

Eva Toulouze

The Biography and Poetry of the Udmurt Poet Kuzebai Gerd as an Example of Repression of Ethnic Writers in Soviet Russia

This article focuses on one less known episode in the history of repression in the Soviet Union. The Stalinist terror has been widely investigated. Still, it has been examined most from the point of view of the centre, from the capital cities, and less from the provinces. Moreover, a topic to which not enough attention has been devoted is the systematic attack on Russia's nationalities, which had so much benefitted from the early Soviet system. At some time, they had become a threat, emphasising their differences from the dominant ethnic group, as they had been formerly encouraged to do. Among the first nationalities to suffer were the Udmurts. The present article concentrates on a representative case study, that of the Udmurt poet Kuzebai Gerd, who had acquired the status of a rising star for the newly promoted Udmurtness before being repressed.

The National Question in its Historical Context

Russia, even after the fall of the Soviet Union, is well-known as a multi-ethnic state. It is a historical fact that the Bolsheviks, while they attempted to reorganise the newly formed territory, relied on the principle of ethnicity. Indeed, this pragmatic approach allowed them to find solutions to the conundrums they had to solve. While their main problem at the end of the First World War were the powerful Western nationalities, such as the Poles, Finns and Ukrainians, there were other nationali-

ties occupying some important part of the territory, with only a few intellectuals and almost no political elite. This was the case in the Volga region, a region that had often been problematic for Russia: since it joined the Muscovite state in the 16th century, it had been the origin of several revolts threatening even the central power, from the Cheremis wars in the second half of the 16th century, up to Stepan Razin's revolt in the 17th and Emel'ian Pugachëv's in the late 18th century. Moreover, besides Orthodox Russians, there were also animist Finno-Ugrians and many Muslim Turkic ethnic

groups in the area. Still, the decision of dividing the country according to ethnicity, while promoted by the People's Commissariat for Nationalities [Narkomnats], was not unanimously accepted: in the 'regionalisation debate' they were against those who argued that the country had to be divided into economic-administrative complementary regions, a union-wide plan (Hirsch 2000; Hirsch 2004). However, within the framework of this administrative decision, at the beginning of the Soviet era, an unexpected alliance was contracted between the Bolsheviks and these nationalities, whose main goals were not incompatible with the Party's: the development of their culture and their dignity.

The new administrative system encompassed units dedicated to particular nationalities, mostly dominant in their regions. This process, led by the People's Commissariat for Nationalities, under Stalin's responsibility, included thorough negotiations between neighbouring regions, Moscow being the referee and arbitrating according to the central power's own interests. Indeed, Moscow was interested in avoiding any local subdivision – especially non-Russian – to become strong enough to chal-

lenge the centre; moreover, it wanted to keep a 'balance' between ethnic concerns and economic coherence, allowing work division between regions (Carr 1959: 277).

In the 1920s, the official Party policy implied achieving balance between two explicit dangers, called in the Bolshevik's terminology 'Great Russian chauvinism' and 'local nationalism,' while in a document written at the end of 1922 – i.e. not long before the leader's demise – and revealed only at the XX Congress of the PCSU in 1956, the former was the most dangerous and widely represented one inside the Party itself (Pipes 1964: 282-85), and particularly endorsed by Stalin.

Indeed, this is the direction in which the Party policy eventually developed, after a promising start dedicated to supporting the different nationalities it had contributed to awaken. Of course, there were huge differences in the situations of the different regions: in some regions the Bolshevik Party was strong and there were conflicts with the central power (as in Georgia, where the Party officials behaved in chauvinist ways towards the Georgian communists), some regions were more politically aware than others (there were both com-

munists and 'whites' in the Komi area or in the Tatar world); in other regions there were not as many communists and they had but little support among the rural indigenous population. So, the Party reacted pragmatically according to each situation.

But the general pattern responded to coherent logics: at the beginning of the 1920s, the central power was well disposed towards the nationalities and supported them in their tensions with the more chauvinistic tendencies. This tendency was confirmed even when the Party leadership was not well disposed towards the indigenous group, as was the case in Udmurtia. At the beginning, this approach was well illustrated by the notion of 'indigenisation,' in Russian *korenizatsiia*, which was theoretically the official position of the leading organs until the 1930s. This was a centrally decided policy, whose idea had already been expressed by Stalin as soon as 1918 (Pesikina 1956: 48) – the core idea was to give some formerly unknown privileges to the local indigenous population. The local language was to be given a status similar to Russian, and not only legally, but in practice as well; moreover, positive discrimination was implemented in working life to support indigenous leaders, by

the establishment of compulsory quotas. This policy was supposed to be implemented everywhere; but there was resistance, and this is particularly clear in the Udmurt case (Toulouze 2006; Toulouze 2016).

This did not make it possible to obtain the expected results. Another factor contributing to the failure of *indigenisation* were also the changes within the Party, which had a huge influx of new members (Pipes 1964) who had not known exile and life abroad and were mostly Russian-centred; they were 97.3% in 1922. This was felt at the 12th Party Congress in April 1923, where centralisation dominated over self-determination (Pipes 1964: 293) and strengthened the position of those hostile to reducing the influence of ethnic Russians.

The Formation of Udmurt 'Statehood'

In this context, the Udmurt example is remarkable, the Udmurt being a community in central Russia, between the rivers Cheptsä and Kama, who spoke a Finno-Ugric language and practiced an animist religion before they were forcibly converted to Orthodox Christianity from the 16th century onwards.

