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Secret Police and Practices of Social Control: Constructing the Case Against Non-Conformist Youth (Leningrad, 1964–1965)

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Abstract

This article traces back the practices of social control over renegade youth and the strategies of the control's legitimization based on the case study of Joseph Brodsky's affair (1964) in Leningrad. Brodsky was prosecuted as a part of a non-conformist youth milieu; his case can be interpreted as an attempt to manage, identify, and destroy the milieus of non-conformist young people. Secret police, which will be viewed as a primary agent of social control, used several strategies to destroy such undesirable youth milieus. Though formally he was accused as a social parasite, the investigators wrote their own version of Brodsky's biography in the file, considering his past and his private networks.

Keywords

Social control – Soviet Union – youth – non-conformism – secret police – Joseph Brodsky

Introduction

One of the most researched and discussed issues of unfreedom under state socialism are the restrictions of freedom of speech, conscience, religion and expression. However, there have also been other, subtler aspects of unfreedom, such as social control. This paper will scrutinize mechanisms that constituted Soviet version of social control and repression over youth, using the case of Joseph Brodsky's persecution in Leningrad as an example. Back in the early 1960s, Brodsky was a young poet, well-known in the milieu of educated youngsters of Leningrad for his poetry. In 1964, Brodsky was sentenced to a five-year exile from Leningrad to a remote village in the north-western part of Russia on the grounds of eluding "socially useful labour". Brodsky's case had been revised, due to pressure on high rank officials in Moscow by Soviet and foreign cultural figures, in 1965. After spending 18 months of exile in the Arctic, Brodsky returned to Leningrad. In 1972 he was forced to emigrate to Austria and he received a Nobel Prize in literature in 1987.

This article seeks, firstly, to address practices of social control at the end of Khrushchev's rule with the focus on the secret police as an agent of social control and secondly, it will examine the strategies of legitimation of social control. Instead of understanding the work of secret police as the embodiment of the repressive nature of the Soviet governance (even though they were that too), it might be beneficial to look at the secret police through the lens of social control and management of the youth. This will allow us to see the collaboration of various agents pursuing social control and so ask what were the stages, the strategies of legitimation, the concepts, and the practices that underpinned social control?

The term "social control" has become "something of a Mickey Mouse concept"¹, which acquired different meanings depending on a discipline and historical context of studies. Following the approach of anthropologist Stanley Cohen, I define social control as organized responses to various types of socially problematic behaviour, such as delinquency, which is deemed as such to prevent the act or after the act has taken place.² The agents of social control are those who decide that certain youth practices constitute "moral danger" or "political danger". Social control activates the normative aspects of social life. It defines deviant behaviours and responds to it by enacting control over such behaviour.³ The agents of social control are primary definers of "deviance" in the discourse on youth.⁴ This lens enables us to follow and dissect the stages and practices of social control, which will give another glimpse into the Soviet 1960s.

The article will scrutinise the practices of social control towards youth milieu and renegade young people. I use the words "renegade" and "non-conformist" as synonyms. "Renegade" has connotations that can be useful in the understanding of the Leningrad

1 Cohen, S.: *Visions of Social Control*, p. 2.

2 Ibid. p. 2

3 Innes, M.: *Understanding*, p. 3.

4 Cohen, S.: *Folk Devils*.

youth milieus: it points at someone who rejects conventional norms of behaviour as well as someone who eludes control.

Recent studies have reconsidered the transition from Stalinism to Khrushchevism, previously understood as a simplistic dichotomy of repression and reform. Certainly, some changes regarding repression and control occurred after Stalin's death, but how fundamental were they? J. Fürst argues that Khrushchev revived and re-launched many Stalinist ideas regarding youth policies. Her findings suggest that Khrushchev's youth policy can hardly be called a new phenomenon. The changes introduced after 1956 were more a question of quantity than quality.⁵ J. Fürst argues that there were several differences in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. For example, negative phenomena such as undesirable youth behaviors were named and widely publicized, whereas under Stalinism this topic was surrounded by silence, although the situation began to change just before Stalin's death.⁶ The new strategy of the Khrushchev era was to deal with the problem head-on, focusing more on prevention than direct repression.⁷ Punishment strategies also changed. Khrushchev-era agents of social control used public humiliation, propaganda, re-educational measures, physical force to impose conformity and punish various manifestations of non-conformism instead of direct repression.⁸ The various facets of youth nonconformism were outlined and addressed more loudly than before.

This article confirms the above conclusions and shows that some aspects did not change significantly after Stalin's death: one similarity can be seen in the idea of "political face" and its role in the persecution. The Brodsky trial was an integral part of the Khrushchev era, given the labels used to criminalise Brodsky and the public nature of the trial. The trial could not have taken this form under Stalinism. However, the way in which Brodsky's guilt was decided shows that Stalinist practices of constructing a crime were not abolished but preserved. Recent scholarship has tended to understand Khrushchev's rule as the period of more complex forms of policing and horizontal control comparing to Stalinism.⁹ The youth policies of the first years of Khrushchev's rule can be understood as the "trial and error" period, especially 1956–1957 when many youth groups were put into prison under the charges of "anti-Soviet underground organisation".¹⁰ In the early 1960s, the government adopted more sophisticated approach towards surveillance and crime prevention, as R. Hornsby indicates, new methods of social control and managing the masses started to take shape.¹¹ Grassroots initiatives and encouragements of extra-legal vigilantism created an arbitrary situation when the notions of illegality and crime intruded on the realms of entertainment and personal choice. As J. Fürst suggests, more types of delinquent acts were classified as hooliganism, therefore, various manifestations of non-conformism have

5 Fürst, J.: *The arrival of spring*, pp. 149–167.

6 Fürst, J.: *The arrival of spring*.

7 Hornsby, R.: *Protest*.

8 Fürst, J.: *The arrival of spring*.

9 Kharkhordin, O.: *The Collective*; Hornsby, R.: *Protest*; LaPierre, B.: *Hooligans*.

10 Hornsby, R.: *Protest*, p. 197.

11 *Ibid.*

been prosecuted using extra-legal measures.¹² The strive for conformity persisted, and the widened sphere of illegality and broadened legal categories such as “hooligan” or “idler” led to witch-hunting of those perceived as non-conformant in their appearance, lifestyle, and individual choices. In the post-Stalin years, youth policy was much more intrusive in the everyday lives of young people, imposing strict standards in dress, leisure time, hobbies, social interactions, consumption.

