Conclusion: The Great Break in Higher Learning

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CONCLUSION /

THE GREAT BREAK

IN HIGHER LEARNING

The upheaval that overtook all of higher learning in the Soviet Union in 1928–32, which in 1929 Stalin dubbed the Great Break (velikii perelom), swept away the dualistic order in organized intellectual life. Defunct was the NEP dynamic that opposed Bolshevik Party institutions and their plethora of revolutionary missions to half-altered old institutions, still dominated by nonparty groups but surviving under the auspices of the Soviet state. In part to overcome the awkward constraints and pervasive contradictions of that phase of the Revolution, in part because of them, a general assault on the nonparty intelligentsia was unleashed and a frenzy of institutional and sectoral reorganization begun.¹ Above all within the camp of communist intellectuals, the new “socialist offensive” was accompanied by the apotheosis of the battles for hegemony and against deviationism; there was a resurgence of “hare-brained schemes,” which in their militant utopianism were sometimes reminiscent of war communism.² What was novel, however, was that a decade of Bolshevik involvement on the third front had already forged a discrete constellation of communist traditions, policies, institu-

¹. A valuable collection for the study of these reorganizations are the records of TsIK’s Uchenyi Komitet, GARF f. 7668. The primary Soviet work is V. D. Esakov, Sovetskaia nauka v gody pervoi piatiletki (Moscow: Nauka, 1971).
². The preeminent work remains Fitzpatrick’s collection Cultural Revolution.
tions, constituencies, and culture in higher learning which now adapted to the turmoil of the "second revolution."

At the end of 1929 the party philosopher Luppol penned a noteworthy narrative about the course of the Revolution on what he referred to interchangeably as the "scientific" and the "ideological" front (but which he might as well, following the slightly different terminology favored in the early 1920s, have called the third or cultural front). The article represents an important window into Bolshevik conceptions of the academic order on the eve of the new era. After the Revolution, Luppol wrote, the front was divided into two poles, represented by the Academy of Sciences and the Socialist Academy. "We" took our first steps there and at IKP, he wrote, creating primarily social scientific journals and beginning to reform higher education; "we" promoted a "worker-peasant" studenchestvo and confined professors who could not be trusted as teachers to research institutes. Yet as the "gradual offensive" of Marxism-Leninism continued in the 1920s, the original communist institutions grew and spread to "daughter organizations," producing a dislocation between the two camps that now demanded resolution. The new "assault of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism" would represent the "forced victory of the socialist sector of science."3

This striking argument—so easily identifying the institutions, intellectuals, and causes of party academia with the regime, the Revolution, and the ruling ideology—in many ways recalled the Fifteenth Party Congress of 1927, which ratified both the early plans for the industrialization drive and a directive for a "special strengthening of the struggle on the ideological and cultural front." At that gathering, as well, Pokrovskii—eminence grise of party scholars, whose own militance, power, and orthodoxy would help him ride out the coming storm until his death in 1932—talked of the experience of the communist academic "sector" and the reconstruction of science on an all-union scale in the same breath.4 On the eve of what was to be an era of confrontations and ceaseless reorganizations in intellectual life, calls were issued not simply for the forcible expansion of the communist academic system but for the "socialist reconstruction of scientific institutions themselves."5 The revolution pursued by the party camp in the 1920s and

4. Esakov, Sovetskaia nauka, 72–75.
5. This was taken to mean the introduction of planning, self-criticism, the regulation of
identified most closely with those party institutions which have been at
the center of attention in this book, was now to be brought to every
corner of higher learning.

Communist intentions going into the Great Break, of course, cannot
be confused with its results; it is hard to disagree with the proposition
that “between 1930 and 1932 the [higher educational] system was so
fluid institutionally and numerically that it seems to have been substan-
tially out of control.” 6 The opening phase of the Stalin era was marked
by an upheaval along the entire cultural front that now embraced its
own, new set of paradoxes and contradictions. Among them were the
coincidence of a virulent assault on authority (one that swept up many
Bolshevik intellectuals predominant in the 1920s) and the great exten-
sion of central party power in science, culture, and scholarship; the bal-
ancing of extremes of egalitarian and proletarianizing “leveling” with
the birth of rigid hierarchy topped by a leader cult; the outburst of
fanciful utopian dreaming along with highly orchestrated repressions. 7
Such quintessential features of the Great Break on the cultural front even
now remain largely unexplored within the deep context of individual set-
tings and on the basis of archival investigation. Nonetheless, the chaos of
the upheaval and the now familiar phenomenon of sudden reversals and
unexpected outcomes should not obscure the fact that in higher learning
the Great Break involved a coherent program— or, to recall the term em-
ployed for the third front a decade earlier, a discernible project. Its main
features were articulated in instantly canonical party resolutions and di-
rectives, reiterated in Central Committee plenums, repeated tirelessly in
newspaper and journal discussions, embodied in constant attempts to
plan and restructure activities and institutions, and manipulated and con-
tested in the rampant struggles the upheaval unleashed.

