

Anthropology and the Moscow Trials

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After initially supporting the Mensheviks, Leon Trotsky (b. 1879 – d. 1940) joined Lenin's Bolsheviks just before the 1917 Russian Revolution. Trotsky clashed with Lenin regarding terms of the peace treaty that the new Soviet government concluded with Germany in 1918. According to Christopher Hill, "Lenin decided that [Bolshevik] Russia must conclude a separate peace [with Germany]. He was afraid that England and Germany might come to terms at [Bolshevik] Russia's expense. He had to face the stubborn opposition of Trotsky and many leading party figures who had been intoxicated by the ease of the internal victory [of the Bolsheviks in Russia], and who were prepared to stake everything on the speedy development of revolutions in western Europe" (1971: 111). Lenin realized that socialism might have to be built in one country – the USSR – without relying on the possibility of assistance from revolutionary socialist states in western Europe.

Trotsky played a leading role during in organizing and leading the Red Army during the Civil War (1918-20) which followed the Revolution, when 'White' forces, whose aim was the overthrow of the Soviet state, were assisted militarily by invading forces from 14 nations, including Britain, France, Canada, the US, and Japan (Hill 1971).

After the Civil War, Trotsky and his followers joined other groups in a 'United Opposition' against continuation of the New Economic Policy, which allowed foreign investment and a degree of private ownership of land, initiated by Lenin before his death in 1924 (Hill 1971). After organizing anti-government demonstrations in Moscow, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party in 1926 and sent to Alma Ata in Central Asia. At its Sixth Congress in 1928, the Communist Party embarked on a policy of rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture in anticipation of an invasion by capitalist powers precipitated by an imminent world-wide capitalist crisis. These policies were championed by J. Stalin, and supported by a large majority of Communist Party members (Szymanski 1984). Trotsky's continued attempts to organize opposition to the Soviet state resulted in his permanent exile from the USSR in 1929. He eventually allowed sanctuary in Mexico in 1937. He was assassinated there in 1940.

During the Moscow Trials of 1936, 1937, and 1938, Trotsky was convicted in absentia of heading a conspiracy to overthrow the Soviet state in collaboration with the regimes of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. In 1936-37, the world-famous psychologist, John Dewey (b. 1859 – d. 1952) established The American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. In February, 1937, Dewey claimed that there was a "concerted effort" to break up the work of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, and issued a statement reaffirming the Committee's intention to work for an "impartial" investigation in "the matter of justice for Mr. Trotsky." Franz Boas (b. 1858 – d. 1942), widely regarded as the founder of the North American academic discipline of Anthropology, was listed as a signer of the statement (New York Times 17 February 1937). In April, 1937, Dewey and four other members of his Committee interviewed Trotsky in Mexico. Trotsky was the only person interviewed. The Dewey Committee concluded

that the charges brought against Trotsky in 1937 were unfounded (New York Times 13 December 1937; Dewey et al 1937). On 2 March 1938, The Dewey Committee was reported in the New York Times as characterizing the charges brought against Trotsky and other defendants as a “Frame-up.” In the New York Times article, Boas was named as a supporter of the Committee’s conclusion. After this report was printed, Boas immediately disavowed the Dewey Committee: “Professor Franz Boas declared yesterday that his name was used without permission in a statement issued last Tuesday by the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky characterizing the trail of leading Bolsheviki now in progress in Moscow as a “frame-up.” “I beg to say that since I do not know the inside of Russian politics I have made no such statement nor have I been asked to make one,” Professor Boas said” (New York Times 5 March 1938).

The American legal scholar, Max Radin, published an analysis of the Moscow Trials in *Foreign Affairs*, the journal of the US Council on Foreign Relations, in 1937. He concluded, “If we must make some estimate of the weight of probability, I think it is still in favor of the prosecutions as far as the Moscow defendants are concerned. In the case of Trotsky and Sedov [Trotsky’s son, who was also convicted in the Moscow Trials] themselves, nothing except a suspension of judgment is possible” (Radin 1937: 79). Presumably, Radin meant that outside observers should suspend judgment regarding the guilt of Trotsky and his son.