The significance of the Brodsky affair cannot be overestimated, as it crystallised new methods of social control over the non-conformist youth, marked further restrictions and repression in the cultural sphere.¹³ Moreover, the persecution of Brodsky gained international significance.¹⁴ Frida Vigdorova’s¹⁵ transcripts of Brodsky’s trial shaped a principle that would later be used by dissidents – a principle of documenting trials, what parties said in court, witnesses’ evidence.¹⁶ M. Dobson rightly pointed out that instead of basing a criminal conviction on an unlawful act, the judges there based their verdict on perceptions of Brodsky’s personality. The trial of Brodsky once again demonstrated that the process of reforming the Soviet legal system and preventing Stalinist-style state terror after 1953 had been reversed and the government’s commitment to legality undermined.¹⁷

Khrushchev used law to fight against youth misbehaviour and in 1956–1957 introduced new legislation against hooliganism and social parasitism. Both laws resulted in criminalization of millions, instead of pacifying the streets.¹⁸ Anti-parasite legislation was used against renegade youth,¹⁹ and Joseph Brodsky became one of such victims. It was an important precedent of the legal categories being a catch-all label. According to R. Hornsby, the authorities often opted for alternative charges for political cases to avoid awkward political trials and kept to a minimum the statistics on “anti-Soviet” elements.²⁰ I see the Brodsky affair as one of the attempts of the agents of control to influence and to suppress developing non-conformist milieus in Leningrad and as such is a telling case as it sheds light on the control strategies, as well as the characteristics of the milieus that the control culture considered “dangerous”.

The Brodsky affair and its secret police file constitute the backbone of this analysis. It serves as an illustration of the practices of social control and allows for the tracing of

12 Fürst, J.: *Stalin’s Last Generation*, p. 198.

13 Polly Jones argues that the Soviet cultural policies can be understood as “pendulum shifts”, when short periods of “liberalization” were followed by „freezes“. The shrinking of boundaries on allowed artistic expressions was signaled by the Manege affair (1962) when Khrushchev visited the exhibition of abstractionist paintings: it marked a reversal in cultural policy and crackdown of non-socialist-realism, non-conformist art. Jones, P.: *The Dilemmas*, p.12. More about Manege affair read in Reid, S.: *In the name of the people*, pp. 673–716.

14 Hornsby, R.: *Protest*, p. 277.

15 Frida Vigdorova (1915–1965) was a teacher and a journalist from Moscow. She took the minutes of Brodsky’s trial; her notes, compiled without censorship, circulated in Samizdat.

16 Rosenblum, O.: *The defense practice*, pp. 95–110.

17 Dobson, M.: *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, pp. 215–236.

18 Fürst, J.: *Stalin’s Last Generation*, p. 197.

19 Fitzpatrick, S.: *Social Parasites*, pp. 377–408.

20 Hornsby, R.: *Protest*, p. 235.

the development of the case, as it was one of the most famous trials of non-conformist youth in the 1960s. The Brodsky affair and his secret police files are quite well-known among historians, and there were several publications about the case.²¹ E. Lygo considers Brodsky's affair as a part of "freezes" in culture in the last years of Khrushchev's rule, which led to further straining of the relationships between the authorities and "liberal" cultural figures.²² R. Reich analyses the encounters of Brodsky with Soviet psychiatry and she claims that those experiences influenced his later writings.²³ M. Dobson traced the development of Brodsky's case in the context of the late Khrushchev campaigns against literary parasites and hooligans.²⁴ J. Fürst addressed Joseph Brodsky as a part of "Stalin's last Generation", which actively challenged state's visions on Soviet youth. R. Hornsby puts the Brodsky's affair in the context of Thaw-era repressions and protest.²⁵

However, this article offers a different interpretation of the case. The available historical source – Brodsky's secret police file – offers a glimpse at the practices and concepts that underpinned social control mechanisms in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, as well as the variety of agents and institutions of social control. The further analysis will show that the KGB was the primary agent in the prosecution of Brodsky, while other agents of social control, such as journalists, Komsomol patrol and members of the Writers' Union, played an auxiliary role. I will use sources of different origins that provide distinct perspectives on the persecution of Brodsky and I will use his secret police file, newspaper publications, and retrospective personal accounts to take apart the practices of prosecution and control over non-conformist youth.

Sources and analysis

Brodsky's affair is a rare example of the prosecution that can be reconstructed from different angles and various historical sources, including a secret police file,²⁶ multiple newspaper publications, memoirs and interviews, sources of the Writers' Union in Leningrad. The combination of historical sources of various origins helps to see a more complicated, more dialogical, and multi-agent representation of history. If the state-produced sources that were generated at the time, reflect the power structures of the context when they were created, the retrospective personal accounts challenge these power

21 Dobson, M.: *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*; Etkind, E.: *Prozess Iosifa Brodskogo*; Yakimchuk, N.: *Kak Sudili Poeta*; Hornsby, R.: *Protest*; Reich, R.: *State of Madness*; Boym, S.: *Estrangement as a Lifestyle*, pp. 241–62. Bethea, D. M.: *Joseph Brodsky*; Lygo, E.: *Leningrad Poetry*; Yurchak, A.: *Everything Was Forever*; Rosenblum, O.: *The defense practice*, pp. 95–110.