The communist experience of mobilizing students and distributing
cadres on all the various levels of higher learning was now turned into
an operation of vast scale. The twin rubrics under which this influx and
breakneck expansion occurred were proletarianization and communiza-
tion. 8 The mobilization of “thousands” of proletarian origin into

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7. For a different formulation of the paradoxes of the Plan years, focusing on aesthetic
culture, see Clark, Petersburg, 261–83.
8. The Orgburo directive of December 1928 on IKP admissions for the coming academic
year gives an interesting insight into the combination of attempted social and political engineer-
higher education marked the onset of what became the heyday of proletarianization, and from 1928 through 1931–32 virtually all institutions boasted annually increasing percentages of workers. This proletarianization went hand in hand with the rise of party members into new positions in all areas of academia. A Central Committee directive in 1929 set the goal of reaching no less than 60 percent of party members among “scientific cadres” in the social sciences. The directives put out by the scientific section of Gosplan on compiling a “five-year plan for scientific-research work” called for the compilation of far more detailed data on the class origin, political “worth,” and scholarly value of scientific cadres and also set the goal of achieving no less than 25 percent party members among all “scientific workers” by the plan’s end. Areas that had been under the de facto control of nonparty professors and scholars, such as graduate student selection and most “scientific-technical disciplines,” were now deliberately exposed to what Pokrovskii in 1929 openly called social and political criteria. The sheer scope and “tempo” of the initiatives launched to solve the “problem of cadres”—if hardly its centrality within the Bolshevik approach to higher learning—were novel in this period. Yet these momentous efforts were still mounted in the name of the now venerable, still multifaceted Bolshevik project of creating “red specialists,” “our” leadership forces, and a new intelligentsia.

One of the best-known features of the Great Break, and a distinct departure from the troubled preservation of nonparty academia that had persisted since 1922, can be called the inverse of cadre promotion: the open assault and widespread repression mounted against a wide

9. For the academic year 1929–30, for example, Kul’tprop and NarKompros jointly ordered a nationwide program of crash four-month courses for preparing literate, politically active “workers from production” and “batraks” with at least 2.5 years of party membership for entry into komvuzy. See “Vsem otdelam kul’tury i propagandy Obl(krai)komov VKP(b), Vsem Obl(krai)ONO i komvuzam,” no later than 1 April 1929, RTSKhiDNf f. 12, op. 1, ed. khr. 614, l. 9.


array of nonparty groups in the intelligentsia in all academic and cultural professions. What has not normally been recognized about the post-Shakhtii attacks on nonparty specialists—which ushered in an era of sanctioned “specialist-baiting” —is that the purges, takeovers, reorganizations, and similar measures that accompanied the imposition of the forms of Bolshevik organization and political culture had frequently been first applied to higher learning in party institutions.

To employ only one example, professorial and teaching personnel went through “reelections” in 1929 and again in 1930. In the first round, according to the party legal specialist Vyshinskii, who was in charge of the operation, 219 of 1,062 professors were either purged or replaced. But less quantifiable yet far more significant than the number removed—many of the professors, just as in party purges, may have later been reinstated or found other positions—was the use of the opportunity to break down what Vyshinskii termed the corporate “conspiracy of silence” and introduce “proletarian self-criticism” for the first time into higher schools. Repressive measures were only the most visible and convenient “weapons” in the attempt to extend the Bolshevik revolutionary system in higher learning, which had been limited in reach in the 1920s. Replicating the conventions of political culture, in forums such as the purge meetings and self-criticism sessions, were intrinsic parts of “sovietization” and “bolshevization.”

Another constituent part of extending the franchise, so to speak, of what might be called the cultural revolutionary project was a large-scale effort to remake conceptions and agendas in science, scholarship, and learning. This took place in several distinct forms. The earlier championing of standards of “practicality,” service, and planning, which grew up with party scholarship itself in the 1920s, blossomed into the insistent demand of the Five-Year Plan era, repeated in the most varied contexts and with ubiquitous vehemence, that all science serve “socialist construction.” The years 1929 and 1930 were extraordinary ones, but this shift was in many cases not as sudden as has sometimes been imagined. In the administration of natural science, for example, one historian has convincingly located the period between 1925 and 1927 as the


14. For example, the second Soviet-era charter of the Academy of Sciences of 1930 introduced the proclamation that the highest academic institution would utilize “one scientific method on the basis of the materialist worldview” and pursue “the servicing of the needs of socialist reconstruction of the country.” Esakov, Sovetskaia nauka, 200.
“turning point” when the Party settled on a science policy that stressed the “science-production tie” and gave precedence to applied over basic research. Yet as we have seen from the growing service function of party scholarship born in antiliberal reaction to the twin notions of pure science and institutional autonomy, there was no one transparent meaning to “practicality,” and it could be reconciled with the most abstract Marxist-Leninist theory. The demand that knowledge serve socialist construction should be seen above all as giving expanded currency to an official rationale for the purpose of scholarship, what might well be called an academic ideology that unambiguously defined nauka in all its manifestations as subordinate to state, revolution, and Party.

