

Personalia

SOME NOTES FROM THE KGB ON THE FATE OF PAVEL FLORENSKIJ

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In 1991 the writer Vitalii Shentalinskij [Shentalinsky] helped organize a search through the KGB archives for information on and manuscripts by or relating to Soviet authors who ran afoul the authorities during the Stalinist era. The searchers uncovered in many instances valuable literary manuscripts along with documentation not only of the activities of the KGB in its various successive appellations but the writings and documentation of activities as well of those who came to the KGB's attention.

One of the folders which Shentalinskij obtained contained files on theologian, philosopher, philologist, engineer, scientist, art historian and mathe-matician Pavel Florenskij. In logic and related areas, Florenskij's work included a study of Cantorian set theory, "On Symbols of the Infinite (Sketch of the Ideas of G. Cantor)" [Florenskij 1907] a graduate thesis on *Transfinite Numbers* [Florenskij 1904] (see [Anellis 1994]), and the description of an analog device, the electrical integrator. Shentalinskij reminds us that Florenskij had been called "a Russian Leonardo da Vinci".

The information which Shentalinskij uncovered from these files on Florenskij comprises Chapter 5 of [Shentalinsky 1996, 101-123] *Arrested Voices: Ressurrecting the Disappeared Writers of the Soviet Regime*. Here I merely summarize what we learn about Florenskij, and especially his fate,

from Shentalinskij's investigation. This supplements and provides new details on the information provided on Florenskij in an earlier issue of *Modern Logic* (see [N. N. 1994]).

Florenskij's name first appeared in a dossier as one of a miscellaneous group of eighty people — poets, scholars, priests, nuns, peasants, and others — arrested in the Spring of 1928 by virtue of their religious belief, and in particular for their association with the historically influential and important Trinity-Sergeev Monastery near Moscow.

Florenskij was first attacked in print in the newspaper *Rabochnaya Moskva* [*Working Moscow*] on 17 May, as part of an article attacking religion. The author of the article singled out Florenskij's contribution to book on Russian religious art of the fifteenth century. This book, the article asserted, was a religious work masquerading as a scholarly study of art history. Florenskij was arrested in the early hours of 21 May, by no less than Genrikh Yagoda himself, then chief of the OGPU (one of the earlier appellations of the KGB). A Red Cross badge, given to Florenskij for his work helping rescue wounded soldiers from the front in World War I, and a photograph of Tsar Nicholas II, given to him, along with several other photographs, belonging to a deceased priest, were confiscated as incriminating evidence. The article from *Rabochnaya Moskva* was also included in the Florenskij dossier as evidence.

In the arrest form which Florenskij filled out upon arrival at the KGB's Lubyanka Prison, he noted that he was 46 years old, of gentry family, son of an engineer, born in the town of Evlakh, Azerbaijan, graduated from Moscow University and the Spiritual Academy [i.e. the Moscow Theological Academy], had a wife (Anna Mikhailovna), three sons and two daughters; he described himself as a scientist, chief of the materials studies department at the Institute of Electrical Engineering, an editor of the *Technical Encyclopedia*, and former professor of the Spiritual Academy.

The "investigator"-interrogator of Florenskij's case was one Polianskij, to whom Father Pavel admitted that he had been arrested in 1906 for preaching a sermon against the execution of Lieutenant Peter Schmidt, a revolutionary who led an uprising in Sevastapol in 1905. He declared to Polianskij that he was nevertheless apolitical, that since all authority was of divine origin, he had been well-disposed towards the Tsar and was now well-disposed towards the Soviet government and was at work on secret scientific research on behalf of the Soviet military. (This was indubitably a reference to his research on heavy water, a key to developing an atomic bomb.) In the end, Florenskij admitted to being a man of the past, and Polianskij recommended a sentence of either *katorga* (penal labor camp) or execution. Polianskij was overridden by his superiors and Florenskij was sent into internal exile in Nizhni Novgorod (Gorki) on 14 July. His release was quickly secured by Maxim Gorki's wife Ekaterina Peshkova and he returned to Moscow to resume his scientific work.

