

THE LIFE OF A SOVIET PROFESSOR

BY DMITRI BULIGIN

I TAUGHT for twenty years in Soviet institutions of higher learning. How many of my thousands of students wrote secret reports on me for the Communist Party and the MVD (secret police) I shall never know. But the figure must have been high indeed, judging from the number of times I was called for questioning on something I had said in a lecture. For each such instance there undoubtedly were innumerable reports about which I never learned.

No incident seemed too trivial to be taken seriously. One morning I explained an engineering problem to my class, and I mentioned a factory where this problem was being worked out. I happened to refer, in passing, to a memorial to Lenin and Stalin which I had seen on its grounds. (There are hundreds of these statues throughout the Soviet Union.) No student indicated by facial expression or comment that anything was amiss. But that evening I was "invited" to the office of the Communist Committee Secretary of my Institute.

He began by discussing academic matters generally. Then he referred to

my lecture of that same day. He said gravely that I had used the word "memorial" in reference to a statue that included a figure of Stalin as well as Lenin. "A living person may have a monument built to him, but never a memorial, which is only for the dead," he sternly told me. These two words are almost identical in Russian, as they are in English. But as soon as I realized what the interview was about, I knew how serious it could be for me. Some student had apparently reported that I had intimated Stalin would be better dead. I knew that this would not have been an unusually far-fetched interpretation, at least not by the standards of Communist Party and MVD informers. I had seen a number of such reports about others when investigators had called me in to ask me about them, and I knew how wildly inaccurate they could be.

I was let off with only a stiff warning. After all, I had the advantage of teaching a specialty for which professors could not easily be found. On other occasions, the Party Secretary complained to me that I had "for-

DMITRI BULIGIN is the pseudonym of a Russian professor who was captured by the Germans during the war, and was later liberated by American troops. He is now working in this country. He contributed "I Was A 'Free' Russian" to the August 1947 AMERICAN MERCURY.

gotten" to include the Communist line or mention of Stalin in my lectures. When I explained that my subject was so technical that there often seemed no way of bringing them in, the Secretary would be unsatisfied. "One can always find a way to tell students about the contributions which the Party is making in your particular field, and about the far-sighted encouragement given by our great leader," I would be told.

Soon after I started a series of lectures on technical advances abroad I received a prompt call from the Communist Secretary. He pointed out that I had talked about American progress, but had not mentioned Soviet Russia's contributions. "But the purpose of this series is only to tell what other countries are doing in my field," I protested. The Party official was adamant. "That makes no difference," he said. "You can't go on like this. Either you drop the series, or you must say that at least equal advances are being made in the Soviet Union, thanks to the impetus provided by the Communist Party's planning programs."

Sometimes, an open check would be kept on me. One day I noticed a strange girl in the back of my lecture room, taking down every word I said. A few days later a student asked me in the lobby, "Did you notice the girl taking down your entire lecture in shorthand?" I nodded, and he explained, "She is the stenographer in the Secret Bureau at the Textile Institute." I saw her there later.

II

Openly, this Secret Bureau is in charge of "classified material" — as secret papers are referred to in military and other government offices. These included reports, maps, charts and other papers marked "restricted" or "secret."

Often they were the actual blueprints and plans used by factories in industrial projects. They were sent to the schools through government Ministries for use by the students. These documents could not be removed from the Secret Bureau, and notes and tracings made by the students had to be initialed, stamped — and then returned. There usually was nothing in all of this material that is not common knowledge abroad, but such precautions are encouraged because they get the young into the habit of maintaining an attitude of military secrecy at all times, in peacetime as well as war.

The Secret Bureaus help to keep the Universities and Institutes on a war footing at all times. When Germany struck, it was from the Secret Bureau that our faculty and student body obtained evacuation and relocation details, which obviously had been long prepared. I had to refer to files in the Secret Bureau at this time, and saw the thorough manner in which they classified the faculty members and students as to their qualifications for war work and military service, so they could be used promptly where most effective. These bureaus

also supervise the peacetime military programs in Soviet schools, and arrange special military lectures.