22 Lygo, E.: *The need for new voices*, pp. 207–222.

23 Reich, R.: *Madness as Balancing*, pp. 45–65.

24 Dobson, M.: *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, pp. 215–236.

25 Hornsby, R.: *Protest*.

26 Gosudarstvenny Archiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF). Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 99616. Gosudarstvenny Archiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF). Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 99617.

structures and provide alternative narratives. They shed light on practices, actions, possibilities and limitations of the historical subjects in the 1960s.

The secret police files give a glimpse of the values, perceptions, fantasies of the KGB, how it dealt with and understood such concepts as interrogation, evidence, crime, criminality.²⁷ Secret police files show the areas where the state felt most vulnerable.²⁸ Seen from the perspective of the secret police, some youth milieus were dangerous and politically subversive forms of youthful pastime and could be easily re-interpreted as criminal, conspiratorial groupings. K. Verdery argues that one of the pivotal tasks of the secret police was to re-forged and re-make private networks in such a way that they were directly connected to the state authorities, especially Communist Party.²⁹ I am going to analyse sources generated by agents of social control from this perspective, with the main focus on secret police files but also applying this perspective to a broader spectre of agents of social control. The analysis will show that the work of different agents of control, not only the secret police, included transformation and destruction of social networks and bonds between people and imposing “desirable” ones.

Brodsky’s secret police file, on which the following analysis is based, is located in the State Archives of the Russian Federation in Moscow in the section of Oversight documents from the prosecutor’s office of the USSR (Nadzornye Proizvodstva Prokuratury SSSR). The file contains procedural materials (copies) such as sentences, decisions, rulings, correspondence concerning their enforcement, statements by relatives and public figures who supported Brodsky, court files, and medical examination reports.

The supervisory proceedings, according to historian T. Edelman³⁰, had been set up in Moscow before the trial, in March 1964. In October 1964 the case was reopened by the monitoring bodies in Moscow. A special commission was set up, consisting of three high-level officials from Moscow.³¹ Edelman believes that the case was reopened in order to put pressure on the Leningrad party leadership. At the same time, Khrushchev was ousted as First Secretary of the Party as a result of a plot by Brezhnev and his colleagues. Mironov, head of the administrative department of the Party Central Committee, was one of the main participants in the conspiracy against Khrushchev. Moreover, he initiated a review of Brodsky’s case by officials at the Union level and sent a memo to Rudenko, the Prosecutor General of the USSR.³² A few weeks later, Mironov died in a plane crash.

27 Vatulescu, C.: *Police Aesthetics*, p. 13.

28 Glajar, V., Lewis, A. and Petrescu, C. L.: *Secret Police Files*, p. 4.

29 Verdery, K.: *Secrets and Truths*.

30 Edelman, O.: *Protsess Iosifa Brodskogo*, pp. 152–167.

31 Edelman, O.: *Protsess Iosifa Brodskogo*, pp. 152–67.

The commission included Sedov, Deputy Head of the Department for Supervision of Investigations in the State Security Bodies of the USSR Prosecutor’s Office; Bylinkina, Senior Consultant of the USSR Supreme Court; and Ivashchenko, Deputy Head of the Investigative Department of the KGB under the USSR Council of Ministers.

32 Edelman, O.: *Protsess Iosifa Brodskogo*, pp. 152–67.

Importantly, it was strange that a local administrative case of social parasitism was reviewed involving such high-profile figures as Mironov and Rudenko.³³ The commission from Moscow arrived in Leningrad and conducted interviews with everyone involved in the case in November 1964. The working materials - extracts, references, notes - were preserved in the case file. The file was comprised in such a way as to demonstrate the contradictions and inconsistencies of the case, thereby discrediting the prosecution and the agents of control in Leningrad.

Activating the mechanisms of social control: identification and labelling

In 1963, Joseph Brodsky was 23 years old when a local Leningrad newspaper published a paper titled “A Quasi-Literary Drone” (“Okololiterurny truten”)³⁴ and activated the mechanisms of social control. It became a driving force of the process in which activities and biographies of Brodsky’s friends and acquaintances have been used to build a case against Brodsky. The paper had three signatures, one of which belonged to Yakov Lerner, a leader of a voluntary patrol guard. The publication had many factual mistakes that were not acknowledged during investigation and trial. The paper claimed that Brodsky’s participation in youth milieus contributed to his “misdeeds”. The newspaper publication incriminated the following wrongdoings to Brodsky: writing of decadent, pessimistic poetry, attempted treason, and social parasitism. The publication represented Brodsky as a poet with a “flawed mentality” who rejects the Soviet norms and lifestyle; as the consequence of his worldview, the publication claimed, he had plans of treason.

The authors use biographies and lifestyles of Brodsky’s allegedly private networks to illustrate his personality traits. Brodsky was defined through his participation in non-conformist milieus and lifestyles of their members. How did “Quasi-Literary Drone” describe his social networks? “*Who among Brodsky’s entourage supported him with their enthusiastic “ahs” and “oohs”? Mariama Volnianskaia, born in 1944, who left her mother alone for a bohemian life. Nezhdanova, a friend of Volnianskaia’s, a preacher of yoga and other mystics; Vladimir Schweigoltz, whose face could be repeatedly seen on satirical posters produced by the patrols; Anatoly Geikhman, a criminal; the layabout Yefim Slavinsky. This group not only lavishes praise on Brodsky, but also tries to pass on examples of his work to young people.*”³⁵ Non-conformist behaviour of those youngsters, allegedly members of Brodsky’s social circle, their lifestyle, and the fact that they did not work at typical Soviet jobs were factors aggravating Brodsky’s guilt in the eyes of the agents of social control. Later, at the court hearings, Brodsky claimed that he did not know the people that were mentioned in the

33 Ibid.

34 Okololiterurny truten’. In: Etkind, E.: *Prozess Iosifa Brodskogo*, p. 16–23.

35 Etkind, E.: *Prozess Iosifa Brodskogo*, p. 19.

article.³⁶ The “pornographic” poetry quoted in the article did not belong to Brodsky.³⁷ Nevertheless, the article played an important role in the development of the case and further prosecution. The article activated the mechanisms of social control by depicting Brodsky and his social circle as non-conformist individuals. The representations of Brodsky and his milieu as “social parasites” was a strategy legitimising the prosecution, which the KGB used later. The social control over youth was executed by multiple agents: it was not only the task of the secret police or journalists.

