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The Purge of Alexander Scherschevsky

DOMINIC PHELAN

Alexander Borisovitsch Scherschevsky was born into a wealthy St. Petersburg Jewish family on 22nd October 1894 and was privately educated before entering the city's Polytechnic Institute in 1913 to study Mechanical Engineering. Although he had developed an interest in aeronautics as a young boy (he even organised a model-aircraft club at school), any hope of becoming a flyer himself was dashed when he had to leave a pilot training course at the local Aero Club because of poor eyesight. He found a job at the Lebedev aircraft factory but decided to move to Germany in 1919 to study at the Berlin Technical University. His lecturers there are reported to have included Albert Einstein and Max Plank [1].

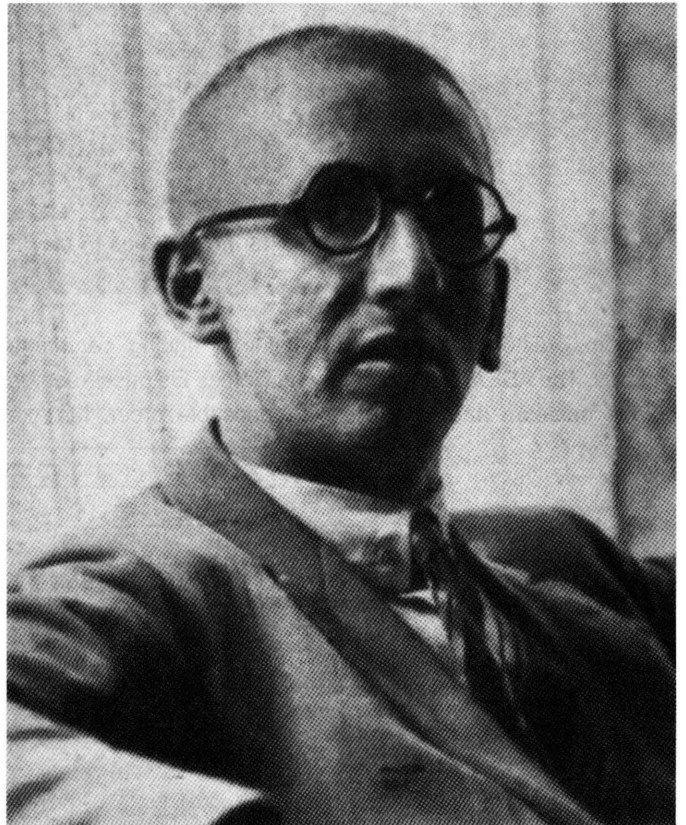
Although the young Russian was sympathetic to the Communist regime back home he decided to stay in Berlin when his course ended. As this broke the terms of his Soviet state-sponsored 'Kommandirovka' visa he then effectively became what his contemporary Willy Ley described as a 'Bolshevist accidentally in disgrace' [2].

Although he worked in the patent office of Berlin's Rohrbach aircraft factory for a few years, his main source of income during the 1920s was from writing freelance aviation articles for the German science and aviation press. During this period he was also commissioned to compile the Russian sections for a seven-volume German aviation dictionary. Luckily, he had been reading the works of Russian spaceflight pioneer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky since 1911 and was the first person to mention him to a German audience during a public lecture in Berlin on 16th April 1920. The two started a correspondence in 1921 that lasted for about a year and saw them exchange the latest spaceflight literature and news between the two countries. Scherschevsky's first article devoted to spaceflight dealt with Tsiolkovsky's priority claim on many original spaceflight concepts but as this appeared in a Russian émigré newspaper, it probably didn't come to the attention of many German readers [3].

In 1926 he tried to persuade Hermann Oberth's publisher to publish a German translation of Tsiolkovsky's latest works but this was rejected because they felt it contained "nothing new". Thankfully, Scherschevsky made copies of his translation available to interested parties and was responsible for the growing reputation of the Russian pioneer in Germany during the late 1920s [4].

Despite being a relatively prolific writer of articles in the

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Alexander Scherschevsky in the late 1920s. (Oberth Museum)

German specialist press, Scherschevsky's only book on the subject was 1929's *Die Rakete für Fahrt und Flug* ('The Rocket for Travel and Flight'). Unfortunately it has been criticised for a lack of historical accuracy, with Willy Ley particularly scathing of a described (but entirely fictitious) face-to-face meeting between Tsiolkovsky, the French rocket pioneer Robert Esnault-Pelterie, and the Russian Tsar! [5].