A consequence of the Moscow Trials was a purge of officers and officials in the Red Army and in the Soviet defense industries who might have been associated in any way with the alleged conspiracy between Trotsky, the Nazis, and Imperial Japan. Some of the purged Red Army officers were sent to forced labour. Others were executed. General M. Tukhachevsky was executed in 1937. The noted aircraft designer, Andrei Tupolev, was convicted of espionage in 1937, and designed aircraft for the Red Air Force while under detention. His detention was lifted in 1941. General Y. Smushkevich, a Red Air Force commander, was executed in 1941. After the USSR was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1941, many of the officers who had been sent to forced labour as a result of the Moscow Trials were freed to rejoin the Red Army (Werth 1971).

In October, 1938, Trotsky wrote that the Red Army had been “beheaded,” and that it had no effective leadership (1938). Also, in 1938, Trotsky wrote that “Only the overthrow of the Bonapartist clique [of Stalin] can make possible the regeneration of the military strength of the USSR” (1938). He reiterated this theme in September, 1939: “Stalin is above all afraid of war... Stalin cannot make a war with discontented workers and peasants and with a decapitated Red Army” (1939a). He also claimed that the Stalinist state had pursued a “policy of capitulation” toward Imperial Japan (1939).

While Boas disavowed knowledge of Russian politics, he was closely connected to prominent Soviet anthropologists. The works of W. Bogoras (b. 1865 – d. 1936), W. Jochelson (b. 1855 – d. 1937), and L. Sternberg (b. 1861 – d. 1927), on the smaller groups of indigenous peoples of the Soviet/Russian North and Far East were part of the reports of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897-1902 (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988), which was sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History and directed by Boas.

During the late Tsarist period, Bogoras, Jochelson, and Sternberg were exiled to Siberia for anti-Tsarist political activity. While spending years in exile, they carried out extensive ethnographic research on the Chukchi, Koryak, Yukagir, and other groups. Boas enlisted the ethnographic expertise of Bogoras, Jochelson, and Sternberg as an essential part of the Jesup

Expedition which was informed by Boas' speculation that "the geographical conditions [of the North Pacific rim] favor migration along the coastline, and exchange of culture. Have such migrations, has such exchange of culture taken place?" (Boas 1974 [1898]: 108-109).

Collaboration between Bogoras and Boas began in the late 19th century, and included Boas' intercession with the Tsarist authorities to allow Bogoras to carry out research for the Jesup Expedition. During a visit to New York in 1900, Bogoras worked with Boas at the American Museum of Natural History. After the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War which followed the 1917 Revolution, Bogoras took the initiative in organizing the Committee for Assistance to the Lesser Nationalities of the North (also known as the Committee of the North), which developed the policies of the Soviet government toward Northern Peoples. Besides Bogoras and Sternberg, the Committee of the North included others who had carried out ethnographic research among Northern Peoples while exiled to Siberia for anti-Tsarist political activity, as well as Karl Luks (b. 1888 – d. 1932). Luks was an Old Bolshevik who was exiled to Siberia by the Tsarist authorities in 1916. He was active on the side of the Bolsheviks in the Transbaikal region during the Civil War (1918-20). In 1921-22, Luks was Minister for Nationality Affairs in the Far Eastern Republic which joined the USSR in 1922.

Creation of a Northern People's "intelligentsia" composed of teachers, political activists and scientifically trained experts in the co-operative organization of traditional occupations was the responsibility of the Institute of the North, established by Bogoras, Sternberg, and others in 1926 (Bartels and Bartels 1995). The first Head of Research at the Institute was Ia. P. Koshkin (also known as Al'kor), a former student of Bogoras. E.A. Kreinovich, a specialist on the Nivkhi of far eastern Siberia, worked at the Institute of the North from 1932 to 1937. Karl Luks was Rector of the Institute of the North in 1929-30 (Prokhorov 1973).

Bogoras kept Boas and other Western anthropologists aware of the activities of the Committee of the North. At the 23rd International Congress of Americanists, held in New York in 1928, Bogoras presented a paper on Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples (Bogoras and Leonov 1930).