“Quasi-Literary Drone” utilises the history of another youth milieu in building its accusations against Brodsky. The milieu was formed by Alexander Umansky, who would later play a notorious role in the development of Brodsky’s affair: two acquaintances of Brodsky were prosecuted for “anti-Soviet activities” in 1962 and were imprisoned for five years each – A. Umansky and O. Shakhmatov. The fact that Brodsky used to spend time with them, played an important role in the further development of his case.

Therefore, the development of the Brodsky affair is impossible to understand without considering the events before Brodsky’s persecution, especially the so-called Umansky-Shakhmatov affair. Retrospective accounts describe the milieu of Umansky and Shakhmatov as non-conformist young adults with wide intellectual interests. The milieu was interested mostly in reading and discussing books, “*Oleg Shakhmatov, a former military pilot, an able musician and a man with an adventurous streak, was six years older than Joseph.*”³⁸ Lev Losev, a close friend of Brodsky, testifies that the two met by chance in 1957 at the Leningrad youth newspaper *Smena*, where both had come to present their poems. Shakhmatov introduced Brodsky to Alexander Umansky. His interests, as for many educated young people at the time, came from books. Umansky was interested in physics, music, philosophy, oriental mysticism, and western occultism.³⁹ Fascinated by his library and his broad interests, the youngsters formed a milieu around Umansky. They often met in Umansky’s flat to spend their free time. According to the recollections of Brodsky’s friend Lev Losev, “*Umansky had considerable charisma and there was always a circle of young people around him, including those who wanted to discuss “eternal issues” outside the narrow confines of official ideology, artists and musicians of a non-conformist persuasion.*”⁴⁰ Losev wrote that these young people were students or did odd jobs, but their main *raison d’être* was to collect hard-to-find books on Eastern philosophy and esoteric knowledge and to talk about books they were reading. This milieu did not yet indulge in drugs, but they did drink and, when drunk, often played daring tricks.

In one of his interviews, Brodsky testifies that in 1958 Shakhmatov was sentenced to one year of imprisonment.⁴¹ After his release, he showed up in Samarkand and invited

36 Burford, R.: *Getting*, pp. 465–508.

37 Gosudarstvennyy Archiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF). Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 99617. p. 234.

38 Losev, L.: *Iosif Brodsky*, p. 57.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Electronnyy arhiv Fonda Iofe. F.6, op.1, d.3. 120-2. Arhivnaya spravka na Shakhmatova O.I. <https://arch2.iofe.center/person/42507>, cited 06. 10. 2021.

Brodsky for a visit. The two were extremely unhappy there: no roof over their heads, no money. They came up with the idea to hijack a plane and escape to Afghanistan but soon changed their minds.⁴² Later this idea was qualified as a “plan for treason”. In one of his later interviews Brodsky claimed, “*motherland or no motherland - there were no such categories, of course.*”⁴³

A year later Shakhmatov was caught with a revolver in Krasnoyarsk. During his interrogations, Shakhmatov pointed at the Umansky’s milieu as an “anti-Soviet” group. His testimony marked the beginning of Umansky’s case. As Brodsky later recalled, during the interrogation Shakhmatov told the State Security official about Umansky’s entourage, named everyone he knew and hinted that they were “big enemies of the Soviet government.” After Shakhmatov’s interrogation, twenty participants were summoned as witnesses, including Brodsky. Later his status was changed, he was deemed a suspect and detained. However, after the interrogation of twenty people, the only evidence against him was Shakhmatov’s own words, which meant that Brodsky was to let go. As a result of interrogations, the criminal case was opened only against Umansky because several individuals evidenced against him, Shakhmatov, Umansky’s wife, and her lover.⁴⁴ Brodsky’s file suggests that 38 people were questioned by the KGB in different cities, from Krasnoyarsk to Tashkent and Tallinn.⁴⁵ Only Umansky was convicted for five years for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda”, as the alleged leader.

The secret police used the interrogation of Shakhmatov to open a criminal investigation against the Umansky’s milieu. The secret police reinterpreted practices and interests of the milieu as anti-Soviet secret gatherings. Brodsky’s secret police file contains several descriptions of the milieu, for example: “*He (Brodsky) met a man called Umansky, born in 1933, and Shakhmatov, born in 1933. When questioned, Shakhmatov testified that he had lived in Leningrad for a long time, where he had met Umansky and Brodsky. His acquaintance and further meetings took place at the flat of Umansky, where the latter organised gatherings of young people, cultivated the participants of the gatherings in an anti-Soviet spirit, arranged collective listening of foreign anti-Soviet broadcasts, and read out loud his “philosophical” anti-Soviet manuscripts.*”⁴⁶ The document narrated that in January 1961, Shakhmatov, while in Samarkand, summoned Brodsky for a visit. Brodsky brought with him an allegedly anti-Soviet manuscript by Umansky, the contents of which he and Shakhmatov introduced to an American tourist. In possession of these materials, in January 1962, Umansky, Brodsky and some of their associates were arrested by the KGB. The document continued, “*As Brodsky voluntarily renounced his criminal intentions, he was released from custody. He stated that by his further behaviour he would not give rise to similar calls to the KGB bodies.*”⁴⁷ The KGB reinterpreted the practices and the purpose of the milieu, made it seem more like

42 Losev L.: *Iosif Brodsky*, pp. 58–59.

43 Volkov, S.: *Dialogi*, p. 67.

44 Ibid, p. 68.

45 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Shakhmatov Oleg Ivanovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 92695, p. 4.

