

Perils of History, Soviet Style

Dr John Bremer

Editor, Higher Education Supplement, *The Australian*

Editor's Note: The author's permission to re-print this article which was first published in *The Weekend Australian*, 20-21 February 1982, is gratefully acknowledged. The number of paragraphs in the original newspaper article has been reduced in the interests of style in the new format.

Arseny Roginsky is on his way to a Soviet labour camp, for four years.

The trial — which his lawyer described as an outrageous violation of all norms of Socialist justice — ended on 4th December last year and the sentence was handed down the following day.

Arseny Roginsky was arrested in Leningrad on 12th August last year and charged with “forgery and the production and sale of forged documents”. These documents were letters of recommendation needed to support an application for permission to use certain libraries and archives. They did not give authority to use the archives, only to apply for such authority. It does not seem to us a very significant crime even if it could be proved, and it is so regarded in the Soviet Union under usual conditions, but these were not usual conditions. People charged with such an offence are normally released and forbidden to leave the city, but Arseny Roginsky was detained and kept incommunicado in “The Crosses” prison.

After three months of investigation by the prosecution, Roginsky's lawyer was given only ten days in which to examine the case materials and prepare his defence. The lawyer put a brave front on the situation and demanded an immediate release for Roginsky on the grounds that the letters of recommendation are not legal documents anyway, that two experts had failed to prove that the letters were forged by Roginsky's hand, and that the most recent letter was dated 1978 so that the Statute of Limitations had expired. Without explanation, the lawyer's appeal was rejected.

The trial began on 25th November and Roginsky refused to answer any questions or to participate in the trial.

Professor V. V. Pugachev of Saratov, a witness on the first day, expressed shock at seeing Roginsky, whom he described as an exceptionally gifted historian and a brilliant researcher, being tried. If the signatures on the letters in question were not in his own handwriting, Professor Pugachev said, it might be that his secretary had signed them since they were of no importance or legal value. On the next day, two more prominent Soviet scholars, Professor Y. S. Lurie, an historian, and Professor B. F. Egorov, a literary specialist, both internationally known, expressed their grief and astonishment at the charges. The prosecutor asked Professor Lurie if Roginsky was a "parasite" (which is a crime in the Soviet Union) — that is, had no wage-earning job. The professor replied that Roginsky had a job, as his own private secretary, and also that he is a graduate of Saratov University, a hard-working researcher with many publications to his credit.

The prosecutor then demanded a third expert witness to examine the forged documents. The defence claimed that this was patently illegal, but the objection was ignored.

On the third day, two more witnesses took the stand. Professor Gerasimenko, head of the Saratov University history department, said that the letters were forged, that the university had no knowledge of a graduate student Roginsky, and that Professor Pugachev was a prominent scholar who, however, "had some troubles with the university administration". The other witness said he had given Roginsky several similar letters of recommendation, and would give others whenever he wished.

During the first three days of the trial, Roginsky was given no meal during the day, and when his mother addressed the court and said she would complain to the International Red Cross, the court answered she could go and complain to the United Nations if she liked.

On 4th December, the fourth day, the third expert witness reported that the letters of recommendation were forged and by Roginsky himself. The prosecutor then summed up. The Soviet Union was surrounded by imperialist enemies. Roginsky had talent, but it had been used to undermine the Soviet State, and not to glorify his Socialist Motherland. In fact, the prosecutor continued, Roginsky had sent materials to the West and published them in anti-Soviet publications abroad, specifically in the historical journal *Pamyat (Memory)*. He demanded four years in a prison camp. Roginsky's lawyer demanded a complete acquittal, all standards of justice having been ignored in the trial. The next day, 5th December, Arseny Roginsky was sentenced.

Although Roginsky had refused to participate in the trial he did give a concluding speech. But instead of talking about his own case, he focused on the problems of researchers in gaining access to and using the archives:

“Let me preface my remarks by saying that for me, the archives are a natural extension of the library. I have often heard non-specialists sincerely convinced that the archives contain either super top-secret documents or documents defaming someone (or perhaps something) and that, therefore, archival access is given only to the select few, armed with ‘special trustworthiness’, and that is the way it ought to be. Such a conception of the archives is completely erroneous, as was the attempt made in this courtroom to distinguish between more and less documents, more and less valuable ones. All documents are important, all documents are valuable as witnesses to our past. Every serious researcher into the Russian past must turn to the archives. . .

“How do historians, both professional and non-professional, obtain access to such archival documents? In order to receive permission to work in the archives, one must not only have a general library card, but also a ‘letter of recommendation from the scholarly institutions and organisations on whose staff the researcher works and at whose assignment he is working, with an indication of the topic to be studied’. That means that if you don’t belong to the staff of some kind of research institute or institution of higher learning, and if, moreover, that institution hasn’t given you an ‘assignment’ (a strange word to find in connection with scholarly institutions), then access to the archives is closed to you. In this category of those barred from the archives we find the absolute majority of historians and literary specialists with higher education. What are those people supposed to do who work in schools, technical institutes, tourist bureaus, local libraries, and technical publishing houses, that is, not in ‘scholarly institutions’?

