

Herinneringe

Reminiscences

Soviet “special depository” facilities for South African history: Research experiences in the Soviet Union on the preparation of candidates for the submission of academic theses on South Africa

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The Soviet Union has always been one of the easiest places to graduate as an engineer. From the very beginning of its history the aim was to boost economic growth and increase industrial production. There were two ambitious goals: to widen and modernise the state production base; and to create and develop the military-industrial complex. In this regard, higher professional education (university education) in the Soviet Union was aimed mainly at the training of engineers. According to a study conducted in 1989, at the end of the history of the Soviet Union per se, non-engineering training (for example, human sciences such as history) was concentrated mainly in the pedagogical institutes, of which there were 198 in the Soviet Union. These pedagogical institutes accounted for almost a quarter (22.4%) of the total number of all universities. Therefore, to gain a liberal arts education in the USSR was several times more complex than it was to qualify as a professional engineer. In addition, a small number of classical universities created additional difficulties; these institutions were often used to gain entrance into a pedagogical institute. In one of the foremost of these pedagogical institutes, the university in Yaroslavl, I obtained a degree in History and became an English teacher in 1974.

In 1977, I enrolled in a graduate school, the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute (MSPi). The Department of Modern and Contemporary History at MSPi had programmes in postgraduate training which offered courses on various different regions Western Europe; North and South America; and the modern history of Asia and Africa. Because I was particularly interested in the study of South Africa back in the Yaroslavl Institute, when I enrolled at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute they decided that I should continue to explore this region.

And now a few words about the system of academic degrees in the USSR. The official regulations on the awarding of academic degrees, laid down that established doctorates and PhD degrees would be recognised and that academic titles would include those of “professor, associate professor, senior researcher, assistant and junior researcher”.¹ This academic hierarchy first appeared under Josef Stalin. Then, in 1917, after the establishment of Bolshevik power, all old academic degrees were abolished and discredited. The decree of the People’s

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1. Polozhenie o poriadke prisuzhdeniya uchenykh stepenei i zvanii, 29 dekabria 1975, goda No. 1067, p 1.

Commissars on 1 October 1918 led to nationwide competition for the positions of head of department at universities. The right to participate in this reinstatement process, as well as to engage in teaching activities was granted to persons well known for their scientific work and educational activity. However, obscure competition conditions meant that there was no accurate measure of individual academic expertise. From 1925 to 1934, the Soviet authorities created a system of training highly qualified specialists. New postgraduate programmes and the public defence of academic work done was introduced. Finally, in 1934, a resolution was adopted which established the levels required for the award of PhD and doctoral degrees.² Consequently, the Soviet degree system was created in Josef Stalin's age. At the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev began the overthrow of Stalinism, but the system of academic degrees was preserved.

Thus, postgraduate schools in the Soviet Union became the main form of training for teaching and research staff at universities. Postgraduate studies were of two types: internal (3 years) and part-time (4 years) and were organised within universities and research institutes. These courses were taken by those who had demonstrated their ability to do research and to teach, having earlier successfully completed their higher education. These individuals also had to have at least two years' experience of practical work (in the chosen field) after completion of their higher education; they also had to pass the relevant entrance exams.

I fulfilled all the conditions for admission to graduate school. When I entered graduate school at Moscow State Pedagogical Institute in 1977, I was 25 years old. I had worked for two years at the Yaroslavl Pedagogical Institute, passed two PhD courses with excellent grades (Philosophy and English); and successfully passed the entrance examination in my speciality (Modern and Contemporary History). After these tests, I enrolled in for a postgraduate programme at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute in the Department of Modern and Contemporary History.

The search then began for a suitable topic for my thesis. In addressing this problem I was given complete freedom by my supervisor, Professor Vera I. Shpil'kova and I proceeded to discuss possible topics with staff at all the major research centres in Moscow. I familiarised myself with research done in Africa by communicating with the Africa Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences; the Institute of Asian and African Countries at the Moscow State University; and the Centre for African Studies at the Institute of World History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. My supervisor believed that the more consultations and discussions I held with experts, the easier it would be to co-ordinate my work with other scholars and avoid duplication. These consultations helped me a great deal because in Moscow I liaised with some of the most renowned Russian experts on South Africa, including Apollon B. Davidson; Leonid D. Yablochkov; Valentin P. Gorodnov; Rufina R. Vyatkina; and Igor V. Vitukhin. Before long, the Department of Modern and Contemporary History at MSPI accepted the title of my thesis: "The

2. L.A. Zaitseva, *Genezis Prisuzhdeniya Uchenykh Stepenei d Rossii // Lex Russica* (Nauchnye trudy MGUA), 3, 2006, pp 601–602.