An Udmurt unity, at the beginning an autonomous oblast', was created at the end of 1920. The new Udmurt ethnic unit faced internal challenges from the very beginning. The Udmurt cause, in this region, had few supporters in the Party and many detractors. The region had a strong industrial basis, two big metallurgical plants (Izhevsk and Votkinsk), in which Party organisations were hostile to the local agricultural population and were strongly pro-Russian.

Thus, at the beginning of the 1920s, the powerful local communist unit acted as a brake on the overall Party policy, especially on the measures aimed at supporting the local population, namely the 'indigenisation' (Siddikova 1990: 38-42; Egorov 1929: 8 for the Udmurt case). This led to serious incidents, in which the Udmurt leaders were victims and were repeatedly defeated in local conflicts (Kulikov 1997: 40-43). While the central Party clearly supported the Udmurt until 1925, afterwards the attitude of the centre became more and more suspicious towards the non-Russians and eventually totally hostile.

One of the first indications of the change in the Party's policy at the local level was certainly the open hostility of the local Party towards the indigenisation

measures such as the promotion of local people for roles of political and economic responsibility. The lack of Udmurt politicians was to be felt already in the preparation of autonomy, when some local administrations refused to communicate the data about their Udmurt inhabitants (Pavlov 1968a: 80), attempting thus to sabotage the creation of an Udmurt oblast', which was at the time among the priorities of the Narkomnats.

While the Udmurt authorities decided in 1923 to recruit a great number of Udmurts in the administration (Siddikova 1990: 38), the results were scarce: 'at the end of 1923, not only there are very few Udmurts in the leading institutions of the oblast' and its subdivisions, but also in the institutions close to the Udmurt peasants' (Bobrova et al. 1970: 149). The requirement of civil servants being able to work in Udmurt was totally ignored, so in the 1920s 28.5% of primary school teachers, and 11% of secondary school teachers were Udmurt (Shklierova 1991: 90), so were 13% of civil servants, less than 25% of local leaders and 14.4% of 'technical leaders' (Kulikov 1998: 100). Later, the proportion changed for the worse: in the local Ministry of economy, while the percentage of Udmurts was 30.7 in 1933, it be-

came 5.5 in 1935 (Shklierova 1991: 29).

The qualitative assessment shows even worse results: while in 1932 the Izhevsk plant recruited 1,000 Udmurt workers, only 2.36% of them remained in the plant in later years (Vasil'eva 1998: 127). The generalised character of these trends and their systematic approach allow us to infer that there was a deliberate sabotage of the Party's official policies by the local leadership. The decision of 1923 also had repercussions on the Udmurt language: complaints and answers were also to be written in Udmurt. Udmurt language courses were organised, but they failed to reach their target. At the time, this failure was explained by different factors: 'The party indifference, the lack of understanding of the importance of using Udmurt by many party members and the absence of a generally recognised literary language; one author adds the reluctance of many Udmurt to go over to their language, for Russian opens any kind of doors' (Egorov 1929: 15).

While at the political level these processes were being implemented and failed, the intelligentsia worked tirelessly. While some of the small Udmurt intelligentsia was not enrolled in the Party, until the end of the 1920s

there was a general agreement with and support for the party's goals (Domokos 1975: 167).

The War against Free Thinking

The first serious attack against free-thinking at a local level was launched in 1926, at the founding congress of the Udmurt writers' union, called then VUARP – the All-Udmurt Association of Revolutionary Writers [Vseudmurtskaia assotsiatsia revoliutsionnykh pisatelei]. The question that started a heated debate in which the head of the local Party fully participated was about the character of the class struggle. Back then only four writers were members of the party (Bobrova et al. 1970: 204). For the (temporary) head of the VUARP, Kuzebai Gerd, there was no class struggle among the Udmurt writers. But this position was rejected by the Party leadership.

This campaign also influenced the fate of the association for the development of Udmurt culture, called 'Bölyak' [Neighbourhood], and created in Moscow by Gerd. In 1928, after having spectacularly increased its membership (Kuznetsov 1994: 429-30), some prominent members were excluded for 'political mistakes,'

while local history was more globally attacked (Kulikov 1997: 164). The Association was later liquidated. In 1931 all the organisations that investigated the Finno-Ugric questions were also liquidated (Domokos 1975: 256; Loikfun 1929; Loikfun 1929a; Loikfun 1930), with the effect that all possibilities of development in this direction were blocked (Kuznetsov 1994: 300, 431).

The first conference of the VUARP in 1930 became a platform of criticism towards Gerd (Shklier 1979: 35). It launched the term 'gerdism' [гердовщина, on the model of Eseninism]. Gerd was seen as a nationalist enemy – according to the leadership's analysis, he was a 'wolf hiding under a sheep's hide'. However, not all voices remained silent: a letter from six writers denounced what was happening. This was the very last manifestation of independent thinking. In 1932, the Party called Gerd a 'spokesman for national bourgeoisie, who praises all our enemies, the kulaks we have eliminated, and opposes all our initiatives... He is active against the Russians, against Russian workers and he calls the backward Udmurts not to learn Russian. [...] Our main task is fighting against Gerdism' (Kulikov 1995: 75-76). 'Gerdism' be-

came a symbol of everything that was negative.

The SOFIN Trial

The SOFIN trial was a show trial which, as a result, eliminated the most prominent Udmurt intellectuals, as well as other Finno-Ugric intellectuals. The main 'culprits' were Finno-Ugric 'nationals,' mainly Udmurts. In this trial, as well in those that followed, the pattern was similar: the victims were members of minority ethnic groups, and the executioners were Russian. The repressive pattern against non-Russians was clear. The SOFIN trial was the first full-fledged operation against ethnic minorities, launched as early as 1932.