46 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 99616, p. 37.

47 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 99616, p. 37.

a tight “anti-Soviet” group rather than a loose milieu of young people who were interested in literature and intellectual discussions. The existence of a manuscript that was written by Umansky was the most powerful weapon in the argumentation of the secret police. These prosecutions resulted in the elimination of the milieu as their leader was imprisoned and many others were subjected to “prophylactic chats” with the KGB.

Prophylactic chats

One of the preventive measures towards the renegade youth was the so-called “chats” with the KGB officers, which was also a strategy to break down undesirable private networks. During the “chat” KGB officers usually asked to stop any communication with certain people.⁴⁸ After Umansky and Shakhmatov were sentenced to five years of imprisonment, multiple “prophylactic chats” and interrogations were conducted. During the “chat”, according to Brodsky’s KGB file, Joseph promised that he would never do anything that would cause problems with the KGB again.⁴⁹ In 1964, two years later, the investigating authorities argued that his lack of compliance to the conditions that were posed during the chat in 1962 and his lack of repentance, made him dangerous for the youth of Leningrad; on these grounds, the prosecutor asked for an exile as a punishment, “*Brodsky has been known to the Leningrad Oblast Department of the KGB under the USSR Council of Ministers since 1957. In 1957, he was invited for a talk with the Directorate because one of his poems had been published in the illegal literary collection Syntaksis, for the publication and distribution of which the Moscow resident Ginzburg was arrested and convicted. During this conversation, Brodsky behaved defiantly. He was warned that if he had not changed his behaviour, stricter measures would be taken against him.*”⁵⁰ Before the trial in 1964, Brodsky was detained by the police twice, in 1960 and 1962, the first time because his poetry was published in the Samizdat magazine *Syntaksis*, the second time because of the Umansky and Shakhmatov affair. Later Brodsky claimed that the prosecution in 1964 happened because his file in the KGB must have been immense.⁵¹

As the secret police file suggests, the purpose of a chat in 1962, which was the destruction of undesirable forms of sociability, was not accomplished. During the chat, Brodsky was advised to stop any communication with the milieu, which was deemed a “malicious” form of sociability, “*During the “chat”, Brodsky was acting insincerely and obnoxiously, he has not made any conclusions.*”⁵² The document reported that despite the warnings, Brodsky continued to communicate with “unrecognized poets and artists”, did

48 Kazhdaya posadka – brak v nashei rabote (2016) / OVD-Info.org, <https://ovdinfo.org/articles/2016/07/11/kazhdaya-posadka-brak-v-nashey-rabote>, cited 24. 4. 2021. More about prophylactic chats: Cohn, E.: *Coercion*, pp. 272–293.

49 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, Op. 31, d. 99616, p. 37.

50 Ibid.

51 Volkov, S.: *Dialogi*, p. 68.

52 Electronny arhiv Fonda Iofe. F. Б-2, op.1. Delo Brodsky Iosif Alexandrovich, p. 62. <http://arch.iofe.center/showObject/388300519> //, cited 24. 4. 2021.

not stop writing “his inferior and decadent poetry”, which circulated among young people in Moscow and Leningrad. The document continues that Brodsky organized several literary evenings and read his poetry in public, “*During these events, he tried to counterpoise himself as a poet to our Soviet reality.*”⁵³ These considerations were used as a pretext to initiate a new round of persecutions. This excerpt shows that the “chat”, from the point of view of the KGB, did not accomplish its goal, moreover, it failed to isolate Brodsky from the milieu of renegade youth; he continued to influence those milieu.

Defining the “political face”

The continuity, rather than a break with Stalinist politics, is indicated by many aspects of the Brodsky’s trial, especially the idea of a “political face”. Igal Halfin in his analysis of the Great Purge (1935–1938)⁵⁴ argues that by the mid-1930s moral motivations irreducible to objective facts were assumed to govern political behaviour. Guilt was thus relocated from the body of the accused to their mind, the presumed intentions of the accused were criminalized. Therefore, according to Halfin, the Communist ethics and utopian ideas of a classless society and human moral perfectibility had unintended consequences of systematic persecution and mass violence. The analysis below will show that some aspects of the Stalinist legacy remained during Khrushchev-era prosecutions.

“*Such is the unsightly face of this man who, it turns out, not only does write poetry, interspersing his gibberish with whining, pessimism and pornography, but he also hatches plans of betrayal*”⁵⁵, the publication that marked the start of the affair, “Quasi-literary drone”, used one of the important concepts of the social control, “political face”. This concept was used to characterize a person using their biography, social networks, lifestyle. This concept served as a complex way of presenting a person as having “hostile” intentions and having a “detrimental influence” on other young people. The concept of “political face” played an important role in the legitimation of social control and persecutions of young people. It encompassed the intruding intentions of the agents of social control.

One of the agents who applied the idea of “political face” extensively were the members of the Writers’ Union. Apart from journalists and the KGB, another important agent of social control was the Writers’ Union because Brodsky wrote poetry and translated poetry from Polish and Serbian. The Writers’ Union held several meetings devoted to the Brodsky affair. Yakov Lerner, one of the masterminds of “Quasi-Literary Drone” and a vigilante, and Voevodin, a member of the Writers’ Union, organized one of the closed meetings at the Writers’ Union.⁵⁶ The Writers’ Union claimed that it had nothing to do with Brodsky since he did not participate in any literary circles for the youth organised by the Union: “*Brodsky is not known in the Writers’ Union because he is not a professional*

53 Electronny arhiv Fonda Iofe. F. Б-2, op.1. Delo Brodsky Iosif Alexandrovich, p. 62. <http://arch.iofe.center/showObject/388300519//>, cited 24. 4. 2021.