We rarely referred to them as Secret Bureaus; indeed, we rarely talked about them at all. In general, when you did refer to the Bureau in your own University or Institute, you called it by the number of the room it occupied — in our case “Room 203.” The Secret Bureau differs from one institution to the other only in its room number. It is a detective bureau right on the premises, an obvious part of the secret police network. When, for instance, the Secretary of the Communist Party Committee in our Institute would be changed in mid-term, I might hear, “Room 203 made an unfavorable report.”

Its minimum occupants are an office manager, assistant and typist. They have extensive files, kept up to date by frequent questionnaires for everybody on the faculty or in the student body. They compare the old answers to new ones. Like the secret police generally in the Soviet Union, they go on the assumption that embarrassing questions are likely to be answered in different ways at different times. When they find such discrepancies, the suspect is given an intense grilling. I have been put under such questioning in “Room 203.” The cross-examination never stops at the discrepancy itself, but probes about in all allied fields. If your mind was hazy about the detail originally, by the time you are through being quizzed you are apt to be in a state

of total confusion, and if there was any family detail you had wished to gloss over, you will probably have revealed it. I have known such examinations to be followed by the disappearance of academicians or students. “The MVD is continuing the interrogation,” I might hear. Then we just dropped their names from the register, and talked no more about them.

The secret police network was unobtrusive, but it extended into every classroom and office. “Room 203” worked closely with the Secretaries of the Communist and Comsomol Committees in our Institute who in turn kept in close contact with the Secretary of the District Communist Committee in the Leningrad area. Our Institute also had a committee called *Mestkom* for the faculty, and another *Mestkom* for students, and the chairman of each was always in close contact with the Party and Comsomol Secretaries. Similar systems exist in every University and Institute in the Soviet Union, and together they are integrated into the national network of secret police maintained by the MVD. Thus, outwardly any sort of democratic procedure, as practiced in the United States or England, can be permitted, but with complete confidence that it will never get out of hand, or escape Communist Party and MVD control.

The *Mestkom* is supposed to represent non-Party as well as Party members; actually it extends Party activities into non-Party ranks. It takes up

a great deal of everyone's time with "social affairs," which are usually thinly-disguised political gatherings, and at least one of which I had to attend each week — after working hours. A percentage of my pay was deducted for what the *Mestkom* called its "cultural outlays." I had nothing to say about how this money would be spent.

For instance, in order to keep propaganda plays well attended — a serious difficulty for the Party — the *Mestkom* would often tell us that we had bought out the whole house for some evening, and that special seats had been reserved for everyone. Reserved seats sounded attractive until we realized that if we failed to appear our empty places would stand out like so many sore thumbs. When you dared to miss such a performance, a "social worker" — that was how the *Mestkom* people liked to refer to themselves — would be sure to sidle up to you the next day and remark significantly, "How could you miss such a wonderful performance? We all noticed your absence." You knew, by this, that another little entry had been included in the files of "Room 203" under your name.

The *Mestkom* also edited two wall newspapers, called *sten-gazeta*, one for the faculty and another for the students. Every institution of higher learning has them. The Communist Committee Secretary never hesitated about asking any professor to "contribute" a signed article about "the unsocial behavior" of some other pro-

fessor. I was often asked to do such pieces. Once, when such a piece referred to one of my closest colleagues on the faculty, I exclaimed, "But he's my friend!"

"You know the Party attitude on criticism," I was told. "You know that we ourselves do as the Party feels advisable, irrespective of friendship or relationship."

Refusal would have been tantamount to challenging the Party itself. I went to see the professor whom I had to attack in print, and asked him to help me write the criticism in a good-natured manner, so as to do as little harm to him as possible. Together we wrote something that was adverse, but with the sting mostly removed. I brought it to the Secretary, who glanced over it, thanked me, and remarked: "You won't mind, will you, if I make some slight corrections?" When the article appeared, it had been drastically changed, with paragraphs added, making it a vicious attack by me upon my friend. Fortunately, he realized that this was just "one of those things" that come up normally in Soviet Russia.

III

Another of the faculty organizations was our trade union. Any grievance we had on wages and hours was of no interest to it; this was not the business of the union. Its job, as everywhere in Russia, was to see to it that we got no less pay — or more — than the scale set by the government. The union also arranged lectures for me,

sometimes for a nominal stipend, more often for nothing. This was part of the "social work" expected of us. Also, when there was some confusion about which category a man's job fell into, the union would take up the case for us. In addition, it collaborated with the *Mestkom* in giving special courses on Party-line subjects. We had to attend these on our own time.