The accusers constructed a whole network, gathering all the initiatives related to Finno-Ugric studies and inventing hierarchies and connections in order to present these different initiatives as linked in a big 'counterrevolutionary' organisation, of which Gerd was supposedly the leader. They called this 'organisation' SOFIN, i.e. the Union of Finnic nationalities. The prosecutors looked also for Finno-Ugric activists in other regions, in Mari, Mordvin and Komi administrative units, in

order to present the judges with a complex body of evidence.

The authorities made several mistakes: they argued that SOFIN was founded on April 19th 1932, a period in which most of those accused were already detained (Kulikov 1997: 130-31, 220, 144), while many Finn scholars mentioned by Gerd in his writings and considered as his accomplices, were already dead...

The trial ended with many sentences handed down to so-called SOFIN activists. The non-Udmurts received lighter penalties and some were able to avoid them.

Kuzebai Gerd's Activity

Gerd has already been mentioned in the previous chapter. It is not by chance – I intended to focus on his pivotal role concerning the Udmurt case.

Gerd is an unavoidable personality when writing about Udmurt identity. There are very few personalities of his stature in the whole range of Finno-Ugric regions. It is understandable that he became the focus of the attention of state authorities and that he concentrated all their resentment against the 'foes' of the socialist path. Gerd was sincere in his appreciation of the Revo-

lution and of the opportunities the Soviet power had offered his people, but he took the Bolshevik promises too seriously, since they came more from political opportunism, than ideological principles. When the Party policy changed, he stumbled as many others did. Gerd was also vulnerable: his enthusiasm, his writing skills, and his open and communicative personality sometimes caused envy and jealousy in others. Therefore, Gerd became the main culprit and paid with his life. He was only the first to be targeted: by the end of the war, Udmurt intelligentsia was almost totally exterminated. This fact is interesting in its exemplarity: the same fate touched all the other Finno-Ugric republics in central Russia.

Kuzebai Gerd (1898-1937) incarnates the contradictions of his time. He was born Kuz'ma Chainikov, he was of a large family and was brought up by the mother.¹ He became a schoolteacher, which at the be-

¹ It is difficult to know today exactly the social position of the Chainikov's family: Gerd says it was a family of poor peasants. But at the time it was the right thing to say. Bogomolova asserts that he was of a middle-class peasant family (Bogomolova 1983: 242). As he soon began to be seen as an enemy, it could not be said that he was from modest origins... Nobody really knows...

gining of the twentieth century was considered the highest achievement for member of ethnic minorities. The revolution triggered his potential for activity and organisation: when he was barely nineteen, he became active in several fields. In politics, he became close to the Bolsheviks, as they were the political force that supported the ethnic intellectuals in their search for recognition and dignity. Gerd did not become a Party member: however, he was among those who attempted to define the borders of the newly created Udmurt administrative unit following the interests of the Udmurt people.

As a literary figure, Gerd was active in political writing. His work was published in the Party's press-poems, but also prose, for example the biographies of revolutionary personalities: his translation of Lenin's biography (January 1920) in Udmurt caused him to be accused later of having betrayed Marxist principles while trying to fit the Udmurt vocabulary to Marxist notions (for example, for translating 'proletarian' with the equivalent word for 'poor' – *kuan'er*, in Udmurt) (Pavlov 1968: 200).

In 1920-22 Gerd organised the orphans' infrastructure in Izhevsk and endeavoured to train childcare specialists (An-

dreeva 1988: 128). Witnesses confirm his excellent relationship with the children (Romanova 1998: 70; Kirillova 1998: 58). In those troubled years, he found the energy to visit Udmurt villages and instruct peasants mostly through theatre.

Gerd himself wrote didactic plays, particularly in support of education and against the Church's obscurantism: 'in 1918, theatre performances swarmed into Udmurt areas as a huge wave' (Gerd 1925: 227). For example, between 1918 and 1919, only in the Malmyzh region, Gerd organised 47 performances (Shklierova 1991: 90).

In the first years of Udmurt statehood, Gerd became quite prominent in the local cultural life. In those years, while attending a meeting in Moscow where Lenin took the floor, he explored the bookshops and discovered a translation of Finnish poetry (Briusov et al. 1917). This book became a path-opening revelation for him. The Finns spoke a language akin to Udmurt; they were not as far ahead in their cultural development, and their latest steps became exemplary for Gerd: on one hand, Elias Lönnrot had given form to the Finnish national epos, which had boosted their self-confidence; on the other hand, proper Finn literature had been

developing with poetry, prose, novels. Gerd decided that this was the right path for the Udmurt and tried to follow it.

Later, when the civil war ended and the Bolshevik power was consolidated, Gerd chose to pursue his studies. He applied to the Literary institute that later took the name of Maksim Gor'kii, studied poetry with Valerii Briusov and concluded his studies successfully. Meanwhile, he was active among the students, organising the Udmurt cultural life in the capital (Lytkin 1998: 74-75), taking responsibility for Udmurt publishing in Moscow, and for the Udmurt scientific activities: in 1923, he launched the already mentioned Association for the study of the Udmurt region (Ermakov 1988: 30; Kulikov 1991: 5-8; Kulikov 1997: 146-53; Kuznetsov 1993: 35-36), which published an important collection of articles on different Udmurt subjects (Gerd 1926). Gerd published himself several relevant books (Tok 1970; Ermakov 1988; Bobrova et al. 1970): he also published a huge collection of poems which turned him into a prominent poet (Gerd 1922). His enthusiastic poetry was open to self-interrogation and doubt. It was not only didactic poetry, aiming at popularising the policy of the Party. It was full of sin-

cerity, enthusiasm, and youthful pathos.