This drive to make learning serve socialist construction affected the party scholarship that embraced it most ardently as much as it did the nonparty scientists at whom it was directed. It transformed higher education perhaps even more immediately and decisively than research. To again cite only one example, the Central Committee’s renamed Kul’t-prop-department instructed the institutes of red professors to introduce “production practice” in lower party organs, kolkhozes, and Machine-Tractor Stations of up to half of all instruction time by the third year of study. The red professor in philosophy, Garber, dispatched in a brigade to the countryside, became the butt of the now-exacerbated anti-intellectualism of the new red intellectuals when he demonstrated ignorance of the anatomy of a cow: as the student newspaper jeered, “He didn’t suspect that all his ‘scholarly qualifications’ weren’t worth a wooden nickle.” In that same year of 1930, in many ways the apogee of the Great Break upheaval, the Communist Academy actually declared that the role of research would be to “help the Party in implementing policies that lead to the building of tractors and organization of collective farms.”

Among the practitioners of Marxism-Leninism, a related part of the Great Break mission was to establish and elaborate the new conception of partiiinost’, which we saw emerge in party scholarship’s search for relevance and standing, and which led it to adopt an ideological service

16. “XVI Parts’ezd i nauchno-issledovatel’skaia rabota,” VKA, no. 39 (1930): 3–7; P. Shabalkin, “‘Beremennai korova,’ ili kak ne nuzhno udariat’,” Za leninskie kadry, no. 1 (March 1930), 4; “Vypiska iz protokola No. 23 zasedaniai Orgbiuro TsK ot 11.XI.30 g.,” RTsKhiDNI f. 147, op. 1, ed. khr. 35, l. 47–48. For a typical summary from 1930 of the “current tasks” of red scholarship, see “Nashi zadachi” (unsigned editorial), Za leninskie kadry, no. 1 (March 1930), 1.
role. In what has been called his unpublished “theoretical testament” of 1931, the besieged Riazanov on the eve of his downfall lashed out at the “citation-seeking” of the young “red seminarians” and a brand of Marxism that could transform both the resolutions of the IKP party cell and the “general line” into the last word in wisdom.17

In sum, the Great Break incorporated a vast expansion and intensification of the Bolshevik cultural project. In higher learning it took the form of a radical program forcibly to bring the Bolshevik Revolution—closely identified with an entire communist system that had already been operating in party institutions—to “virgin soil.” This involved a reconstitution of the third front missions that had risen to prominence a decade before and which had been pursued, hardly exclusively, but most intensively in the party institutions during the 1920s. In both the 1920s and the early 1930s the project as applied to higher learning was held together by the comprehensive sweep of its multifaceted, contested, yet coherent program that flowed from the knitting together of manifold Bolshevik missions on the cultural front. In both the 1920s and the early 1930s this program encompassed the construction of institutions, the politics of cadres, the engineering of social composition, the attempt to create red experts, the spread of party Marxism, the reorientation of science, and the growth of a Bolshevik cultural system as applied to higher learning.18 Although itself caught in the upheaval, the fundamental position of party higher learning remained analogous to what it had been since it was constituted as a unified entity in 1920. It still represented an arm and extension of the Party in the academic world, integrated into the broader polity and sensitive to regularized links to the party leadership and administrative organs. At the same time, as it has been depicted in the 1920s, it represented a full-fledged, institutionalized, and by now highly developed enterprise and movement in its own right within academia.19

18. The elements, of course, could be extended: I have omitted, for example, the continuing pursuit of revolutionary pedagogy. “Active methods,” collectivism, group evaluations in what were now dubbed study brigades, became an intrinsic part of the revolutionary/party/proletarian program, while any criticism was linked to rightist/reactionary/bourgeois opposition. For example, see E. V. Mikhin, “Klassovaia bor’ba i nauchnye rabotniki,” Nauchnyi rabotnik, no. 3 (1930): 16–18.
19. Pokrovskii’s correspondence between 1929 and February 1932 (RTsKhIDNI f. 147, op. 1, d. 30, 33, 35, 37, 42), although too voluminous to treat here, provides a window into the lines of communication and command between party scholarship and the broader party polity in this period. It includes letters to the Politburo, Central Committee secretaries, especially Mo-
Another feature of the Great Break in higher learning that was also a primary characteristic present at the birth of the third front was the organic interconnectedness of the disparate missions on the cultural front. Once again, they were pursued and discussed together, conceptualized and fused as the single process of bringing the Revolution and socialism to the cultural realm. At a different tempo and in a different fashion, the party camp itself continued to be transformed as it spearheaded the effort. An overriding difference was that the academic order of NEP had erected boundaries and constraints on the pursuit of revolutionary missions within nonparty institutions and sectors; now the field of play for the pursuit of revolutionary missions was extended to, indeed purposefully concentrated on, those areas and aspects of academia which had largely remained outside its scope in the 1920s.