54 Halfin, I.: *Terror in my soul*.

55 Etkind, E.: *Prozess Iosifa Brodskogo*, pp. 21–22.

56 Burford, R.: *Getting*, p. 467.

writer and has no published works. The Writers' Union also does not know Brodsky because for many years he has studiously avoided meetings with writers, poets, knowing exactly what would be said about his poetry exercises."⁵⁷ Writers' Union defied any responsibility for Brodsky's behaviour: Soviet institutions could be deemed responsible for the youth misbehaviours because they were supposed to provide guidance and education for them. Thus, the Writers' Union can be considered an agent of social control over the youth. Grudinina, the head of a state-sponsored literary union for young poets (LITO)⁵⁸, was one of the three members of the Writers' Union who supported Brodsky. She received reprimands at the Writers' Union's meeting.

What did the "political face" mean? During the meetings of the Writers' Union, one of the participants revealed the meaning of the phrase "political face" in the following manner: "*He (Brodsky) acted indecently, he simulated a (mental) illness, he was in a psychiatric hospital, he was exempted from military service as the main breadwinner in his family – but he was not the breadwinner. You (Grudinina) have got it wrong, you did not know his everyday life behaviour, his political face, you tried to protect him. You yourself said that you did not know his soul. You had no right to talk about him only as a translator.*"⁵⁹ The idea of "political face" was all-encompassing: not only the current misdeed or a crime was important – the whole biography, worldview, thoughts, intentions, and lifestyle of the subject was. To find out the "true political face", one had to know the person's biography, past wrongdoings, their private networks and "political faces" of those involved in the networks, to have evidence about their private conversations and even their thoughts. That is why the diaries, poetry, and various writings were important pieces of evidence. To show the "political face" of Brodsky, the investigators considered excerpts from Brodsky's diary from 1956, the diary of his acquaintance, and excerpts from Umansky's manuscript. Surveillance was another strategy to reveal one's "true political face": even overheard statements could play an important role in persecution.

The concept of political face included political convictions of a person, which were not supposed to be obvious. The agents of social control had to reveal it and see the "true" political face, "*from all the speeches bit by bit we reconstructed the political convictions of this person. Did you not think, comrades-witnesses who supported him, that his work in translation was a disguise behind which he hid his true political face?*"⁶⁰

The lifestyle, interests, social networks and the biography of Brodsky were used by the secret police to legitimise the prosecution. Documents from Brodsky's secret police file reported his biography in different ways to show that he deserved to be prosecuted. One of such documents narrated Brodsky's biography, claiming he was a "social parasite": "*In 1956, Brodsky dropped out of school. Unemployed, he changed jobs frequently and*

57 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, Op. 31, d. 99616, p. 5.

58 Literary clubs, or 'literaturnoye ob'yedinenie' (LITO), were seminars for young poets and writers. Their main goal was tutoring. They were run by respected literary figures, often members of the Writers' Union. More about LITO: Lygo, E.: *Leningrad Poetry*.

59 TsGALI. St.Petersburg. Minutes and Transcripts of Writers' Union Secretariat Meetings 1964. F. 371, op.1, d.477, p. 119.

60 TsGALI, p. 122.

stayed away for long periods of time. From 1956 onwards, he had 14 different jobs and in the past four and a half years he had only worked for nine months.”⁶¹ The document continues that during that period Brodsky actively wrote “mystical, decadent and often ideologically harmful” poems, and distributed them among his entourage. The document also tried to grasp Brodsky’s self-understanding and claimed that he thought of himself as an exceptional figure and was interested in various philosophical movements such as Buddhism and Confucianism.⁶² One of the documents in Brodsky’s file narrated that after becoming interested in the doctrine of the modern Indian yogi, Brodsky met Umansky and Shakhmatov, who were arrested by the KGB and convicted for anti-Soviet activities in January 1962. The document characterizes Umansky as a leader of a youth group, who allegedly brainwashed others in anti-Soviet spirit and organized listenings of foreign radio broadcasts. The document continued that after Umansky and Shakhmatov had been imprisoned, Brodsky came in close contact with young people involved in publication of an illegal magazine Phoenix; those young people were arrested as well. Moreover, the document addressed Brodsky as an “idol of underground literature”.⁶³

The letter of the Writers’ Union contributes to the accusations and establishes a logical link between poetry readings and the illicit exchange of poetry to an anti-Soviet and anti-state deed, making it a matter of secret police investigation. It also shows that the agents of social control were in hierarchical relationships with one another. In the case of Brodsky, the leading agent was the secret police since it had more power in controlling the narrative and constructing the criminal case. However, after the case was revised by Soviet Procuracy, the secret police lost its leading power in defining the narrative.

Various institutions could be deemed responsible for youngsters’ misdeeds, which goes in line with the understanding of the Soviet Union as a parent-state.⁶⁴ The newspapers often blamed adults and educational institutions for various misbehaviours and bad morals of youngsters, for failing in preventing crimes. It was considered the task of parents, adults and institutions to re-educate a youngster; if these attempts were not successful, a youngster was supposed to be ripped out of the society like an undesirable plant that was suspected to “grow” and “infect” others.

Breaking down private networks

The Writers’ Union condemned Brodsky as an “anti-social” person who had a pernicious influence on the youth: “*The state prosecutor in Leningrad proposed to exile Brodsky from Leningrad on the grounds of anti-social activities, the pernicious influence of his so-called “art” on young people and the fact that educating attempts did not have any positive influence.*”⁶⁵ They

61 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, Op. 31, d. 99616, p. 37.