Political Struggle in the Union of South Africa concerning the Proclamation of a Republic”.

My supervisor, Vera I. Shpilkova, who holds a PhD in History, is a professor at Moscow State Pedagogical. She was very generous with her time; she gave me sound advice and helped me with the editing of my text. I am most grateful for her invaluable assistance. Other professors of Modern and Contemporary History at MSPi who assisted with the preparation of my thesis included Irina A. Nikitina; Alexander N. Heifetz; Evgenia I. Popova; Gennady S. Kucherenko; and Kira N. Tatarinova, who is an associate professor. I owe all these colleagues in the graduate seminar a great deal, and I extend my thanks to them.

For the award of a doctorate in History in the USSR there are a number of requirements. First, it is necessary to prepare a well-argued and analytical dissertation based on sound sources. The candidate must be well prepared for the public defence of the thesis. Paragraph 28 of the regulations requires that the thesis for a PhD degree must show evidence of thorough research carried out by the candidate on his/her own and under the direction of the holder of a doctoral degree. It must present new information and/or solutions to the specific field of study and have significant value for that particular branch of knowledge.³

Furthermore, according to the regulations, a PhD degree can only be awarded by a specialised Council at a higher education or research institution on the basis of the candidate's public defence of his/her PhD thesis.⁴ The Council will only accept the dissertation if the candidate proves to have professional knowledge and has recognised expertise in a particular branch of academic study. Furthermore, the candidate must “have a Marxist-Leninist theory approach/outlook” and prove positively that he/she has followed the “norms of communist morality” and has been guided by the principles of “Soviet patriotism and proletarian internationalism”.⁵ What, one may well ask, is “communist morality”? Few people really understood this at the time, but most were very well aware of adhering to “Soviet patriotism”.

“Having a Marxist-Leninist approach” was also a definite challenge in the USSR in 1977. According to the Soviet *nomenklatura* (ranking, status) of the academic discipline of History, the “main [primary] history” was the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (it had a ranking of 07.00.01 – the History of the Communist Party). In this history a graduate student had to show a precise knowledge of Marxist-Leninist theory in its entirety. Actually, this was the story of the CPSU policy from one CPSU Congress to the next. In this approach to the definition of problems, the subject and object of study was hardly analytical, it was primarily descriptive.

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3. Polozhenie o Poriadke Prisuzhdeniya Uchenykh Stepenei i Zvanii, 29 Dekabria 1975 goda, No. 1067, para. 28.
 4. Polozhenie o Poriadke Prisuzhdeniya Uchenykh Stepenei i Zvanii, para.3.
 5. Polozhenie o Poriadke Prisuzhdeniya Uchenykh Stepenei i Zvanii, para. 24.

The next academic category was the History of the USSR (ranking number 07.00.02 – the History of the USSR). And in the wake, behind this, was my discipline, namely international history (ranking number 07.00.03 – World History). The aim of international (or as it was also known at the time, “universal”) history was to explain to the Russian reader the history of foreign countries of the corresponding period. Universal history became an area of research in the Soviet period, where there had to be some self-regulation by the academic community. There were topics which required stricter ideological rules and self-censorship, for example, studies of the international labour movement; the activities of foreign Communist parties; and the development of European culture. However, the further back into the past the study went, the more Soviet historians could count on some freedom. The title of my thesis gave me a fair degree of independence and leeway in my research, and perhaps even more importantly, to the extent of my reading.

In Moscow, I opened up a whole new world of information. In the Soviet Union there were excellent libraries. However, it was the state that replenished library funds and there were restrictions, on ideological grounds, on how these funds could be spent. “Foreign literature” had to be examined thoroughly for any hint of “hostility” to the Soviet socialist system and Marxist-Leninist ideology. Publications classified as “hostile” for these reasons were only kept in a few central libraries. There were three or four such libraries in Moscow and only one in Leningrad. In addition, large regional libraries had special storage sections (*spetskhran*) where books on philosophy, methodology and history were kept. These books had been rejected by censors because they were considered harmful and at odds with Marxist-Leninist ideology. Access to these publications was closed.