In the ensuing melee, as might have been expected given the inherent conflicts built into the third front regulatory bureaucracy and the divided academic order of NEP, a primary realm of contestation was, once again, “sectoral.” In the Great Break, the consequences of the struggles touched off among the range of administrations (vedomstva) in higher learning were frequently lasting. Here again, some of the main developments can be seen to have had their roots in the evolution of the 1920s order: the growth of the party sector into a key actor in the fray, the rise of the Academy of Sciences in the wake of bolshevization, and the assault on universities hitherto dominated by the nonparty professoriat.

In the Great Break the central party institutions we have followed achieved their organizational apex and their moment of eclipse simultaneously. The Communist Academy expanded to its greatest breadth, as we have seen; a network of Institutes of Red Professors, with preparatory sections in cities around the country, mushroomed out of the departments of the original IKP. Whereas the combined budgets of the Communist Academy and IKP in 1929–30 were significantly less than that of the Academy of Sciences, in 1930–31 the budget for the five separate IKPs alone exceeded that of the Academy of Sciences.20 Paralotov and Kaganovich, and above all to Stetskii at Kul’tprop TsK; it contains not only situation reports (dokladnye zapisky) on the “historical front” but routine updates concerning struggles at the Communist Academy, theoretical disputes, and editorial appointments.

20. “Otchet o rabote Uchenogo komiteta TsIK SSSR za 1929–30 gg.,” GARF f. 7668, op. 1, d. 209, l. 6; “Smeta raskhodov nauchnykh i uchenykh ochrezhdenii TsIK Soiuza SSR na 1929–1930 g.g.,” GARF f. 7668, op. 1, d. 209, l. 54, and “Spisok nauchno-issledovatel’sikh ochrezhdenii, sostoiaschikh v sisteme Uchenogo komiteta TsIK SSSR na 15/1-33 г.,” ibid., d. 210, l. 3–21. On the IKP reorganization, “Postanovlenie o reorganizatsii Instituta krasnoi pro-
doxically — and as I intimated in the case of the Communist Academy — this opportunity for the most rapid expansion, the loudest attacks, and the most savage polemics on the "ideological" and "theoretical" fronts arose just as the revolutionary potential to supplant fully what had been until now "bourgeois" higher learning slipped away. Of the many explanations for this fresh irony, several have already been suggested. The increasingly vociferous insistence of the communist intellectuals that the Party was the supreme court of all affairs stripped them of their claim to leadership in intellectual life; the destructive wave of infighting discredited them in light of their own much-vaulted standards of service and "practicality." The Great Break widened the front to bring the Revolution to hitherto "nonparty" groups, areas, institutions, and sectors, with the unintended consequences that many of the Party’s own institutions were discredited as revolutionary alternatives. Finally, the entire metamorphosis of Marxist-Leninist social science itself deprived the theory and nauka of party intellectuals (as opposed to the pronouncements of the Central Committee) of the authority they had enjoyed in the 1920s. A most substantial blow was the shift in emphasis and prestige to technical training in the era of the Five-Year Plan, which undermined the prospects of the Communist Academy and the party schools that, despite their wider ambitions, had historically made the social sciences their special preserve. All this occurred even as the practices and, it might be said, the legacy of the network of party institutions that rose up in the 1920s were being forcibly applied to a still raggedly integrated Soviet higher learning. In this sense, the Great Break was the period of the greatest triumph and greatest failure for Bolshevik higher learning.

If the party sector met a kind of defeat in victory, there were other far more clear-cut winners and losers in the sectoral realignment that began

fessury. Utverzhdeno 18.VIII.30 г.,” GARF f. 7668, op. 1, d. 255, l. 5; Vosy, “Pereprezhdaiam i predlagaem: Nikto nichego ne znaet o reorganizatsii IKP,” Za leninskii kadry, no. 2 (May 1930), 3. The new IKPs created in 1930 were in economics, philosophy, history and law, history of the Party, and the Institute for Preparing Cadres.

21. For examples of how the Communist Academy was paralyzed by intrigues and infighting, see Pokrovskii’s parries to the attacks by Pashukanis and younger academy leaders in “Vsem chlenam prezidiuma Komm. Akademii,” January 1931, copy sent to A. I. Stetskii, Kul’tprop TsK, RTskhIDNI f. 147, op. 1, ed. khr. 33, l. 34–35, and on the historical profession, “Dokladnye zapiski v TsK o polozhenii na istoricheskom fronte,” no day given, January 1931, RTskhIDNI f. 147, op. 1, ed. khr. 42, l. 10–23. For a typical polemic generated by the ferocious battles between the "proletarian culture" camp and IKP, see “Obrazts fasilifiktsii nauchnopoliticheskikh dokumentov; Chto sdelala b. gruppa pereverzevev s otchetom diskussii o Plemchano i Pereverzeve. Soobshchenie sekretariata RAPP,” 1930, ARAN f. 1759, op. 2, d. 12, l. 63–69.
in the late 1920s. It is enough to consider the fortunes of several other academic sectors. The industrialization drive, coupled with the suspicion cast on the old specialists and the urgency invested in creating new ones, led to an explosion of higher education in general. In the orgy of reorganization various sectors seized their chance to increase their standing. A chief beneficiary was “branch science,” encompassing the commissariat-run institutes, which rode the crest of “practicality” and the breakneck expansion of higher technical education after 1928. In 1930 in the wake of Central Committee decrees of 1928 and 1929, the traditionally large, multidisciplinary faculties in higher schools were broken up into independent institutes that often developed narrowly specialized and applied profiles, and many were attached to the economic commissariats. The number of VUZy shot up from 152 in 1929–30, to 579 in 1930–31, to 701 in 1931–32.\(^\text{22}\)