62 Remarks in the file: “he did not”.

63 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, Op. 31, d. 99616, p. 37.

64 Verdery, K.: *What was socialism*.

65 GARF. Moskva. Nadzornoe proizvodstvo. Brodsky Iosif Aleskandrovich. F. 8131, op. 31, d. 99616, p. 4.

also condemned his poetry as praising solitude and having mystical ideas, spreading pessimism, disbelief and anti-national attitudes that could distract some young people from “*the active participation in the building of Communism*”.⁶⁶ In doing so, the Writers’ Union denied any responsibility for influencing Brodsky and argued that there was no contact with the poet.

The phrase “pernicious influence” had biological connotations. The agents of social control treated “bad” milieus and networks as cancer cells. To stop them from growing, the agents of control isolated the leader or leaders as the ones causing the bad milieus to grow. Secondly, they intended to eliminate the group by having “prophylactic chats” with the group’s members to prevent them from building and maintaining their social networks. Finally, they kept monitoring whether the milieu continued functioning.

Two court hearings were carried out on February 18th, 1964 and on March 3rd, 1964. During the trial, the prosecution justified the need to isolate Brodsky from society, arguing that he became famous in Moscow and Leningrad as an unrecognized poet. Young people, which the document labelled as “*theoreticians*”, “*subverters of truth*”, and “*home-made philosophers*”, were interested in his poetry. The prosecutor asked to expel the poet from Leningrad as a social parasite, on the grounds of his harmful influence on young people and his friendship with Umansky and Shakhmatov who allegedly had anti-Soviet views.⁶⁷ This excerpt from the prosecutor’s speech demonstrates that Brodsky was acknowledged as a part of non-conformist youth circles of Leningrad, as labels “*theoreticians*”, “*subverters of truth*”, and “*home-made philosophers*” suggest. His social networks were under investigators’ scrutiny. The agents of social control invented labels and reinterpreted the practices of young people as something malicious, threatening, and immoral. The categories of non-conformism and crime were blurred; non-conformism was represented as anti-Soviet views which could lead to treason. The excerpts show that not only the accusations in other-thinking and provocative poetry were important but also Brodsky’s influence and fame among some youth milieus. Since the influence among wide groups of youngsters was the most worrying aspect, the agents of social control legitimised their intrusion into these networks. The goal was to break such networks apart. The KGB engaged in reconstructions of the networks of Brodsky and their “anti-Soviet” character.

During the trial hearings, the prosecutor continued to create and impose labels on Brodsky’s milieu: “*Brodsky is defended by rogues, parasites, lice and insects. Brodsky is not a poet, but a person who tries to write his little verses. He has forgotten that in our country a person must work, create material wealth, be it machines, bread or poetry. Brodsky must be forced to work. He must be sent out of this hero-city. He is a parasite, a cad, a rogue, a morally filthy man. Brodsky’s admirers splatter saliva.*”⁶⁸

Brodsky was represented as one of the leaders of the renegade youth. He was a centre of attention and consequently was a “harmful influence on young people”. At the trial,

66 Ibid., p. 6.

67 Electronny arhiv Fonda Iofe. Brodsky Iosif Alexandrovich. F. Б-2, op. 1. <http://arch.iofe.center/showObject/388300519//>, cited 24. 4. 2021.

68 Burford, R: *Getting*, p. 490.

the public prosecutor used such words as “satanic” and “führer” regarding a friendship circle to which Brodsky belonged: *“He belonged to a kompaniia, which greeted the word “labour” with a satanic laugh and respectively listened to their “Führer” Umansky. Brodsky is similar to Umansky regarding his hatred of labour and Soviet literature. Their kompaniia uses several pornographic words and concepts. Brodsky called Shakhmatov Sir. Nothing less than that. Shakhmatov was convicted. This is the stinky place from which Brodsky has originated.”*⁶⁹ The sources that cover the Brodsky’s affair demonstrate that the agents of social control were inventive when it came to labelling: they addressed Brodsky, his acquaintances, and renegade youth in general using a wide variety of labels, including “home-made philosophers”, “quasi-literary drone”, “lice”, “insects”, and so on.

Two aspects came to the forefront during the trial, Brodsky’s evasion of “socially useful labour” and his “harmful influence” on youth, which alleged that Brodsky held anti-Soviet views. One is based on the evidence of Brodsky eluding “socially useful labour” and the fact that he changed workplaces often and, as the prosecutor claimed, did not earn enough money to make a living. The other one is based on his social connections, biography, personality, and thus defined his “political face”. Memorandum of the district police department in February 1964 emphasises the history of Brodsky’s employment and argues that he led a life of a “social parasite”. Thus, this file also depicts the process of negotiations, since various agents cooperated to write a more or less coherent narrative.

Appeal to the public

The prosecution was legitimised by appealing to the public. Right after Brodsky’s trial, a newspaper published a short note titled “The social parasite gets what he deserves.”⁷⁰ It described Brodsky as *“a young man who stopped studying, who is leading a parasitic lifestyle and scribbling formalistic verse.”*⁷¹ The article quotes multiple letters from the young people to the editor commenting on the previous article on Brodsky published in 1963 and initiated his prosecution: *“The groups of students asked their professor of history of the Communist Party to write the following: “It is a pity that there are still such people among us as Brodsky and his pitiful circle of twerps.”*⁷² Another letter suggested that *“While the wonderful Soviet youth conquers the space, selflessly working in the shop floors, in the Virgin Lands⁷³...there are still*

69 Etkind, E.: *Prozess Iosifa Brodskogo*, p. 163.

70 Tuneyadtsu vozdaetsya dolzhnoe. O Sude Nad Brodskim. (The idler gets what he deserves. The Trial of Brodsky.) Newspaper article. Leningrad, Newspaper Smena. 15.03.1964.

