsed

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<sup>29</sup> As, for example, writer Mikhail Konovalov, who could finish his novel *Gayan* (1936) before being arrested and eliminated.

- That the Great Terror was not an aberration, but a logical construct on the path Stalin had chosen since collectivisation
- That border and war problematic are later phenomena. Ethnicity was dangerous as such. It had to be checked and subordinated to the State's interests.
- That the so called Lenin nationality policy that had structured the Soviet Union, while not being discussed as such, was a source of tension and one that was solved with the use of terror.

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