For the Academy of Sciences, the Janus face of the Stalin era for the scientific elite was never so starkly apparent. The newly bolshevized academy was racked by arrests, purges, and expansion in this period, but as has already been suggested, the blueprint for its emergence as a dominant, all-union “empire of knowledge” was already ratified.\(^\text{23}\) Perhaps this explains why the “Academy Affair,” the web of fabricated charges and repressions that continued into 1931, never came to trial. Yet it has been plausibly suggested that the affair was originally planned by the OGPU as one of a series of other show trials of 1930–31 that did take place—for example, the “Industrial Party” trial featuring engineers, the “Laboring Peasant Party” (TKP) trial spotlighting agronomists—designed to target those segments of the nonparty intelligentsia that had been of particular importance to the regime in the 1920s and had thus retained unusual influence and autonomy.\(^\text{24}\)

If the harsh repressions experienced in the “academy” sector coincided with its rise to an extraordinary position of dominance, a less ambiguous blow was dealt to the university system. The upheaval and reorganization corresponded to calls for the withering away of the uni-


\(^{23}\) For the report of permanent secretary Volgin to the Uchenyi Komitet on the expansion and reorganization of the Academy of Sciences in this period, see “Akademiia nauk za 1928–1933,” GARF f. 7668, op. 1, d. 178, l. 1–28.

\(^{24}\) Perchenok, “Akademiia nauk,” 232–33. The literature treating the “Academic” or “Platonov Affair” has become voluminous; for the most recent examples see I. G. Aref’eva, ed., Tragichekie sud’by: Repressirovan’ye uchenye Akademii nauk SSSR (Moscow: Nauka, 1995), and V. S. Kaganovich, Evgenii Viktorovich Tarle i peterburgskaiia shkola istorikov (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1995).
versities as feudal relics and attacks on them as anachronisms in the technological age. Even the rector of Moscow University, in an article “A 175-Year-Old Oldster” (175-letnii starets), called for the death of the institution over which he presided. Universities began to be broken up into their component parts, which in turn formed the bases of institutes. In January 1930 the deans (dekanaty) and collegial organs of universities were relieved of their duties. Departments (fakul'tety) and kafe
dry were shortly thereafter disbanded and “sectors of cadres” or “divisions” were created in their place. The commissar of education, Bubnov, who had replaced Lunacharskii in 1929, noted after the storm had passed (weakened universities were reconstituted in 1932) that his agency had not resisted these “clearly liquidationist moods” (iatno likvidatorskim nastroeniam). Opponents of such “reorganizations” were not only lumped together as “rightists” and class enemies, interestingly enough, but portrayed as opponents of an entire Great Break agenda in the higher school: vydvizhenie, “active” methods of teaching, and the remaking of science and learning to fit the needs of socialist construction. It should be apparent that the “organic” thrust of this portrait of the enemy fits squarely into the third front tradition.

As part of the dismemberment of the universities in 1930–31 disciplines such as history, languages, philosophy, art history, pedagogy, economics, and law were for years banished from the university curriculum, which on one level, underscored the predominance of the technological, engineering, and natural sciences begun during the First Five-Year plan and persisting much later. More immediately, however, this weakening of the universities, particularly in the social and humanistic disciplines, reflected the political and institutional struggles between the universities, on one side, and leftist and party forces, on the other. The demise of the research university in Soviet Russia should be attributed, not only to the rise of the scientific-research institutes of the Academy of Sciences to crown the edifice of the academic hierarchy, but also and

25. Chanbarisov, Formirovanie, 198. See also G. M. Krzhizhanovskii, ed., Universitety i nau
chnye uchebzhdenia. K XVII s'ezdu VKP(b) (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe tekhniko
teoreticheskoе izdatel'stvo, 1934), 13–15.
26. For example, E. V. Mikhin, “Klassovaia bor'ba i nauchnye rabotniki,” Nauchnyi rabot
nik, no. 5–6 (May–June 1930): 15–18.
27. It should be added, however, that in one of the few archival studies relevant for this topic, Peter Konecny argues that one reason Leningrad State University survived the ordeal was that “communists, having assumed positions of leadership, adopted managerial strategies and defensive institutional tactics which their non-communist rivals employed in the past.” See Konecny, “Conflict and Community at Leningrad State University, 1917–1941” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1994), 130.
in no small part to the all-out assault by party forces on the nonparty professoriat, an assault either restricted or impossible between 1922 and the Great Break.