When the *History of the Communist Party* was published, it was our union which tested us on our knowledge of it, to make sure that we had read and studied it. There was no question but that we had to give satisfactory answers, if we were to keep our jobs. Social science instructors did the testing. I never knew one who was not a Communist Party member; it is an unwritten law that only a Party man can be entrusted with social studies.

Although my subjects were technical, I had to receive this political training. In such matters, emphasis was always placed on the Party (the government was given only minor attention). Before I could be trusted to instruct my students about the capacity of a bridge, I had to be able to explain to them "why Lenin selected Stalin as his successor." A professor may teach Russian literature, but as part of his qualifications he must be able to tell his students the exact degree of political favor in which Tolstoy is held at any particular moment; he must know whether Eсенин's poetry on peasant life is suitable for the classroom, in view of Lenin's theory on collectivization of farms.

Students, who also have to pass political tests, never know what fine point of Communist Party dogma they will be called on to explain, yet they realize that if they do not answer as required they will not be enrolled. The main points in these tests are, first, the general line of the Communist Party, then Communist Party history, the Soviet Constitution, comparisons of the Communist and capitalist systems, and, at the very end, Soviet Russia's foreign policy. Thus it was necessary to explain in 1938 that Hitler was plotting to undermine the peaceful Soviet industrialization; in 1940 we had to declare that he was one of the most far-sighted statesmen in the world; and only in mid-1941, after he had invaded our own soil, could we condemn him as an aggressor. From such Soviet newspapers and publications as I see nowadays, it is evident that if I were still with my students in Leningrad, I would now have to teach that it is the United States which is plotting to undermine Soviet Russia's peaceful reconstruction.

The students also have their unions. They join unions in the industries for which they are being trained. The Railway Union has a unit right inside the Railway Institute, for instance. It is the union which picks the officers of the students' *Mestkom*, which in turn supervises student activities. I attended a number of student union meetings, at which *Mestkom* officers were selected. A representative from union headquarters was always on

hand, sitting on the platform to "guide" proceedings. Slates of candidates for the various offices were always ready beforehand, but it was required that the candidates be at least briefly discussed, in accordance with "democratic procedure." I never heard anyone attack a Communist Party member who was running for office. When a candidate somehow slipped in that the Party did not wish to run, a Party man would take the floor. "This student is not sufficiently prepared for the very important work which will fall upon him," he would explain. "Maybe in a year or two he will have more experience, and then he can be selected. For the time being, the candidate may wish to withdraw." I never heard of a case in which the candidate did not promptly withdraw.

Such formal activities monopolized student time. There was no campus life, for there was no campus. My wife was the childhood acquaintance of another professor's wife, and so our families met socially, but we limited these meetings to three or four a year.

I was once summoned to MVD headquarters in the center of Leningrad after such a party, and bluntly accused in this manner: "You conducted a counter-revolutionary meeting; you belong to a counter-revolutionary organization." I protested that it was just an innocent social affair. "You spoke against Party leaders," the MVD investigator would insist. "You joined in singing *God*

Save the Tsar." Notwithstanding the seriousness of the situation, I could not help smiling; it was preposterous for the MVD to intimate, more than a quarter-century after the revolution, that the Tsarist hymn was still sung in Soviet Russia. The public is sincerely anti-monarchist. Too many remember the Tsarist régime too well to wish its return.

Also, it would have been unthinkable to sing a subversive song in an apartment house, with neighbors on every side. That question broke the tension, and I felt confident that this inquiry had nothing to do with me personally. I told the examiner quite frankly that yes, he certainly knew where I had been, and with whom, but there had been "no counter-revolutionary talk." We had been drinking a little, yes. A little dancing and flirting. We had sung. But there had been no politics.