“There are two solutions: either immediately to relinquish such essentials as archival work (as, alas, many end up doing) or to try by begging and conniving (that is the only word for it) to obtain a letter of recommendation to use the archives from the proper authorities. Such authorities, however, generally refuse all such requests.”

Roginsky pointed out that a topic might not fit in with a university’s research Plan, that they had no reason to help an unknown scholar, that publishing houses were equally uninterested — the scholarly ones already had their Plan, and the popular ones found your topic too academic.

“Then, having come full circle and having been subjected to many unpleasantnesses on the way, you find yourself once again with the choice: to give up the idea of using the archives and make do with the published

ones, to throw aside your old topic and begin a new one more closely corresponding to the Plans of the 'scholarly institutions,' or to resort to roundabout means. "For example, you might decide to get a letter of recommendation for a topic which would somehow interest the editors and really work on that topic, hoping at the same time to acquaint yourself with at least part of the material on your own topic.

"I know many scholars who are interested in Gumilev (a Symbolist poet who was shot in the 1920s) but study Blok (a poet recognised by the Soviet authorities), or who have an interest in Katkov (a 19th century reactionary political figure) but study Chernyshevsky (a 19th century revolutionary hero). Of course, such an approach greatly slows your work, but there is still the possibility that sooner or later you will finish it."

But, Roginsky pointed out, if roundabout means don't work, you have reached a dead end. Even if you get permission to work in the archives it does not give free access because the administration can only allow a researcher to see a document if it "corresponds" to the topic approved. Administrative refusal is very common and Roginsky said there were probably a hundred cases in his own archival work when he was denied access.

"Some of the material . . . I received unhindered, but for much of it I came up against the standard responses of 'not corresponding to the topic' and 'does not contain information relevant to the subject of your study'. These responses did not satisfy me, as they would not satisfy any serious researcher. Only I could decide whether the documents in question contained relevant information, and that only upon examining them."

Scholars are driven to trying to get more letters of recommendation to cover more topics or to cover a more broadly formulated topic. Neither is very likely to succeed.

"In the present court setting it hardly seems worth discussing why such artificial and often insurmountable barriers have been erected between researchers and documents, why such secreting away of Russian historical documents has been necessary," Roginsky said.

"I can say, though, that the system needs to be changed. Of course, I do not consider that every person off the street should be given access to the archives, nor that manuscripts should be given to anyone without the skills to work with them. But we can eliminate such problems as those without any difficulty . . . What must be removed entirely, however, is any kind of restriction on the materials available. Only such changes . . . would create conditions under which one would no longer have to resort to tricks during the humiliating requests for letters of recommendation nor to even more humiliating attempts to obtain that access by means

of false recommendations. I ask the court to bring this matter to the attention of the Central Archive Office, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the Ministry of Culture, so that they might re-examine the regulations concerning archives.”

Roginsky pointed out that he faces difficulties with publishing his work already, one editor having volunteered to remove his articles from a forthcoming dictionary of 18th century Russian writers “if necessary”, but this is nothing compared with his predicament if he were to be excluded from libraries, not by the Criminal Code, but by administrators. This is a real possibility.

“Now I come to my final point,” he continued. “In the order from the Public Library one of the reasons cited for rescinding my library card was the publication in a ‘foreign periodical’ of a few letters from the Plekhanov Collection from the Department of Manuscripts. I cannot remember a case, and I rather doubt there ever was one, when such a measure was taken against any author for unauthorised publication in a Soviet journal. But such is the logic of the administration of the Public Library. And such is the logic which has dominated this interrogation process. It ought to be immaterial whether the (unauthorised) publication was Soviet or foreign. Yet it has been clear that it is precisely foreign publication which holds special significance for this court.

“It is enough to say that when on 10th November, at the end of my interrogation, I was shown the accusations being brought against me, the goal of my archival work was defined as ‘the publication of archival documents in foreign periodicals’, and only after I had commented did the expression ‘and in Soviet ones’ appear in the final indictment. In the Court’s Resolution, however, transferring my case to the KGB for ‘examination and adoption of appropriate measures’ . . . that formula was kept in its original form — ‘in foreign periodicals’. I will not discuss here — or, for that matter, in any other place — the question of whether I had anything to do with the publication of any historical documents abroad. I am not keeping silent on that issue out of the need to hide anything. Simply for me publishing in Russian periodicals does not negate the possibility of publishing abroad. A document which was carefully produced and has been objectively commented on remains a document regardless of where and by whom it was published.

“Russian culture is one entity. Only through the study of the archives and the free publication of their contents can we learn the truth about our past.

“I must ask everyone to forgive me that this final speech has come

out so sombre and lengthy. But I ask you to remember the conditions under which I wrote it — nine people in 8 square metres. It was rather difficult to concentrate. That is all I wish to say”.