This brief sketch, a cataclysmic postscript to the history of higher learning among the Bolsheviks, should not be taken to imply that the Great Break involved a simple, mechanical imposition of the model that rose with the party institutions of the 1920s. The “sectoral” consequences of the Great Break for party higher learning alone—defeat in victory—suggest a more complicated resolution. Nevertheless, several explanations can be advanced to explain why the “socialist offensive” applied to all of higher learning processes that had been pursued first or most avidly in the evolving party camp of the 1920s. This can be attributed to the unusual opportunity for the party sector in the 1920s to pursue revolutionary missions within its own educational and “scientific-research” institutions, even as the academic order imposed constraints on reconstructing nonparty areas. This is hardly to downplay the significance of changes the Revolution brought for the nonparty academic intelligentsia and above all for students in the 1920s. Yet many factors, notably the Bolsheviks’ own Manichaean thinking—combined with their “sectoral” interests and the manner in which party institutional structures had assumed the status of symbols of the revolutionary—in fact exaggerated the dualistic features of the NEP academic order on the eve of the much-anticipated revolutionary upsurge. Perhaps most important was that within higher learning the socialist offensive was spearheaded by groups, actors, and entire institutions from the party sector. The decade of channeling revolutionary missions through party institutions in higher learning helped ensure that the Great Break on this “front” encompassed an outgrowth, adaptation, or intensification on a hitherto unimaginable scale of the constellation of communist missions and policies that in higher learning had been pursued above all in party institutions in the 1920s. In this sense, the term “bolshevization,” used at the time, acquires a special relevance for the Great Break in academia.

With the end of the deepest NEP-style divisions between party and nonparty camps, a much more unified Soviet academic order could arise. The end of the two-camp, two-culture division of NEP academia

might be viewed as a kind of forced merger, in which the practices, conventions, personnel, institutions, and values from the communist and nonparty camps were meshed—if hardly completely, then much more tightly than in the 1920s. The notion of such a new Soviet synthesis beginning with the Stalin era is strongly suggested by manner in which the bifurcated academic order of NEP met its demise in the communist-led “general offensive.” For even after former “bourgeois specialists” were rehabilitated, order was restored, and the militants and proletarianizers of the Great Break were reined in during the course of 1932, there could be no return to a status quo ante.

The history of Bolshevik higher learning lends a new perspective to our understanding of cultural revolution in Soviet Russia. The creation of party educational and scholarly institutions after 1917 and their unification after 1920 into an academic system that rose up to play a crucial role in the course of postrevolutionary higher learning exemplify some of the most concrete and consequential results flowing from the early articulations of a Bolshevik cultural project as a locus of revolutionary activity. To identify “the cultural revolution” with the Great Break of the late 1920s and early 1930s or to use the term to encompass all cultural processes under socialism obscures the discrete history and rapid evolution of the Bolshevik cultural project, of which party higher learning formed a significant part. Yet these two extremes in understanding cultural revolution have in fact been dominant, the narrow one in recent Western historiography and the universalistic one in the post–Great Break USSR.

From the 1930s to the 1980s, Soviet writers, following an orthodoxy that drew on the writings of Lenin in the early 1920s, used the concept of cultural revolution to refer to the rising tide of cultural progress and mass enlightenment that followed the October Revolution. For two decades, following the cultural revolution in China, Western historians have linked the term, and hence the process in revolutionary Russia, all but exclusively with the period 1928–1931, that is, with the upheaval on the “cultural front” during the Great Break. This divergence—and the use of “cultural revolution” as a synonym for the entire Great Break by more than one generation of Anglo-American historians of the Soviet Union—can be traced to a group of historians in the 1970s and 1980s who made the signal contribution of first exploring that period as a distinctive episode of militant “class war” and iconoclastic communist utopianism in culture. “In the First Five-Year Plan period, the term ‘cul-
tural revolution' was used in a special sense,” writes Sheila Fitzpatrick, the most influential of those historians, “different from earlier or later Soviet usages.” In a definition with lasting resonance, she takes “cultural revolution” in this period to mean “class war” in culture, a connotation supposedly introduced “abruptly” in 1928 and denoting the surrogate class struggle between “proletarian” Communists and “bourgeois” intellectuals.29

But the enterprise of party higher learning in the 1920s demonstrates how vigorous and well developed was the attempt not simply to champion a set of Bolshevik revolutionary missions in culture, education, and science but to implement them in the midst of NEP. A driving motivation behind this earlier project was to create an institutionalized and hence deeply rooted challenge to the nonparty establishment, to develop a new kind of education and pedagogy rooted in revolutionary and Bolshevik culture, and to inculcate Bolshevik practices and traditions. Insofar as the resulting conflicts were an intrinsic part of the cultural front in the 1920s, the Bolshevik cultural project encompassed but reached far beyond a struggle between social groups, between party intellectuals and the nonparty intelligentsia, from the first. It represented the goal of creating a full-fledged revolutionary alternative to all “bourgeois” science and education—with many far-reaching consequences above and beyond the confrontation between groups of communist and nonparty intellectuals portrayed in class terms. Communist higher learning launched as a part of the “cultural front” after the Revolution also encompassed the creation of new kinds of institutions, redefinition of the purpose and orientation of science and scholarship, and the development of higher learning within the communist political system. The question remains whether the notion of cultural revolution should be associated exclusively with 1928–31, and if so, then whether it should be identified so intimately with surrogate class war.30

Those who would apply “cultural revolution” exclusively to the

29. Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Editor’s Introduction” and “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in Cultural Revolution. To distinguish this class-war concept of cultural revolution—and by extension also the phenomenon—from the period before 1928, Fitz-trick pointed to its departure from Lenin’s concept of cultural revolution: “Lenin’s idea of cultural revolution was a gradual and nonmilitant raising of cultural standards, achieved without direct confrontation with the old intelligentsia and involving above all the expansion of mass education and the spread of basic literacy.”