Whether the information sought in this inquiry concerned any one of my guests, or our party generally, I never knew. I had to answer explicit personal questions on every individual who came to the party. Obviously, one or more of my guests had been secret police informers. Perhaps the MVD only wanted to check up on the accuracy of its reports. One never knew. I have been trapped by threats against my own and my family's security, camouflaged in verbiage about "the responsibility of the Soviet citizen to safeguard the State," into providing the secret police with such reports at times. Such experiences, it

can be readily understood, tend to discourage you from inviting your colleagues home for sociable evenings.

IV

The problem of Party work was a nightmare. All Universities and Institutes (both give degrees of equal standing, and both are entered after completion of 10-year schools) have a Communist Party Committee and a Comsomol Committee. The case of Professor Alexandrov, who taught in my department, was an example of how Party students could gain credit in these political committees for "social work." Each year, the best theses are put in the library, for reference use by the next year's students. Each thesis is 100 to 150 handwritten pages, with 10 or 12 technical drawings. It is physically impossible for a professor to read every word in every one that comes to him. But a Communist student, who had been reviewing some old theses in the library, reported that he had detected "an erroneous point of view" in a paper that Professor Alexandrov had passed.

Although it was a scientific paper, a court, consisting of selected faculty and student members, was set up, and Professor Alexandrov was put on trial. He got off with a reprimand; the Party had only taken advantage of the opportunity for a show trial. But the atmosphere became so tense that Alexandrov had to leave the Institute. He was a conscientious man, who had told me that he always concentrated on the technical parts of a

thesis as most important. I had warned him of the danger in this — that it was in the long introductions and verbose endings that personal opinions might slip in, and that it was on this that one had to focus attention, even at the expense of technical portions.

We often noticed that a professor much less capable than others would make outstanding progress. He would always be a Party member. When the old professor who headed our department died, it was taken for granted that I, as his closest assistant, would succeed him. The job, however, was assigned to an instructor who had been my student. He had had the habit of missing lectures to attend to Party affairs. This absence from class for Party work was often a favorite artifice by those who needed their studies most.

Shortly before the war, however, when numerous specialists were being sent all over the country to head engineering and construction projects, this man, too, was sent. He did not relish the distant, politically dangerous assignment, but he had no choice, and so I was finally given the post as department head.

We non-Party members often came up against evidence of the constant struggle for power that took place within the Communist ranks, of how ruthlessly it was fought, and with what patient subterfuge. All controversies between Party members are supposed to remain secret, to be settled by a high Party committee when

officials are involved, and by a local Party superior where the rank and file is concerned. One such contest pitted the Director of my Institute against our Party Committee Secretary. They were polite in public, but a number of us on the faculty knew that each was trying to oust the other.

They were well matched — the Director was supported by his Moscow Ministry, and the Party Secretary by the local District Party Committee — much nearer home. The climax came on the eve of Constitution Day. A supper-concert was held for the faculty and students. Party big shots, as usual, did not eat, but attended to the arrangements and then retired for their own special supper later. A few of the prettier girl students were invited. I was invited, too, although I was a non-Party man. I found out why later.

Just before the festivities ended, the Party Secretary joined me and another professor, and we strolled down the hallway, chatting. Someone opened the door of a classroom — and there within was the director, in the arms of one of the girl students. It dawned on me later that the poor man had been framed. As was to be expected, he was dismissed — and also, as was to be expected, he was replaced by a close associate of the Secretary's.

v

On the eve of patriotic or anniversary days, we had to attend meetings of the entire faculty and student body, when an "order of the day" might be made

public, naming those who were to receive awards for work or study — cash prizes, coupons to buy a suit or pair of pants, a piece of material to make into a suit, perhaps some shoes. We had to sit through interminable speeches, all expounding the Party line, and all containing the pious allusions to Comrade Stalin.

The similarity of these speeches is no accident, as my own experience attests. The Party Secretary usually picks the speakers, and generally invites each one to come and see him "for a little discussion." In my case, which was typical, he remarked that "it might be advisable" for me to mention the Party's important rôle in my own field, and, "as you certainly know, at the end of a speech, one usually refers to Comrade Stalin." It might be the same dull propaganda that everyone had been reading in the newspapers, seeing in the movies and hearing over the radio; but I could no more avoid putting it into my speech than I could avoid attending these "voluntary" meetings.