Gerd's Poetry

Since Gerd's poetry was one of the main reasons for his repression, we should not ignore it and the following are some samples that are representative of his style and main themes.

The collection published in 1924, called *The Zither Player* [Krez'chi], is opened by an introduction, the simplicity of which reminds one of folk poetry, and which resonates with the title:

Та кырзанъёсме -
Шур тулкымъёсме,
Та кылбыръёсме -
Тюрагайёсме
Туж кема люкай,
Туж кема гожъяй.
Удмурт гуртъёсты
Люкаса ветлй
Паськыт тэльёстй
Кылзыса калги...

Уин изыкум
Вõtаса адзи.
Пыдйыл ветликум -
Дугдылытэк кылзй
Медам вун шуса
Мон сое гожъяй
Крезьме шуккыса,
Калыклы кырзай, -
Калыклэн сюлмаз

Туж мур ватылй.

Куанер гуртъестй
Уйшор дауре
Укно улъестй
Кытысь мар сюре,
Весь лушкем ветлй
Весь лушкем люкай.
Калык бӧрдэмез,
Туж курадземез
Уйбыт кырзамез
Ас сюлмам ватй.

Азвесь гырлыё
Турагаедлэсь
Зарни чыртыё
Чуж уӧиедлэсь
Азвесь куаразэ
Мон аслым басътй
Зарни гуръессэ
Мон аслым кари -
Соос кадь табре
Луэ кырзаме!

Шунды пуксьыку,
Гурт пуме мынко
Калык бӧрдыку
Кырзаны медко -
Калык кылзыса
Бӧрдэмысь дугдэ
Сюлмыз юнмаса
Серекъян кутске,
Азылань улыны
Кужым будэтэ.

Тулыс вуыку
Шур жингыртыку
Сяська жужаку,
Шулдыр луыку,
Сяська пӧлын мон

Кырзаса пукко,
Кӧт жож луымон
Крезьме шуккисько -
Куанер калыкез
Весь сайкатйсько!

These songs of mine,
the waves of our river,
These poems of mine,
my larks -
very long I gathered them
very long I wrote them.
Along Udmurt villages
I went gathering them,
Along dense forests
I wandered listening...

When I sleep at night
Dreaming I see them.
When I go wandering
I listen to them non-stop.
Not to forget them
I wrote them
Playing my zither
I sang to the people,
Into the heart of the people
I hid them very deeply.

Along poor villages
At midnight
Under the window
I was staying,
Secretly I walked
Secretly I gathered.
The weeping of the people,
Its many sufferings
Its nightly singing

I buried in my heart.

With a silver bell
From your lark
With its golden neck
From your yellow nightin-
gale
Its silver voice
I took for myself
Its golden tunes
I made them for myself,
Like them, later
They became my song!

At sunset,
I go to the end of the vil-
lage
When people weep,
I wander singing:
Hearing it, people
Stop weeping
Strengthening their heart
They start laughing,
To go on living
Their energy grows.

When spring comes
When the river calls
When the flower blooms
When it is nice,
Among the flowers I
sit singing
The sadness inside me
I play my zither,
The poor people,
I elevate them.

This poem seems to offer a good summary of Gerd's first produc-
tions: aesthetically, Gerd uses

the parallelism characteristic of
Finnic folk poetry, using quasi
synonyms to enrich his message.
There are two agents in interac-
tion, the people and the poet,
and the result of their interac-
tions are songs/poems, which
express the Udmurt people's suf-
ferings, but at the same time ask
us to arise from passivity – these
are the main themes of this col-
lection. Many of these issues
were later to serve as court
charges against Gerd: the indi-
vidual action by the poet, who
singlehandedly led the people –
whose agency he despised – to
its happiness. In the Bolsheviks'
understanding, the central role
of the author's 'I,' instead of the
agency of the people, was sus-
pect. But this illustrates the
sense of mission that filled Gerd
and inspired his work. He was
the voice of the people and at
the same time the voice of the
nightingale.

I would like to quote two other
significant poems from this col-
lection. The first was much ap-
preciated by Maksim Gor'kii,
who commented on its Russian
translation by the author and
edited it. It reflects on the re-
mains of the sacred grove of the
Udmurts' ancient religion, in a
melancholic tone, which ex-
presses Gerd's ambiguity about
the destruction caused by the
Soviet regime.

It is called *Keremet*, the name both of the sacred grove and the ancient deity, borrowed from the Turkic peoples, which was worshipped there.

I
 Синэз ворекъятйсь
 Йырез учкыса поро-
 мытйсь
 Туж паськыт лудын
 Бусыын
 Огназ куашетыса
 Оло куректыса, оло
 бөрдыса
 Оло мөзмыса
 Оло вашкала даурез то-
 даз вайыса,
 Оло ас понназ
 Кырзаса
 Чылкак огназ
 Керемет сылэ, лулзылэ

[...]

Кудйз эшъёсы
 Арлыдлы чидатэк
 Пограллям,
 Музьэме вылыса
 Кулйллям, сисьмиллям.
 Сыло пересьёс, каллен
 Чашето -
 Валантэм выжыкылъёс
 вераса
 Куашето...