30. A notable plea for understanding cultural revolution as a “single, long-term process”—and a warning that separating out 1928–31 as “the cultural revolution” would lead to “confusion and question-begging”—was made by David Joravsky, “The Construction of the Stalinist Psyche,” in Fitzpatrick, Cultural Revolution, 107.
Great Break of 1928–31 must believe that this notion of “cultural revolution” changed abruptly in 1928 from its original Leninist incarnation. This belief warrants further examination. Lenin did indeed place overwhelming (but not exclusive) stress on what the most extended analysis terms “culture-as-knowledge”—universal know-how and expertise to be acquired by the proletariat from whatever “bearers” could teach it. This was part of what became Lenin’s “virtual obsession” with inculcating the habits of “civilized” societies, overcoming backward “barbarism,” and mastering science and technology. Nevertheless, Lenin’s employment of the slogan of cultural revolution coincided with, indeed was a part of, the Bolshevik advance on the the third front of culture, which has been traced here as a major, overlooked aspect of the transition to the 1920s order. As such it entered into the party arena and, appropriated by others, added greatly to the importance of a “cultural” agenda for revolutionary forces.

No matter how far removed Lenin’s use of the term “cultural revolution” appears from the meaning given to it by those forces on the Bolshevik Left urging, even then, the destruction of bourgeois culture through militant confrontation in the cultural arena, there were points of contact between them. For Lenin also stressed the assimilation of culture through the prism of Marxism, as well as its adaptation to the proletarian dictatorship. The concept of cultural revolution, moreover, like most of Lenin’s theoretical output, had a lengthy history of its own during the course of the 1920s, when various forces modified it or adapted it to their own agendas.

The concept of cultural revolution became one of many notions that informed activity on the third front in the 1920s. John Biggart, for example, has convincingly analyzed Bukharin’s writings on cultural revolution in 1923 and 1928 as a middle ground between Lenin’s “developmental” process and the class-war definition of the Great Break. In the


32. This comes through even in Lenin’s anti-Proletkul’t “theses” of 1920: “Not the invention of a new proletarian culture, but the development of the best models, traditions, and results of the existing culture, from the point of view of the Marxist world outlook and the conditions of life and struggle of the proletariat in the period of its dictatorship.” Claudiin-Urondo, *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution*, 45.

mid-1920s, in a more explicit elaboration of the cultural assimilationism, the communist civilizing mission, inherent in Lenin’s usage, we encounter cultural revolution as a program for the acculturation of “backward” national groups, whose “wild” ideological and religious views have to be plowed by a “cultural tractor.” Even here, however, the implication of revolutionary and ideological class struggle is not absent: for example, it was asserted that cultural revolution means not only raising the cultural level of the masses of general, but of the poor batraks in particular, in order to create a “consciousness of the revolutionary, socialist-thinking proletariat.” The party scholar Luppol, in his 1925 survey of Lenin’s thought on culture, made a not uncommon acknowledgment that culture in the “transition period” could not be simply “reorganized” by violence either today or tomorrow. Just as typical, however, was his blunt formulation of rivalry with nonparty specialists and the depiction of expertise as something to be seized from the enemy: carrying out cultural revolution required the taking of “all of science, all of technology, all knowledge and art. . . . And this science, technology, and art is in the hands of specialists and in their minds.”

Most significantly, the militants of the “proletarian culture” camp well before 1928 pursued a radical conception of cultural revolution they claimed was Leninist. As Averbakh proclaimed, “The problem of proletarian culture is above all the question of Lenin’s cultural revolution.” He agreed that the “liquidation of illiteracy” was a primary task, but insisted that “the process of cultural revolution encompasses not only the tasks of teaching reading and writing, but also the entire area of the ideological superstructure” through a process of “class struggle.”