71 Tuneiadtsam Ne Mesto v Nashem Gorode. (The Idlers Are Not Welcomed in Our City). Newspaper article. Leningrad, Vechernii Leningrad. 08.01.1964.

72 Tuneiadtsam Ne Mesto v Nashem Gorode. (The Idlers Are Not Welcomed in Our City). Newspaper article. Leningrad, Vechernii Leningrad. 08.01.1964.

73 The Virgin Lands campaign was Nikita Khrushchev’s campaign to increase Soviet agricultural production and alleviate food shortages. The aim of the campaign was to open up steppe lands, mainly in northern Kazakhstan and Altai region, to grain cultivation. The campaign began in 1954, when more than 300,000 young men and women were recruited to work these lands. In the short term, the campaign increased

*some youngsters, who spend their time in idleness, being interested only in their persona.*⁷⁴ The letters which were cited in the publication supported the prosecutions of those whose lifestyle and outlook was not “Soviet”. Therefore, newspaper publications served as an instrument of marginalisation and at the same time as an instrument of legitimisation of persecution. Newspaper publications aimed to mobilise the public opinion and show the approval from a wider audience.

Conclusions

This article, using the Brodsky affair as an example, showed the mechanisms of social control in the last years of Khrushchev’s rule. I understand social control as a number of measures which define, label and manage the youth in order to prevent or punish deviant behavior. In the case of Brodsky, the main agent of social control was the secret police, although journalists, judges in court and the Writers’ Union played an important role as well. The analysis has shown that the agents of control involved in the persecution, focused less on Brodsky’s misdeeds and more on his intentions and his allegedly immoral self. This aspect suggests similarities rather than breaks with Stalin-era trials that involved “interrogations of the self”. However, there were important differences, for example, no one asked Brodsky’s opinion. His “political face” was constructed without his participation or confession. Brodsky’s voice is overshadowed by the loud voices of agents of control. Some of them defended Brodsky but most of them wanted to punish him. The story of Brodsky’s prosecution is inevitably multivocal, with dozens of different narratives by journalists, teachers, secret police officers, diaries and writings of Brodsky and his friends. These stories intertwined and ended up in his KGB file. They became evidence of a state-orchestrated prosecution and bullying of a young poet and translator. Brodsky’s case can be seen not only as a case of oppression of a non-conformist individual but also as an example of management of non-desirable youth milieus. The newspaper article condemning Brodsky was the driving force that initiated the persecution. It defined Brodsky as a social parasite and a traitor and used his milieus and the profiles of the members of those milieus as a factor aggravating Brodsky’s alleged guilt. The fact that the two of his acquaintances were sentenced to prison for five years for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda”, made his position even worse. Multiple accounts suggest that the Brodsky affair was politically motivated.

However, it might be beneficial to look at Brodsky’s affair not only through the lens of political prosecution of ideological opponents, but also through the lens of social control and management of the masses. It transfers our focus away from matters of repressions and opposition, to the practices and strategies of social control thus setting

grain production, but by 1959 the campaign had failed because it reduced the fertility of the soil. More about Virgin Lands Campaign see Pohl, M.: *The Virgin Lands* and McCauley, M.: *Khrushchev and the Development*.

74 Tuneiadsam Ne Mesto v Nashem Gorode. (The Idlers Are Not Welcomed in Our City). Newspaper article. Leningrad, Vechernii Leningrad. 08.01.1964.

the stage for future transnational comparisons. It also shows a different side of the functioning of the Thaw-era Soviet Union. This case be seen not only as a crackdown on non-conformism, but can also be interpreted as an approach to governing late Soviet society. This approach implied that social control was to be carried out, not on individual youngsters but rather their networks. The trial and exile, as well as imprisonment, can be seen as the extreme measure of eliminating undesirable youth milieus. However, there were also a number of other measures such as “prophylactic chats”, where the youth was advised to stop socializing with certain people.

This article analyzed the mechanisms of social control in regards to youth non-conformist milieus. The agents of social control, especially the secret police, used different strategies to destroy the milieus, such as “prophylactic chats” with the KGB, prosecution of the milieus’ leaders and public shaming in newspapers. The functioning of social control also needed legitimation. After defining Brodsky’s milieu as anti-Soviet and hostile, the agents of social control portrayed his personality through the concept of “political face” as an immoral and anti-Soviet individual. The concept of the political face was important for the unfolding of the prosecution because the guilt was defined, not through a misdeed but in a complex way. This was through the entire biography of a suspect, their worldview, political convictions, their circle of friends and various actions in the past. Other practices of social control aimed at legitimizing the persecution were through mobilization of the public outcry.

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Secret Police and Practices of Social Control: Constructing the Case Against Non-Conformist Youth (Leningrad, 1964–1965)

This article considers mechanisms of social control over the non-conformist youth milieu by the example of Joseph Brodsky's trial in Leningrad in 1964. The analysis shows that the purpose of Brodsky's persecution was not only to punish a non-conformist young individual but also to eliminate an undesirable youth milieu. The article examines the numerous practices that were used during this process, including preventive chats with the KGB, vilification in newspapers, and the persecution of the milieu's leaders. The persecution of Brodsky can be seen as an example that sheds light on both new and old methods of social control over non-conformist youths under Khrushchev. It demonstrates that the reform of the Soviet legal system after Stalin was rolled back and some aspects of the Stalinist legal system were retained: Brodsky was found guilty not on the basis that he had done something illegal but based on his non-conformist beliefs, alleged intentions and renegade friends. However, there were also new trends, such as the labeling of young people's misdeeds, the general public's appeal to the youth problem, and the focus on the management of youth milieus and crime prevention.



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