The work which he produced in the years that followed included research for Glavelektro, the state electrical administration, during which he came to the attention of Trotsky, a book on *The Imaginary in Geometry* [1922; 1991] which gives an interpretation of Einstein's theory of relativity, and the paper "The Mathematical Applications of Physics" which contains his description of the electrical integrator. (For an analysis of Florenskij's conception of the "imaginary" in mathematics, see [Petrova & Suchilin 1993].) His enemies and the second arrest warrant on him branded him an "extreme right-wing monarchist."

Florenskij, not to his surprise, was arrested again on 26 February 1933. The names of the interrogators were Shupeiko and Rogozhin. The interrogation occurred daily through early March. In his "confession", Florenskij "admitted" to being the leader of a nationalist-fascist ring. Additional "evidence" came in a letter from a law professor named Gidulianov who had already been arrested; he was made to write that the other "members" of this nationalist-fascist center were his "colleagues Chapylgin, Luzin and Florenskij, who were already arrested" (quoted by [Shentalinsky 1996, 111]). It was ostensibly through Florenskij that Gidulianov met the physicist Chapylgin and mathematician Luzin; in fact, however, Gidulianov was later able to state that he had never met Florenskij until they faced each other courtesy of OGPU. In the indictment, Florenskij was shown to be the ideologist of the "center" and engaged in espionage through contacts with a German electrical engineer. The engineer, Gidulianov tells us, was a fictional character invented by OGPU and christened by Gidulianov. On 30 June 1933 he was convicted and sentenced to ten years in *katorga*. In August, the sentence was carried out and he was removed to the Far East, coming to an experimental research station in the town of Skovorodino on the Amur River. While Florenskij was detained in the Lubyanka prison, the OGPU visited Florenskij's Moscow apartment in search of religious writings (they were at first in search specifically and exclusively of his book *The Pillar and Affirmation of Truth*, and evidently they thus must either have had no knowledge of, or no interest in, confiscating his book *The Salt of the Earth* [Florenskij 1908; 1987], a hagiographic life of his spiritual advisor Father Isidore), obviously seditious material, or pornography. Failing more than once to find what they were looking for, they returned under the leadership of Shupeiko and confiscated his entire library. When he learned about the destruction of his library in a letter from his wife, Florenskij wrote (as quoted by [Shentalinsky 1996, 116–117]):

All my life has been devoted to philosophical reflection and scientific research. I never took the time for a vacation or for amusements and pleasures. Not only all my time and efforts but the greater part of my small earnings went on this service to mankind (spent buying books etc). My library was not simply a collection of books but a selection

made according to already thought-out and well-defined subjects. One could say that my works were already half-written but preserved in the form of summaries of books to which only I knew the key. . . . The work of my entire life has now been lost The destruction of the results of my life's work is much worse, for me, than my own death. . . .

Soon after he began to work again on scientific projects at the research station, he was placed into solitary confinement — the records do not say why — and was transferred to the Solovetskii prison in the White Sea, arriving there in October 1934. Even there, despite the tribulations he had endured, he maintained his strong religious faith, even baptizing some of his fellow prisoners, bore his kenotic cross, and continued to be accused of anti-Soviet agitation. The files preserve informants' notes on his conversations with them and other prisoners, in which, e.g., the regimes of Hitler and Stalin are compared and in which Trotsky is supposedly praised.

There had been several different rumors professing tell how and when Florenskij died. The KGB files reveal that the decision was made on 25 November 1937 by the Leningrad branch of the NKVD (another of the many successive appellations of the KGB) and signed by one Lieutenant Sorokin: "To be shot, Florenskij Pavel Aleksandrovich." The decision was then forwarded to Solovetskii prison and carried out, according to the last item — a slip of paper inside a special sealed yellow envelope — in the Florenskij dossier, signed by Senior Lieutenant K. Polikarpov, Commandant of the Leningrad Region NKVD, on 8 December 1937.

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