While Universities specialize in the natural sciences, mathematics, physics, law and the social sciences, the Institutes operate in the specialized fields: medicine, agriculture, business problems, etc. Each Ministry not only directs industry in its own field, but also educates the manpower for that industry by its direct control of the appropriate Institutes. It has the responsibility for educating just the right number of men in each specialty, so that each man fits his job, and no

man is without a job. We often heard of administrators being arrested and accused of faulty job planning — and without exception they would also be charged with doing this deliberately. It would be sabotage or some other anti-social act. As ultimate responsibility for the Ministries is in the hands of the Communist Party, when specialists cannot get the job they are trained for, it cannot be ascribed simply to poor planning, or to the human element — this would conflict with Communist ideology. The Party can do no wrong, even by inference.

I was employed in two Institutes and, at the same time, as an engineering consultant in several plants. This doubling up in education and factory work was encouraged by the government, as it was supposed to give practical experience to pedagogues. For myself, it was the only way to make a living. I received a full salary in the Engineering Institute, and worked elsewhere by the hour. I worked almost fifteen hours a day for six days a week — and often six more hours on my day off. Officially, I had two months' vacation a year, but in practice I was only able to absent myself from all work for a month at a time every few years.

My day started about 7:30 A.M., for Institute life began at 9 A.M., and I lived on the edge of town, almost an hour away by trolley. Lectures last 50 minutes, with 10-minute intervals between them. I gave three such lectures for the Locomotive Faculty, then two more for the Railway Cars

Faculty, both in the same building. Then I took another crowded trolley, and spent two or three more hours at one of my jobs as consulting engineer.

After this, I would go to another Institute, in another part of town. I worked more than half-time at this second Institute, but the law forbids collecting more than half your regular pay at any second job. So, in effect, I worked overtime at reduced pay. At this second Institute I lectured for two hours, and then spent two to three hours helping students with their projects. After this I could go home — another packed trolley, and another hour's ride. But my day's work was not yet ended. I had to put in a couple more hours preparing the next day's lectures and, finally, do whatever extra assignments I had, such as writing textbooks.

During wartime in Leningrad University, I taught in a building without windows, without electricity, my hands almost frozen, while my students tried to take notes without removing their mittens, and we tried to ignore the sound of shells outside.

There were times when only one student remained in a class, for all the others were out doing war work, or in the military services. But we professors had to stay at our posts, in a skeleton institution, so that the Russian radio could boast to the rest of the nation and to the world that not even artillery fire or incendiary bombs could stop Soviet education.

That was wartime. But in spirit Soviet Russia is the same in peacetime.

THE SOAP BOX



EDITORIAL NOTES

Shop Talk. An editorial office has one feature in common with a railroad station or an office building elevator: one never knows whom one will meet there, and almost anything can happen. From this point of view, nearly every day at THE AMERICAN MERCURY is filled with the unexpected. . . . Over a period of several days, not long ago, a middle-aged man would rush in and ask for asylum, because "dangerous Communists, one of them a tall man," were hunting for him with intent to kill. He was satisfied when allowed to sit in the reception room for a few minutes, and always thanked the receptionist profusely. We haven't heard from him since. . . . At least three, four times every week we get a letter or postcard denouncing us as Communists, which will be news to Andrei Vishinsky. . . . For some two years now, about the first and tenth of every month we have been receiving a postcard from someone in Nevada, warning us that there is a Hell, where all sinners will eventually go. The card is, merci-

fully, not addressed to any individual on the staff, but to the editorial department as a whole. . . . Lately we have been getting huge, hand-written manuscripts (carbon copies), with vague return addresses in several Middle-Western states. They all seem to be written by the same person, and the burden of most of them is that Shakespeare never existed, a point of view that should interest the adherents of the Baconian theory of the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. . . . One afternoon a pleasant-faced and soft-spoken woman in her seventies asked for the editorial secretary, and in a very sweet tone, said, "I have read a wonderful piece in your magazine. Simply wonderful! As a matter of fact, it changed my whole life. And I would like a copy of the magazine containing it." But she did not remember the author's name. She did not remember the approximate issue it had appeared in: "Oh, it may have been a few months ago, or perhaps further back — two or three years." She didn't remember whether it was a story, a poem, an article or a review. "Isn't it maddening how it all escapes