Once I was enrolled in Moscow graduate school, it was relatively easy to acquire a letter of request for access to central Moscow *spetskhran* libraries – and I soon discovered a wealth of information about the foreign world that was previously unknown to me. In the mid-1980s, the *spetskhran* of the State Library named after V. Lenin in Moscow (probably the largest library in the country), had more than 1 million books. Each year this “special collection” was boosted by the state to the tune of about 30 to 35 000 new publications.⁶

Reading material in these special depositories inevitably became a problem to use in the light of the restrictions by the Soviet totalitarian regime. Opening the window on the big world of foreign publications using *spetskhran* made a reader question why these publications were restricted. In what way, one wondered, were these publications anti-Soviet or ideologically harmful? Often these questions remained unanswered; there was little evidence of direct “harm” to the Soviet ideology. Indeed a thinking person inevitably experienced an attitude (although not one of outright dissent) of resistance to the idea of the state controlling what an individual was allowed to read. However, I was afraid to elicit the dislike of the Soviet librarians and archivists in the special depositories – it was they alone who

6. V.D. Stelmakh, “Reading in the Context of Censorship in the Soviet Union”, *Libraries and Culture*, 36, 1, Winter 2001, p 144.

could order the publications I wanted to consult. As a reader I was entirely dependent upon them because I only had free access to the library catalogue. There was no question of my searching the bookshelves on my own. In addition, according to the rules, I could only order books and other materials on the narrow confines of my topic as prescribed in the letter which granted me permission to make use of the *spetskhran*. *Spetskhran* librarians were generally understanding of the needs of those who were conducting research, but there were also those who showed greater vigilance than official state censorship demanded. Sometimes they refused to comply with my requests if they felt I was straying even marginally beyond the limits of my specific topic. This made my search for sources far more difficult.

The functions of official state censorship were assigned to a special Board called a *Glavlit*, which can be loosely translated as the General Administration of Literature and Publishing Board. It was tasked with censoring printed works and the protection of state secrets in the USSR media from 1922 to 1991. The *Glavlit* was headed by Pavel K. Romanov from 1958 to 1986. In 1958 alone, the *Glavlit* scrutinised 1.6 million control copies of publications (including newspapers and magazines, books and pamphlets) with a total circulation of 24 million copies of works held in state-funded libraries. Another 6 million copies of materials that were deemed “anti-Soviet and anti-socialist” were sent to the library special (restricted) collections. In addition, the censors totally rejected more than 250 000 copies of “overtly hostile foreign publications”.⁷ In Soviet dissident circles, the *Glavlit* was known covertly as the “ministry of truth” with analogy to George Orwell’s (1949) novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, bearing in mind that the activities of the *Glavlit* were aimed at distorting reality to suit political preferences.

Spetskhrans had a special cultural life of their own; their readers forged new identities. All those interested in international history, literature, linguistics and philosophy inevitably had to find their way to the *spetskhran*, and after becoming acquainted with “that” literature”, the literature of “*tamizdat*”, the readers began to compare the Soviet reality with that of other cultural worlds. In the mid-1980s according to the rules of Soviet censorship, almost all foreign literature on humanitarian and socio-economic disciplines went exclusively to the *spetskhrans* of central libraries. Foreign literature comprised 80 percent of all state-funded publications in the *spetskhran* of the State Library named after V. Lenin in Moscow.

Buried in this wealth of books and newspapers in these special depositories of the State Library, I discovered complete sets of South African newspapers including *Die Burger*, *The Cape Times*, *The Friend*, *The Natal Mercury*, *The Star*, and *The World*. They provided me with vital information. Without these sources my dissertation would have been incomplete. They gave me additional insight because I had already studied the documents of the political parties in South Africa; the Union of South Africa parliamentary debates; the African National Congress documents; and other key sources.