If this proletarianizing incarnation of “Leninist cultural revolution” was the property of the Bolshevik Left, it becomes easier to understand how and why it was adopted immediately when the Party “turned left” in 1928. A key moment in the official adoption of a voluntaristic and iconoclastic definition of the term came in an Agitprop conference in the

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Biggart, for example, unconvincingly portrays Bukharin’s notion of cultural revolution, which focused not only on raising the mass cultural level but training the most able party and working-class cadres at institutions like IKP and Sverdlov, as somehow at odds with (and not part of) the “NEP system” (131).


summer of 1928, when the “class content of cultural construction” was defined as “the task of constructing proletarian culture.” We have encountered Agitprop, of course, as the agency that won oversight of the party schools. In the formative third front power struggles it embraced a notion of “pure” party propaganda while rejecting what was again widely attacked in the late 1920s as “enlightenment for its own sake,” and it came to represent the left wing of the divided NEP-era cultural bureaucracy. Even the official reformulation of “cultural revolution” in the Great Break, then, was introduced, not as a negation or abrupt shift from the NEP order, but as an outgrowth of the agenda of the Bolshevik cultural Left. Cultural revolution became the rubric signifying the entire project of implementing communist missions on the cultural front. In this light, the rise of a militant definition of cultural revolution during the Great Break reflects a new phase in a continuing long-term Bolshevik project on what had long before been constituted as a primary arena of the Revolution, the third front of culture.

Using the vehicle of party higher learning, I have traced several phases in the history of Bolshevik institution-building and revolutionary missions in culture. A seminal moment in the emergence of a Bolshevik cultural program was the formulation by the Vperedist wing of the Party in the prerevolutionary underground of an agenda involving the creation of a new intelligentsia, a new culture, and a new science. Achievement of these missions was linked closely to party schools and education from 1909 on; and while cultural questions remained the special territory of intellectuals in this wing of the Party, the new enterprise of formal party education proved attractive and influential to the Leninists as well. A second phase, during the explosion of “enlightenment” activity after 1917, culminated in the emergence of a unified system of institutions that developed a specifically party identity, coopted or superseded other movements, and rose up as the primary and self-proclaimed rival of “bourgeois science” and the nonparty intelligentsia.

The third and most critical phase came during the 1920s, when an attempt to implement a complex of Bolshevik missions shaped the evolution of a flourishing new network of party institutions. The result was a sweeping and many-leveled transformation during the course of NEP, which proved of lasting significance because of some basic features of

37. Cited, for example, as an iconic text by A. Maletskii, “Problema kul’turnoi revoliutsii v programme Kominterna,” Revoliutsia i kul’tura, no. 19 (15 October 1928), 9. The conference is noted by Fitzpatrick in “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” 10.
the enterprise. Bolshevik higher learning became more than a base for certain groups of communist scholars, students, and intellectuals, or certain factions within academic disciplines and cultural professions. In no small part because the contradictory NEP order seemed to stall revolutionary change elsewhere, Bolshevik higher learning became a formative attempt at implementing revolutionary missions on the third front through institution-building, during which party models of institutional organization were first applied to academia. It became the champion of a new party-approved curriculum and a new pedagogy. It became a branch of the Party in academia, tied organically to the broader polity and power structure to which it belonged. It became the forum for the growth and spread of an elaborate Bolshevik political and academic culture that spread outward in academia. All these features ensured that the intentions and actions of the party leadership must be considered as only one, albeit crucial factor in the “revolution of the mind.” Looming larger was the decade of experience in a sprawling new enterprise that itself was part and parcel of the Party.

No aspect of Soviet history, it is fair to say, has produced so much attention as the history of the Communist Party. Yet the overwhelming majority of accounts, in confronting the one-party monopoly on power, have considered the Party almost exclusively as the agent of change. Certainly it has appeared in that guise here as well. Yet the view afforded from within the enterprise of party higher learning suggests that many levels of change within the 1920s transformation cannot be reduced to the intentions of even the most powerful leaders. In this account, the Party has appeared not only as an agent and a victimizer but also as a movement in a very immediate sense caught in a web of its own making, gripped in a powerful vice of party political practices and culture. The Bolshevik cultural system not only developed but inculcated on a large scale new ways of speaking, acting, and thinking; it evolved in ways that went far beyond individual agency even as the Bolsheviks were launching their most voluntaristic attempts to transform the cultural sphere, for all the while, the structures and traditions the Party had erected in the everyday life of its institutions had come to dominate its members’ lives. In ways in which contemporaries may have been scarcely aware, the intense pressures and habits of the emergent system mastered even the activist, interventionist Party that had created it.

It is perhaps fitting to end with a reflection on one of the more subtle yet fundamental of the transformations of the 1920s. When Bolshevik
higher learning rose up for the first time to become the direct competitor to “bourgeois” science and its institutions, it was still cast in the role of revolutionary outsider beating on the walls of established academe. The 1920s order at once perpetuated this role, because the “present” of the “bourgeois” academic establishment during NEP was relatively assured even as its future was uncertain, and inversed it, as a result of the party camp’s powerful position and the entrenchment of a system of party education and research. Even as the fires of the Great Break raged, capping a decade of continuous evolution on the third front, the outsider stance of party institutions of higher learning was being much more fundamentally negated—a “negation of the negation” that is perhaps the most ironic and indeed uncontrollable transformation we have witnessed. No longer was it the underdog, the alternative, the revolutionary force pressing for a wholesale revolution of the mind. In the decades that followed, party schools retreated to the spheres of training cadres, producing ideologists, and preserving certain “party” disciplines. Bolshevik higher learning itself had finally become part of the establishment.