II

Ортчем
 Вунэм аръёсы,

Вашкала дыръёсы
 Удмуртъёс
 Кыче татчы лыктыса
 Люкаськозы,
 Курадзонзэс вераса
 Бөрдозы вал...
 Соку вöсьлэн
 Бадзымесь, пиштйсь
 Тылъёсыз,
 Курадзись каыклээн
 Тыл кадь сюлэмез сутйсь
 Кылъёсыз
 Востэм нылъёслэн
 кырзанъёссы
 Шур жингыртэм кадь,
 жингырес куараоссы
 Туж кыдёке
 вöлдйськыса,
 Шуккиськыса,
 Чукна шунды жужатозь
 Кылйськозы вал...

III

Табере Кереметэз
 Вунэтйзы
 Огназэ куштйзы.
 Уноез,
 Солэсь кышкаса,
 Татын периос, убиръёс
 Каръясько шуыса
 Кöшкеманы кутскизы.
 Огназ
 Уй но нунал Керемет
 сылэ
 Куашетыса
 Неноку но быронтэм
 Туж чебересь вашкала
 выжыкылъёс
 Ас понназ
 Дугдылытэк вераса.

Making its eyes sparkle,
Its head turning while
watching
In the very dense grove
On the field
Alone rustling
Either suffering, or weep-
ing
Or pining
Or remembering old times
Or singing
To itself
Totally alone,
Stands the Keremet, sigh-
ing,

[...]

Some friends
Giving in to their age
Have fallen
Lying on the earth
Dead, rotten.
The elder, who stay, softly
bicker
Telling unclear stories
They rustle...

In the past,
Forgotten years,
In their old times
The Udmurts
While coming here
Gathered
Telling their sufferings
Wept...
Then the ceremony's

Great, shining
Fires,
Of the suffering people,
Burning their heart as the
fire
Their words,
The girls' soft songs
Their ringing voices like
the singing of the river
Spreading up very far,
Sounding out,
Until sunrise
Were to be heard...

Now the Keremet
Has been forgotten,
Abandoned.
Many,
Afraid of it,
Saying that here evil spir-
its, vampires
Nest,
Started to fear.
Alone,
Day and night, stands the
Keremet
Rustling
Never ending
Beautiful old stories
To itself
Telling unceasingly.

While many of this collection's
poems focus on one main idea –
i.e. glorifying the revolution –
without much ambiguity, this
evocation of the old natural
sanctuary is much more com-
plex – which is why I have cho-

sen to discuss it in this article. The Soviet power, already in 1924, had clearly declared its hostility to religion. The open rejection of vernacular beliefs was to come later, but religions were already ideologically suspect. The elegiac atmosphere of this poem suggests melancholia in seeing the old sacred place's decay. In Gerd's poem, what happened there was both sad – the people's suffering, a stereotyped characteristic of the tsarist time – and beautiful – the songs, the stories... Gerd was not an apologist of old times: many traditions had to be replaced by new customs (such as the submissive position of women). But he acknowledged the beauty of some of them.

I have chosen the last poem to illustrate Gerd's first collection in order to show that, despite dedicating many poems to the Revolution, to the sunrise, to the fights of the civil war, Gerd also shows that he was a thinker who had doubts. This is an aspect I find endearing in Gerd. He was torn, he was attracted by contrary ideals and a choice for him was, indeed, impossible. He was, as the title of the next poem says, in the middle, halfway, stuck in midstream, in the middle of the ford.

Шоро-куспо

Марлы меда дышетски,
Шулдыр городын уй,
Зйбыт гуртэн люкиськи,
Бадзым карез адзылй?

Куанер удмурт гуртьёсме
Уг быгатски вунэтны
Сяськаё бусыосме
Жокыт карен воштыны.

[...]

Мар-о каром, мар каром.
Кудзэ маин мон воштом?
Шоро-куспо ульсько
Сюрес шоре дугдйсько.

Марлы меда дышетски,
Шулдыр городын уй,
Зйбыт гуртэн люкиськи,
Бадзым карез адзылй?

[...]

Городэ ке мынйсько
Зйбыт гуртлэсь
мозмисько.
Нош гуртэ ке кошкисько
Бадзым карлэсь
мозмисько.

Кутез дыбеч кадь улко
Солань-талань лобасько.
Куддыр вылэ тубисько,
Куддыр улэ лэзькисько.

Укыр вылэ тубыны
Мыным кужым уг тырмы
Укыр улэ лэзькыны

Дышетском визь ут
лэззы!

In the middle

Why did I study
And live in a joyful city,
And leave the quiet village
And see the big town?

My poor Udmurt villages
I cannot forget
My fields covered in flow-
ers,
I cannot exchange them
for the stuffy city.

[...]

What shall I do, what shall
I do
Which shall I exchange for
which?
I live in-between
I am stuck in the middle of
the road.

Why did I study
And live in the big city,
And leave the quiet village
And see the big town?

[...]

If I go to the city,
I miss my quiet village;
But if I leave for the vil-
lage,
I miss the big town.

I live like a flail
I fly here and there.
Sometimes I rise high,
Sometimes I go down.

To rise too high
My strength is not enough
To go too far down,
The wisdom from my
studies does not allow it.