The US cut diplomatic relations with Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. After the USSR was founded in 1922, Boas and Dewey advocated US diplomatic recognition of the USSR (New York Times, 25 March 1933; Bullert 2013). Diplomatic relations between the US and the USSR were established by the Roosevelt Administration in November, 1933. Diplomatic recognition included establishment of embassies in Washington, DC, and in Moscow.

Despite the absence of diplomatic recognition of the USSR by the US prior to 1933, Bogoras and Boas arranged for an exchange of post-graduate anthropology students. These included the Soviet ethnographer, Yulia Averkieva (b. 1907 – d. 1980), who worked with Boas among the Kwakiutl in British Columbia in the winter of 1930-31. Boas' students who met Bogoras in the USSR included Archie Phinney (b. 1903 – d. 1949), a Native-American (Nez Perce), and Roy Franklin Barton (b. 1883 – d. 1947) (Willard 2000).

The drive to collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization under the leadership of Stalin was accompanied by a "cultural revolution" which involved reorganization of academic disciplines to achieve consistency with current interpretations of Marxist-Leninist theory (Szymanski 1984; Anderson and Arzyutov 2016). There were sharp disputes among Soviet ethnographers regarding the nature and direction of their discipline (Kan 2006; 2009). In a

letter to Bogoras (19 Dec., 1931), Yulia Averkieva wrote, “Here big discussions [are being] held – what are the subjects and the methods of anthropology [?] Its field was so great that there wasn’t anything definit[e] in it. As a whole the point i[‘]d made that the [sic.] anthropology must narrow its field and be som[e]thing more definit[e]. It must be the history of preclass society. And in these limits it must be further specialized on history of material production, history of social organisation, religion, art, and etc. [sic.]. Of course there are the opponents too, but the majority agreed with that. Now is issued the first number of the journal “Sovietskaya Ethnographia,” the name, as you see is old yet, but in it are given new principles of the science” (<https://www.amphilsoc.org/library>).

Bogoras wrote to Stalin in 1930 on behalf of Georgii Prokofiev, an early Soviet ethnographic film maker, who may have been among those at the Soviet Academy of Sciences accused of sabotage. According to Prokofiev’s children, Bogoras’ letter saved their father’s life (Arzyutov 2016).

Sergei Kan suggests that Bogoras attempted to bring his ethnographic work into line with Morgan and Engels’ view of sociocultural evolution, and with the views of Averkieva and Al’kor (see above). Bogoras “encouraged” Al’kor to “publish a Russian translation of an updated version of Boas’ influential Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages,” and arranged for a translation of Boas’, “The Aims of Anthropological Research,” to be published in *Sovietskaya Etnografiia* in 1933. At the same time, Bogoras wrote that Boas’ theoretical approach had reached a “dead-end of empiricism and skepticism” because it was divorced from class struggle and class analysis (Bogoras, quoted in Kan 2006).

According to Kan, Bogoras died in 1936 while traveling by train from Leningrad to Rostov-on-Don, “where he hoped to have his arteries operated on by his brother, a prominent surgeon” (2006: 18). In the same year, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan concluded an Anti-Comintern Pact aimed at combatting the Soviet-based international influence of Communism. Boas retired from Columbia University to campaign against racism and Fascism (Bullert 2013).

In 1938, Boas founded the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom (ACDIF). In February, 1939, the ACDIF organized a Lincoln Day Birthday for Democracy. Over two thousand educators signed a condemnation of the Fascist threat to democracy. The ACDIF strongly condemned Nazi theories of race, and characterized the USSR as a consistent bulwark against war and aggression (Bullert 2013).

In May, 1939, John Dewey and Sidney Hook founded the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) which condemned Naziism as well as Stalinism. The possibility of uniting the ACDIF and the CCF was discussed by Dewey, Hook, and Boas, but the merger did not occur (Bullert 2013). Many members of the ACDIF did not accept the CCF’s linkage of Naziism and Stalinism. In November, 1939, Dewey resigned as Honorary Chair of the CCF, possibly in the expectation that the ACDIF would founder in light of the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on 23 August 1939 (Bullert 2013). Indeed, many Soviet sympathizers in Western Europe and North America, including the novelist Eric Ambler, were disillusioned because they had seen the USSR as the main bulwark against Nazi aggression (Marcus 1990). Others on the left defended the Non-Aggression Pact. Winston Churchill’s nephew, Esmond Romilly, who had fought against Fascism in Spain (Romilly 1937), saw the Munich Pact of 1938, in which the British and French governments yielded much of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, as a clear rejection of Soviet attempts to form a collective security pact with Britain and France to contain Hitler (Cockburn 1973).