Willy Ley opined that Scherschevsky should have stuck to writing about his homeland: "He could have done better if he had written about Russia, but he didn't. He knew that nothing much favourable could be said and he would not say anything unfavourable, certainly not in print" [6].

Oberth's Assistant

In 1929 Scherschevsky's name came to Hermann Oberth's mind when he was looking for assistants to build a liquid-fuel rocket to launch at the premier of Fritz Lang's science fiction movie *Frau Im Mond* ('The Woman in the Moon'). Against the wishes of the film studio, the director had even agreed to invest 20,000 Marks



Cover of 1929's *Die Rakete für Fahrt und Flug*. (Oberth Museum)

of his own money into the project. Although Oberth had known of Scherschevsky since 1926, when he finally met him in person he was less than impressed.

"I found a Russian emigrant completely stuck in the dirt, and in the real meaning of the word," Oberth later told the President of the *Verein für Raumschiffahrt* (German Spaceflight Society). "I had the impression that if one would throw that guy against a wall he would stick to it! And on top of that, he had no energy and zest for life left, just a totally unproductive gallows humour" [7].

Feeling sorry for him, Oberth hired Scherschevsky alongside ex-pilot Rudolf Nebel on a salary of 6,000 Marks each but he soon regretted the decision. Neither of them had any practical engineering experience and their early amateurish experiments resulted in an explosion that almost blinded Oberth in one eye [8].

Sensing his Russian assistant's only talents lay in the world of writing, Oberth entrusted him with the job of proof-reading a new edition of his classic book, *Die Rakete zu den Planetenräumen*. It appears Scherschevsky even botched this because when veteran space engineer Boris Raushenbakh met Oberth in the late 1980s (he was the translator a 1948 Russian edition), he was surprised to hear Scherschevsky being blamed

for over one hundred errors in the 1929 book. Oberth believed Scherschevsky had simply initialled the pages and sent them off to the publisher without reading them [9].

Right from the beginning Oberth had been frustrated by his assistant's apparent lack of drive and poor personal manners. The final straw came when he lent him money to have his bad teeth fixed, only to discover that the Russian had spent it all on sweets [10].

Sacking him, Oberth complained: 'You have, in fact, done no work for me whatsoever' [11].

He later feared the sacking would be seen as anti-Semitic, when in fact it had been caused by the Jewish man's extreme laziness [12].

Return to Russia

Surprisingly, Scherschevsky's left-wing sympathies appear to have eluded the staunchly anti-communist Oberth. Bizarrely, he defended him from such accusations by contemporaries: "It is also questionable whether Scherschevsky had already been a Bolshevik or whether Ley and Nebel painted him 'Red' just for their own benefit. Although he has always been full of his (close) relations with the Russian Embassy... because of the whole impression I got of him during the half year of working for me, I believe, that in reality, it was not that deep" [13].

But recent research by Russian scholar Dr. Tanja Jelkina appears to prove Scherschevsky did have close links with the Soviet embassy in Berlin and passed on 32 reports about German rocketry between November 1929 and July 1931. By then the Soviet government had started a recruitment drive to encourage foreign specialists to move to the USSR. Hermann Oberth was approached in February 1932 by a Russian agent named 'Vladimir Kubin' but turned down the offer because he suspected he was being asked to develop missiles for use against Germany [14].

The Soviets then turned to Scherschevsky and persuaded him to return home in the spring of 1932. According to a recent biography of Soviet rocket pioneer Valentin Glushko, co-written by his son Aleksandr, the NKVD (*People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs*) recommended the returning émigré for a job at Leningrad's Gas Dynamics Laboratory (GDL) but Glushko suspected he was a 'plant' being placed inside the workshop to keep an eye on them. Bravely, he wrote to the NKVD voicing his objections [15].

Scherschevsky's relations with his new co-workers got off to a bad start when they discovered he was being given full VIP treatment. To their astonishment he was living in a luxury two-bedroom apartment at the Astoria Hotel, ate the best food and dressed in the finest Soviet clothes. He often arrived late at the office, sat at his desk and appeared to

fall asleep. When confronted by Glushko, he said he had to close his eyes so the sight of other people didn't disturb his thinking!