Even as a young man, Gerd had doubts. Later, expressing doubt became dangerous. He did not allow himself the kind of endearing sincerity that characterised the first collection. In the second one, *Blooming land* [S'as'kayas'kis' muz'em]), he was less problematic, more affirmative and militant, more in line with his time. This is the collection that was published in 1927, curiously not in Izhevsk but in Kazan'. This is probably a sign that the times were becoming critical for him, as he had just come back from Moscow following the denunciation of his Udmurt comrades. There are some 'red' poems, for example about the Komsomol [Communist Youth Organization], but many are dedicated to innocent topics such as nature, the fields, a butterfly... For the scope of this article, the most important topic he touches upon is Udmurtness.

The second poem of the collection is dedicated to it.

While the poetic, lyric dimension remains weaker than in the previous, reflecting poems, this poem conceptually develops important aspects of his 'new life:' the possibility of being himself.

Мон – удмурт

Мон – удмурт. Мон – туж
шудо!
Эрказ луи, бурдъяськи.
Сюлмам горд тылъёс
будо,
Сьӧд дыннеысь
мозмытски!

[...]

Нокинлэсь
возьдаськытэк,
Удмурт дйсьме дисяса,
Мон но пото кышкатэк,
Горд кырзанъёс кырзаса.

Танй – мон но тй пӧлын,
Уно пӧртэм калыкъёс.
Мынам мылкыд – туж
вылын,
Котырам – выль
сюресъёс.

Та Октябрь ӧй ке лусал,
Пеймыт гуын мон улсал,
«Гожмо шыр» нимы
лусал,
Аслэсьтым
возьдаськысал.

Горд Октябрь монэ
жутйз -
Калыкъёс радэ пыртйз...
Мон – танй: татын
сылко,
Удмурт кылын
кырзасько.

Мон – удмурт. Мон – туж
шудо!
Эрказ луи, бурдъяськи.
Сюлмам горд тылъёс
будо,
Сьӧд дыннеысь
мозмытски!

I am Udmurt

I am Udmurt. I am very
happy!
I became free, I took
wings,
In my heart red fires grow,
I got free of the black
world.

[...]

Ashamed of nobody,
Wearing Udmurt clothes,
I also go out without fear,
Singing red songs.

There – I am also among
you,
Numerous different peo-
ples.
My spirits are very high,

Around me – new roads.

If October hadn't happened,
I would live in a dark hole,
My name would be
«striped mouse»,
I would be ashamed of
myself.

The Red October made me
grow
Let me enter the ranks of
the peoples...
I am there – here I stand,
I sing songs in Udmurt.

I am Udmurt. I am very
happy!
I became free, I took
wings,
In my heart red fires grow,
I got free of the black
world.

A third collection of poems, *Steps* [L'oget'yos], was published in Izhevsk four years later, in 1931. The atmosphere was becoming stifling for Gerd, and he did not have much time left in his short life.

Rise and Downfall

Gerd was called back from Moscow to Udmurtia in 1925 because of a letter sent by other Udmurt students. But in Udmurtia, de-

spite this heinous attempt, Gerd initially became a prominent figure in different fields of public life (Ermakov 1988: 34). For example, he was one of the first directors of what would become the National Museum and he gave it its scope (Ermakov 1988: 34; Toulouze 2020), organising there some important expeditions – today the Museum bears his name.

As already stated, Gerd was also fundamental for the creation, in March 1926, of the Udmurt writers' union, called the All-Udmurt Association of Revolutionary Writers (VUARP), to the point of being considered as its founder – of course with the support of the Party (Shklierieva 1991: 37; Domokos 1975: 254; Shklieriev 1979: 31). All the Udmurt writers enrolled in the newly founded organisation (Shklieriev 1979: 33). However, Gerd was its first chairman, although he lasted less than three months before being removed for not being a supporter of drawing lines between Udmurts according to class identification and class interests.

At the VUARP congress, Gerd reviewed the situation in literature and criticised the place left to the Udmurt (Kulikov 1997: 165). This provoked an irate reply from the Party's secretary Baryshnikov, who accused Gerd

of being openly scornful towards the Udmurt (Ermakov 1988: 36). The negative attitude towards the poet, therefore, came from the highest echelon of the local Party. Gerd was deprived of his position as director of the museum, expelled from the literary journal's editorial board and from his position of chairman of VUARP. The Party also attempted to get him to pay back the expenses for his education in Moscow. Later, all of Gerd's activities were criticised, and his achievements annihilated.

According to his contemporaries, Gerd was spontaneous, and expressed himself passionately, not expecting to be surrounded by enemies (Gerd 1998: 27). His mere presence was noteworthy (Tok 1970: 20-21). He was also easily hurt (Lytkin 1998: 76; Kuznetsov 1994: 386). Gerd was undoubtedly disliked by Party officials, who attempted, and were successful in blocking his doctoral studies and his scholarship to travel abroad (Ermakov 1988: 14; Ermakov 1994: 36-37).

I have chosen here not to give samples of more day-to-day political poetry, which Gerd also included in his last collections. However, the last collection, *Steps*, is clearly inspired by the new style of rhythmic, free verse launched by Maiakovskii. I have chosen here a poem that is rep-

resentative of this style, and at the same time was later to be wildly attacked. It very eloquently illustrates Gerd's ambiguity towards certain aspects of life in his time, a new life that was simultaneously destructive but also bore the wind of change. The poem below sums up very eloquently, even in its vibrant rhythm, the shaking violence of his time and the poet's reflections and palpitation.

Гутрын буран

Гутрын
буран,
Гутрын
пурга,
Вуж гурт
урам,
Питыр
берга.
Буж луд
быре.
Лудын -
выль тӧл.
Выль тӧл
пыре
Юртэ,
гуртэ.
Выль тӧл
шере
Лэчыт
шизэ,
Вань ша-
Ере

[...]