Consequently, the Soviet government sought a pact with the Nazis in order to avoid standing alone against Nazi aggression (Mitford 1960; Cockburn 1973). Even though Britain and France declared war on Germany after the Nazi invasion of Poland in September, 1939, Romilly "... was convinced the greatest danger... was that British and French imperialism would fail to prosecute the war fully, that it might still be turned into a Fascist crusade against Communism, with the Western democracies either sitting on the sidelines or actively coming in on Hitler's side" (Mitford 1977 [1960]: 187-188). (After the fall of the Chamberlain government in Britain, Romilly joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. He attained the rank of Pilot Officer and was killed in action over the North Sea in November, 1941, at age 23. The foregoing summary of Romilly's views on the Non-Aggression Pact was written by his widow, Jessica Mitford).

Boas' obituary of Bogoras was published in the *American Anthropologist* in 1937 (New Series 39: 314-15), the same year that Dewey and other members of his Committee interviewed Trotsky in Mexico. Presumably, news of the Dewey Committee's conclusions reached the Soviet authorities through diplomatic and other channels. It arrived in the context of a series of increasingly serious border clashes in Siberia and Mongolia in 1935, 1936, and 1937, between Japanese forces occupying China, and Soviet/Mongolian forces. It should be noted that G.S. Lyushkov, a general in the NKVD (Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs) who had been stationed in Far Eastern Siberia, defected to the Japanese in 1938 (Coox 2007).

According to Kan, in 1937, Kreinovich was arrested along with Al'kor and other Siberian and Far Eastern ethnographers and linguists... All of them were accused of spying for Japan under the direction of Karl Lukes [Luks]..." (2006: 406). According to Bruce Grant, Kreinovich was beaten and sent to forced labour. His servitude ended in 1955 when he was rehabilitated for lack of evidence. From 1956 until his death, he worked at the Institute of Linguistics in Moscow (Grant 1995: 104). According to Andrey Kazaev, Al'kor and eight others were convicted in 1937. They were executed on 17 March 1938 (2005: 1557). Would Al'kor, had he survived, also have been rehabilitated? Should Al'kor and others have been posthumously rehabilitated?

D.P. Korzh, one of the first teachers who worked among the Chukchi during the 1930s, possessed a book on Northern Peoples published in the early 1930s with an article entitled, "What the October Revolution Gave to the Working People of the North," by Al'kor, whose name had been inked out. Korzh told us (Alice and Dennis Bartels) in 1989 that he had inked out the name after Al'kor had been declared an "enemy of the people," and executed. Korzh was still a strong supporter of Leninist nationality policy in 1989, but clearly had questions about the fate of Al'kor (Bartels and Bartels 1995).

Al'kor's conviction may have been influenced by widespread fear in the Soviet Union of a Japanese invasion of Far Eastern Siberia. This fear was justified. Japanese military forces who joined other nations in attempting to overthrow newly-established Soviet state, were not driven from far eastern Siberia until 1924. In 1939, the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Mongolia which was then allied to the Soviet Union. After four months of fierce fighting, several thousand Japanese troops were surrounded near Khalkin-Gol (also known as the Nomonhan region). Some escaped but many were killed by Red Army units commanded by General G. Zhukov who went on to become the most successful Soviet general of W.W. II/the Great Patriotic War. The air war over Khalkin-Gol was only matched in scale and ferocity by the Battle of Britain in 1940 (Nedialkov 2011).

The Khalkin-Gol victory was reported in Soviet mass media (see <https://www.net-film.us/film-8278> for clips from 1939 Soviet newsreels). Zhukov was made a Hero of the Soviet Union.