When Boris Raushenbakh, a Russian of German descent, met the strange man he was disappointed: "If Schershevsky was put on a question relating to air travel, the answer would always be the exact identification of the periodical (including even the year and the issue number) in which an article on the given subject appeared, as well as who wrote it, but to get from him even a short summary of the article's content was impossible. His laziness was probably a result of his complete inability to do creative work" [16].

With hindsight Raushenbakh wondered if the man he met in Leningrad had been changed by some physical or mental illness.

"Until 1929 he regularly published articles on the subject of rockets and space in German scientific and popular magazines. These articles...were of good quality and could not possibly have been written by the lazybones Schershevsky later turned out to be. Either someone else had written them, although it is very unclear who would have done so and for what reason, or shortly before 1929 he went through some sort of illness which affected his capacity for intellectual work. That he had some kind of chronic illness is undeniable: his face was always covered with sores. All in all, he was an interesting companion who loved to make jokes, and who understood what one was talking about as long as the conversation remained general" [17].

Purged from History

During this period, his only contribution to the work of the GDL were some mathematical calculations for a planned

meteorological rocket. Its design used a German-style nose-mounted engine to carry a 20 kg payload to an altitude of one hundred kilometers before falling back to Earth via parachute [18].

Schershevsky even revealed the specifications for Oberth's latest 'Kegelduse' cone-shaped rocket engine but a planned Soviet copy (the ORM-15) was never built. This has been cited as proof of Schershevsky's lack of influence [19].

When the two main Soviet rockets groups (Leningrad's GDL and Moscow's GIRD) merged in 1933 and moved to the capital under direct government control, Schershevsky wasn't invited to join. He was forced to give-up his VIP lifestyle and moved into a single room at a communal housing block. Although given a job at a Leningrad college, he was soon translating documents at a local library to make ends meet [20].

Unfortunately, he now had too much knowledge of secret military technology and was trapped inside the Soviet Union just as Stalin's 'Purge' was about to begin. On 7th October 1936 he was at the library with a friend when they were both arrested by the secret police. Although the other man had been their real target, when the NKVD found out who Schershevsky was they were delighted to discover they had a possible 'German spy' on their hands. During his interrogation he admitted to having "transferred abroad" details of Georgy Langemak and Valentin Glushko's 1935 book '*Rockets: Their Design and Uses*' and was charged with "anti-Soviet activities".

On 22nd March 1937, Schershevsky was given a death sentence and his personal papers were confiscated by the NKVD. When historian Dr. Tania Jel'nina asked to see them in the mid-1990s, she was told they were still under 'lock and key' at the former KGB archives for security reasons. To Glushko's biographers this was evidence that he really had been a "double



Valentin Glushko's 1938 NKVD 'mugshot'.
(KGB archive)

agent" spying on the German rocket pioneers in Berlin and the GDL in Leningrad. To quash a rumour that Glushko had been responsible for Schershevsky's arrest, they say that when they asked the St. Petersburg Military Prosecutor to examine the relevant files, no mention was found of Glushko [21].

On 28th May 1937 Schershevsky was led into a sound-proofed cell in the basement of the NKVD's Leningrad 'Bolshoi Dom' (Great House) headquarters and executed. As was normal procedure during the industrialised killing of the Purges, he would have been killed with a single shot to the back of the neck [22].

We now know the persecution of the Soviet rocket group was as a direct result of their close links to popular Red Army leader Marshal Mikhail Tukchaevsky. As he had been an early supporter of their work, his patronage proved fatal when he was denounced as the leader of an "anti-Soviet Trotskyite conspiracy" by a paranoid and jealous Stalin [23].

Marshal Tukchaevsky was executed on 12th June 1937 – alongside his mother, sister, and two brothers [24].

Former GDL director Ivan Kleimenov was arrested at the end of 1937 and it is easy to imagine information gathered from Schershevsky being used against him. He was executed in January 1938. Valentin Glushko's turn came in March 1938 but by then the Terror had run its course and he survived.

Conclusion

Although it is true to say Alexander Schershevsky's odd personal habits and political naiveté alienated him from contemporaries and ultimately led to his death, he still deserves to be remembered as one of the first aviation writers to promote spaceflight to the general public. Unfortunately an anonymous death amongst millions of other victims of the 'Great Terror' has effectively purged his name from the space history books.

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