Ой, төл
 шула.
 Ой, төл
 зола.
 Гутрын
 буран,
 Гутрын
 пурга,
 Зурка
 урам,
 Вуж гурт
 зурка.
 Гидэ,
 Корка
 Выль төл
 йыга.
 Лымы -
 пуля.
 Сильтөл -
 пычал.
 Пычал
 чиля.
 Пуля
 Пыча
 Йыре,
 вире,
 Йырви-
 yme,
 Вань му-
 горе,
 Вань
 улэме.
 Лымы
 берга,
 Инозь
 жутске.
 Буран.
 Пурга.
 Вуж гурт

 сутске.
 «Ми -
 Горд
 кавале-
 ри
 но,
 Ми
 ся-
 рысь
 Уно
 Выль
 Крезьчиос
 Кырзан
 кырезяло:
 Кызы
 Ми
 сьод уй
 пыр,
 Кызы
 Ми
 тылпу
 пыр,
 Азылань,
 чик кышкатэк,
 Шунды
 июры
 потйм!»
 [...]

«Эй, кин
 со?...»
 « Ась!»
 Оло
 пужым?
 Со -
 выль
 улон!
 Со -
 выль

кужым!
Со -
Сюрс
миллён!

[...]

Вуж
Сюрестэк
Доре
лыктэ,
Ўогем
Ўстэк

Пыре
гуртэ.

Со -
выль
улон!

Со -
выль
кужым!

Со -
Сюрс
миллён!

Со -
выль пужы!

Вань
улонэз

Со
бугыртэ,
Сьёд
Толонэз

Вие,
вандэ.

Со -
котыкытын:

Татын,
отын,

Со -
омырын,

Со -
музъемын.
Выжы
лэзе,
Куарзэ
поттэ,
Выль
шуд сйзе,
Выль
шуд
сёте.

A storm at the village

At the village
there is a
storm

At the village
there is a
blizzard,

The old village's
street

In a whirlwind
rotates.

The old grove
is dead.

On the grove
a new wind
blows.

The new wind
enters

The house,
the village.

The new wind
sharpens

The sharp
bayonet

All my coun-
try

Oh, the wind
 whistles.
Oh, the wind
 gets stronger.
At the village
 there is a
storm
At the village
 there is a
blizzard,
It shakes
 the street,
The old village
 is shaken.
Into the stables,
 into the
house
The new wind
 knocks.
The snow
 is a bullet,
The hurricane
 is a rifle.
The rifle
 shines,
The bullet
 penetrates
Into the head,
 into the blood,
Into the
 brains
In all the bo-
 dy,
In all
 life.
The snow
 whirls,

It rises
 up to the sky.
The storm.
 The blizzard.
The old village
 blazes.

'We are
 the Red
 Caval-
 ry

and
About
 us
 there are
Many
 new
 songs
zither players
 shall play:
How
 shall we
 go through
 the
black night
How
 shall we
 go through

the fire
Forwards,
 fearing nothing
at all
To the
 sun
 we go'.

[...]

'Hey, who

is it?...'
 'What?'
 Maybe it's
 a pine?
 It is
 the new
 life!
 It is
 the new
 strength!
 It is
 thousands
 of millions!

[...]

Without
 the old road
 it goes
 home,
 Without a chopped
 door

It enters
 the village.
 It is
 the new
 life!
 It is
 the new
 strength!
 It is
 one thousand
 millions!
 It is
 the new pattern!
 All
 life
 It
 disrupts,
 The black

yesterday
 It kills it,
 it slaughters it.
 It is
 everywhere:
 Here,
 there,
 It is
 in the air,
 it is
 in the earth.
 It takes
 root,
 It breaks
 out its leaves,
 It promises
 a new happi-
 ness,
 A new
 happiness
 it gives.

This poem was to be attacked by Gerd's opponents: undoubtedly, Gerd referred here to the disruption of collectivisation, which since 1928 had devastated the countryside in the whole country, including Udmurtia. 1928 was also the year of food crisis, during which the Party organised bread requisitions, arrests and charges for sabotage (Nikitina 1998: 148, 153). In 1930, Stalin acknowledged that mistakes had been made and apparently slowed the process down, but only apparently. While most peasants left the kolkhozes (from 86% to 14.3%, Nikitina

1998: 148, 153), the countryside was depleted of its most active members – not only rich peasants, but also members of the rural middle class were chased and had to leave their homes (around 60% of the families – Vikharev 1962: 158). The consequences were devastating, similar to Gerd's storm...

As seen above, Gerd was involved in the SOFIN trial. At the beginning, before his arrest, the poet was interrogated in Nizhnii Novgorod and forced to write confessions (Kuznetsov 1994: 43-44). He was finally arrested on 1932, May 13th and kept in isolation for one year and seven months (Gerd 1998: 34).

Kulikov argues that Gerd had been subject to 'frightful tortures' in Nizhnii Novgorod (Kulikov 1997: 173; Verner 1998: 227). The accusations against Gerd were mainly ideological. He was accused of being nationalist, anti-Russian, anti-Soviet and to have sympathies for foreign countries. The main weapon used against him was nevertheless literary criticism. His writings were screened finely, and Gerd's enemies found ideological shortcomings. Gerd's early poems were interpreted as individualistic and denying the people's agency. Some sentences were interpreted as supposedly denying class struggle, or as

sympathising with the rich. Any expression of perplexity, of trouble, of doubt was interpreted as a political message.