The Khalkin-Gol events did not receive much attention in Western mass media, which were focused on the Soviet-Nazi Non-Aggression Pact, and on the Nazi invasion of Poland which marked the ‘official’ beginning of World War II. Consequently, the importance of the Japanese defeat was unknown to most people in the West, probably including Boas.

The defeat of Imperial Japanese forces at Khalkin-Gol had far-reaching consequences. The faction of the Japanese military high command which favored an invasion of the Soviet Union via Mongolia and Siberia lost influence, and the naval faction which favored a strike southward to destroy the US Pacific Fleet and to secure oil and natural resources in the French, American, and Dutch colonies of the Pacific and Indo-China became dominant. A Non-Aggression Pact between the Soviet Union and Japan was concluded, and the course which led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 was thus determined (Coox 1990; Goldman 2012).

The Soviet victory at Khalkin-Gol quite probably spared the Soviet Union fighting a war on two fronts: against the Nazis in the West, and against Imperial Japan in the East.

Soviet fears of the Imperial Japanese threat to the Soviet Union may have influenced the fate of Al’kor and others in 1938. These fears are perhaps comparable to fears of a Japanese invasion which, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, led to the dispossession and internment of Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans.

The decisive Soviet victory at Khalkin-Gol was inconsistent with Trotsky’s claims that the Red Army was ineffective because of Stalinist purges, and that the Stalinist state had pursued a “policy of capitulation” toward Imperial Japan (see above). It is thus not surprising that Trotsky failed to mention the Red Army victory in his public pronouncements and editorials. Trotsky’s failure to acknowledge the implications of the Soviet victory at Khalkin-Gol raises the issue of his overall credibility. Did he lie to the Dewey Committee when he denied involvement in a conspiracy with the Nazis and the Imperial Japanese state to overthrow the Soviet state?

Albert Einstein (b. 1879 – d. 1955) was critical of the Dewey Committee. He suggested that Trotsky was “an adroit politician” who might have used the Committee for “presentation of his views in the public sphere” (quoted in Phelps 2005: 153).

Jodi Dean (2012) argues that the political orientations of the Anti-Communist right and the Anti-Communist left prevent any objective approach to Soviet history. This is consistent with a characterization of the conclusion of the Dewey Committee as a Kuhnian paradigm (Furr 2009). Evidence which doesn’t support a dominant paradigm is ignored or marginalized. In the exact/experimental sciences, dominant paradigms are eventually overthrown, and new paradigms emerge. Perhaps this will happen in the social sciences and humanities if a reexamination of Trotsky’s overall credibility shows that the conclusion of The Dewey Committee is suspect.

At the same time, even if Trotsky actually was involved in a conspiracy with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to overthrow the Soviet state, it does not necessarily follow that Al’kor was guilty of spying for Imperial Japan.

It is unlikely that Boas’ support for more investigation into the charges against Trotsky was implicated in the fates of Al’kor and other members of the Committee of the North. Perhaps

Kan's forthcoming publication of Boas' "correspondence with Soviet officials, as well as pro- and anti-Soviet American intellectuals (including Communist Party USA leaders, John Dewey, and several others)...", will shed light on this and related issues (www.franzboaspapers.uwo.ca).

Franz Boas died in December, 1942. According to Kan, Averkieva wrote a "glowing" obituary of Boas that was published in 1946 (2006: 63). With the deaths of Bogoras and Boas and the later advent of the Cold War, co-operation between US and Soviet anthropology effectively ended.

After the Second World War, Sidney Hook played an important role in organizing the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, the successor to the Congress for Cultural Freedom that he had co-founded with Dewey. During the early Cold War, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom was covertly funded by the CIA (Whitney 2016).

It has been shown elsewhere how Cold War ideology skewed anthropological research on indigenous peoples of the Soviet North and Far East (Bartels and Bartels 2006). Will Cold War ideology, particularly widespread acceptance of the conclusion of the Dewey Committee, similarly inhibit investigation of the impact of the Moscow Trials on the history of US anthropology and Soviet/Russian anthropology?

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culturallogic

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ISSN 1097-3087

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