7. Glavnoe Upravlenie po Delam Literatry i Izdatelstv // <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki>

It should be noted it was by no means accidental that I was interested in South Africa. In the mid-1950s the USSR began an era of active support for national liberation movements in Africa. Prior to the Second World War, Soviet society took a rather exotic interest in Africa but thereafter the situation changed dramatically. Under the influence of an expansive wave of liberalism the colonial empires in Africa began to disintegrate. The new Soviet leader, Nikita S. Khrushchev, strengthened his political power after the death of Stalin in 1953, and called for some openness to the world, supporting the national liberation movements and the growing antagonism to imperialism. This came to be called a policy of “proletarian internationalism and solidarity with the peoples of the colonies”.⁸ The Soviet Union believed that this “proletarian internationalism” provided conditions which favoured the convergence of all people, contributing to their prosperity and rapprochement, and opposing narrow nationalisms.

The prominent scholar of Soviet foreign policy Vladislav M. Zubok rightly emphasised that “for many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, recently liberated from colonialism, the Soviet way of development of society seemed extremely attractive”. In Soviet society in the 1960s, there was a special atmosphere that was associated with the expression of sympathy and support for the peoples of the colonies and the newly independent countries. A large part of Russian society supported the efforts of Nikita Khrushchev to expand Soviet influence in the world, especially the course taken by him to assist to the emerging new states in Asia, Africa and Latin America.⁹

This interest in Africa persisted under the next leader of the USSR Leonid I. Brezhnev (1964–1982). Brezhnev had to cope with the task of conducting negotiations with the other superpower, the United States of America, in order to reduce conflict in the so-called Cold War. This reconciliatory tendency which came to the fore in the late 1960s and early 1970s became known as *détente*. I was studying at the graduate school in Moscow at the end of this era. Historians refer to the period from 1973 to 1979 as being characterised by “sunset *détente*” and “imperial inertia”.¹⁰ Nevertheless, political events of the time fuelled renewed interest in Africa and the continent’s research. Among other major events in Asia and Africa in the 1970s which destroyed the policy of *détente* on the Cold War, were the conflict in the Middle East (1973); the escalation of conflict in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Somalia); and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979).

In this context, the study of the history of South Africa in the period from 1950 to the early 1960s was very relevant to Soviet social sciences. However, the topic of my dissertation, “The Political Struggle in the Union of South Africa concerning the Proclamation of a Republic”, differed in some ways from the mainstream of Soviet African studies. The thesis was an attempt to explore South African society in its entirety and its political preferences. Most of the Soviet

8. V.M. Zubok, *Neudavshaiasia Imperiia: Sovetskii Souz v Holodnoi Voine ot Stalina do Gorbacheva* (Rosspen, Moscow, 2011), pp 260–261.

9. Zubok, *Neudavshaiasia Imperiia*, p 264.

10. Zubok, *Neudavshaiasia Imperiia*, p 327.

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studies on this region have focused on the study of progressive forces in South Africa. Re-reading my theses today, I note that the main findings were indeed correct. Of course I did not have access to documents which, for obvious reasons, were published much later.

I defended my thesis on 16 February 1981. On 23 February the 26th Congress of the CPSU was due to begin. I was sitting in the hostel working when I heard a radio broadcast on the opening of the 26th Congress, with Leonid Brezhnev delivering a report. Suddenly, after 20 minutes of his speech, the live broadcast was terminated without warning and classical music began to play. I honestly thought that something had happened to Leonid Brezhnev. At that time he was already showing marked signs of ill-health; he was moving poorly and spoke with great difficulty. Although I had already defended my thesis, and overall I was confident in the arguments I had made in its defence, a chill ran down my spine.

The reality is that according to Soviet tradition, after a change of leadership it is not unusual for historians' publications and dissertations to be rejected out of hand and totally discredited. Under the new leadership, there is often a decree issued that all references, all mention and citing of the previous leaders must be erased from scholarly texts. If the text had any positive information and too many flattering references to the progress made under the old leader, the new regime could demand that wide-ranging changes be made to the thesis, making it necessary to re-defend it!

That particular day after a short break in transmission, the radio resumed its broadcast of Leonid Brezhnev's speech. Later I learnt that Brezhnev had indeed felt unwell and that he had to read his report intermittently, taking several rest periods before resuming. Thus the story of the defence of my thesis had a happy ending. It might well have been worse.