Other accusations were aimed at Gerd's intentions, i.e. at what he supposedly intended to do.

Thus, Gerd and other people arrested with him were charged and accused of participating in a counterrevolutionary organisation, which spied for Finland and Estonia and whose final aim was to establish a Finnish protectorate over Russia's Finno-Ugric regions. The SOFIN trial was the first time this stereotyped accusation was issued. With some slight variations, it would become a usual pattern in the following fifteen years, and especially in the years 1935-1938. The expression counterrevolutionary had become so widespread, that it appeared in period documents under the abbreviation 'k/r.'

The main individuals accused were Gerd and Burdiukov, the latter confessed throwing bombs into the River Vala and planning to destroy railways (Kulikov 1997: 218). Rumours say that Gerd's death penalty was changed into a term in the fearful camp of Solovki thanks to Gor'kii (Kuznetsov 1994: 67; Gerd 1998: 35): the Russian writer, at that time the main authority in Soviet literature, knew the

Udmurt poet. Gerd was probably sent to the Solovki islands camp in October 1934: the Solovki prison camp, called SLON², is today considered by some historians as 'the very first camp in the Gulag network'. It opened in 1923, and in 1936 held around 60,000 inmates (Bogomolova 1998: 108). It was closed in 1939: before it was closed, many of its inmates were executed. Other SOFIN trial victims were sent to the SLON, including Iakovlev and Burdiukov (Kuznetsov 1994: 72, 454).

Gerd's niece managed to investigate his last years in Solovki (Kuvshinova 1990: 3). She discovered that he worked with the famous poet, philosopher, religious thinker and scientist Pavel Florenskii (Zueva 1997: 298-99). Gerd allegedly continued to write, both in Udmurt and in Russian (Fedorov 1998: 132). For many years, Gerd's fate was unknown. Some believed he died in 1941 – even in 1988, Foma Kuz'mich Ermakov, the best specialist of Gerd in Udmurtia, wrote this in his book on the poet. Only Nikolai Kuznetsov's book in 1994 provided the evidence that he was shot on November 1st 1937 in Sandarmokh, a

mass burial place found in 1997, where more than 400 prisoners had been killed in one night (Loriia 1998: 152).

The Consequences

The consequences of the tragic policies against Udmurt writers, many of whom were victims of repression, were heavy for Udmurt culture.

After World War II, the victims of the repressions in the thirties ceased to exist, as if they had never existed. Their names were deleted, thus making Udmurt literature particularly poor, without the works of repressed writers, such as Gerd, Ashal'chi Oki, Kedra Mitrei, Mikhail Konovalov, Grigorij Medvedev (Kralina 1990: 15). Only after Stalin's death did the victims gradually start to be rehabilitated. In 1956, a court decided that the organisation SOFIN did not exist, and that the affair was fabricated (Kuznetsov 1994: 20-30). Of thirty convicted individuals, twenty-seven were fully acquitted. The others would have to wait two more years (Turkin 1996: 46). Gerd was rehabilitated as a citizen, but still ignored as a poet – the Party's leadership was against it. His full rehabilitation would eventually require the efforts of dedicated scholars, such as Foma Ermakov and others.

² Solovetskii lager' osobogo naznacheniia [Solovki Special Purpose Prison Camp].

Within the Party, only Mikhail Kireev's stubbornness made it possible to obtain it. Kireev was a Russian KGB colonel and thus, Gerd was one of the last of the Udmurt intellectuals to be rehabilitated. However, it was not until the 1990s that Gerd's importance was recognised. As the author of the *Essays* [Ocherki], the history of Udmurt literature published in 1957, Kralina acknowledged: 'I discovered all the attractiveness of Gerd's poetry ... But I had to keep this discovery to myself. His name was still under the strictest taboo: it was prohibited to quote him, even to mention him. Even a short chapter dedicated to him was expunged. I had to take out the texts I planned for the *Ocherki*, and destroy them' (Kralina 1990:17).

As far as language is concerned, Udmurt was not prohibited and continued to be taught and used in social and cultural life. Endangerment started later, in the Khrushchev era. In Stalinist times, linguists who attempted to create Udmurt words based on Udmurt stems were accused of being nationalists (see Edygárova 2022). Russian had to be the basis of every neologism, as imitating or transposing words from Russian was considered then the only proper way to create them, a way that guaranteed

'people's friendship' and could salvage the leading role of the Russian language, which could enrich the 'backward Udmurt language' (Perevoshchikov 1952: 9). The main period in which flows of Russian words invaded Udmurt was in the 1950s, however the trend continued until the 1970s: "Russian has become to the Udmurt not only a means of interethnic communication, it also functions within their community. It is an endless treasure, the source of lexical development, of phraseology and rich language. Perfect mastering of Russian is for the Udmurt people an internationalist duty and a patriotic obligation' (Ponomarev 1976: 12).

There were also other consequences, less easy to identify. Firstly, Udmurt intellectuals had no possibility whatsoever to express themselves freely. They even had to denounce their companions. The collective experience of state repression shaped a new behaviour model for those who wanted to stay alive and continue a literary career. This model remained active for decades.

Moreover, everyone lived in a state of generalised fear. The Udmurt people learned that their language and culture was dangerous, suspect, and that its promotion could lead to state

repression. Everything the Udmurt had conquered with the Revolution was called into question. Thus, the work for Udmurt values, Udmurt culture, Udmurt language was postponed.

Today, young Udmurts are no longer afraid to defend their culture. But for how long?

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