

Psychoanalysis and Communism: Freud in the early Soviet Union – Hope and Disappointment

Psychoanalysis in Soviet Russia and the early Soviet Union took – like many other disciplines – advantage of Lenin's educational and scientific policy. He was strongly convinced, that without a drastic improvement of cultural standards and an accelerated development of science in Soviet Russia, the realisation of his communistic ideals were doomed. This explains why he strongly resisted all attempts to combine the abolition of capitalism with getting rid of its cultural and scientific achievements. In 1920 he addressed a Youth Congress with the following words:

But it would mean falling into a grave error for you to try to draw the conclusion that one can become a Communist without assimilating the wealth of knowledge amassed by mankind. ... You can become a Communist only when you enrich your mind with a knowledge of all the treasures created by mankind.
... only a precise knowledge and transformation of the culture created by the entire development of mankind will enable us to create a proletarian culture. The latter is not clutched out of thin air; it is not an invention of those who call themselves experts in proletarian culture. That is all nonsense.¹

These considerations were guidelines for all of Lenin's decisions concerning the educational and research policy of his government. One example of that policy was the programme of the State Publishing house to translate Freud's works. The State Publishing House was part of the Ministry of Education, i.e. it was a governmental institution. Between 1921 and 1924 its director was Otto Yulevitch Schmidt (1891-1956). He was a central figure in the Soviet history of science, especially in the history of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union during the twenties. Between 1924 and 1941 he was Editor-in-Chief of the first edition of the famous *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*. As a scientist he became well-known after his polar expeditions. He also published widely in mathematics, astronomy und geophysics. He was a member of the Soviet Academy of Science, received three Orders of Lenin and was finally awarded the »Hero of the Soviet Union«. Particularly relevant to our topic is the fact that he became Vice-president of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society. His wife, Vera Schmidt, is well-known among psychoanalysts for her book *Psychoanalytic Education in Soviet Russia*.² It was published in 1924 by the

¹ Lenin (1920)

² Schmidt (1924).

International Psychoanalytic Press and describes the work at the so-called »Psychoanalytic Children's Laboratory« in Moscow. This laboratory was run by Professor Ermakov und Vera Schmidt herself. In autumn 1923 the laboratory expanded, acquiring an ambulatorium and psychoanalytic courses and seminars and becoming a State Psychoanalytic Institute.

Otto Schmidt started to publish Freud's works in Russian through his publishing house. In part he was able to use translations from before the revolution. But the majority were new translations. 34 of a total of 54 Russian editions of Freud's works were translated after 1917, and 28 of them were published by the State Publishing House. Most of the works were part of a series called the "Psychological and Psychoanalytic Library". Later on the State Publishing House published Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* and *The Moses of Michelangelo* as separate volumes.

As already mentioned, the State Publishing House was part of the Ministry of Education. Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya played a very important role in that ministry. In 1921, together with Stanislav Shatsky (1878-1934) and Pavel Blonsky (1884-1941), she founded the pedagogical section of the ministry, which provided the funds for Vera Schmidt's psychoanalytic laboratory for children. Blonsky was also a founding member of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society and Shatsky was the head of its pedagogical section. Both men were considered the leading Russian pedagogues. Shatsky had travelled widely in France, Belgium and Germany and maintained contacts with Georg Kerschensteiner and John Dewey. Part of his obituary in the *Pravda* of October 30, 1934 was written by Nadezhda Krupskaya. Blonsky was the founder of the Academy for Communist Education – later called »Nadezhda-Krupskaya-Academy« – and was probably suggested by Lenin himself as a collaborator with his wife. That means that the most influential Soviet pedagogues and closest collaborators with Lenin's wife simultaneously occupied key positions in the Russian Psychoanalytic Society.

One of the most prominent figures in the Soviet Union, who was very sympathetic to psychoanalysis was a Hungarian born socialist and communist. He was first mentioned in a letter from Sándor Ferenczi to Freud of March 25, 1919. In that letter Ferenczi describes the first days of the Soviet republic in Hungary. It was written four days after the take-over of government by the communists in March 1919 and it paints an interesting picture of the events:

Concerning the ψ effects of the events here – which on the surface have taken place very peacefully – I can only say that they were and are overwhelming. The upsets of the war and the first revolution can't be compared with them. The transfer of such

significant, deeply rooted libidinal cathexes, in the way in which one now requires it, places uncommon demands on the adaptive capability of the hitherto propertied class, to which I was beginning to belong, and, as a child of well-to-do parents, actually did belong. The first day of revolution passed with speculations; the deeper effect didn't become apparent until the second to third and the fourth day. The inner κρισις [Krisis] is considerably heightened by the threatened cordoning-off of unoccupied Hungary to *all* foodstuff. My small assets consist of industrial stocks and bank deposits; the former will be become invalid, the latter (approximately twenty grand) will be paid out in instalments of 2,000 a month. As a basic salary there remains for me the position with the Worker's Health Service, which – as you know – I have always wanted to give up. My clients have completely lost their ability to pay; a few want to continue to pay me. I hear that the state wants to pay us “white-collar workers” a yearly salary of 12 x 1,800 crowns, but in lieu of that have our labour at its disposal. (A member of the ψα Society, Dr. V., is the People's Representative for Finance.) – In a few days I will leave my present lodgings and move in with my wife. The house, which belongs to her family, is being “socialized”, as are all houses; that means that no further rent will be paid. A commission will take up the distribution of dwellings. -

I hear that foodstuffs are being very strictly requisitioned, as are gold, silver, jewelry, and money. – One has also returned to the primal state, inasmuch as the death penalty is being imposed for almost all crimes.

Today I feel much calmer, i.e., composed; I am even beginning to reflect upon how it will be for ψα in the new era. Naturally the newest helmsmen are extremely unfriendly, but perhaps they believe they are proving their modernity by, so I hear, wanting to support us. Naturally one has to limit oneself to strictly scientific matters, for the censorship of dictatorship is very strict. – In the end, Toni will achieve his goal of becoming ψα. For it is still questionable whether he will keep his factory (as a “foreman”). My brother-in-law (G.[izella]'s brother), a high judge (Superior District Court judge), will probably lose his position. The law faculty of the university was dissolved, since there won't be any trials from now on. The state will administer everything, at first by decree.

They are gearing up for a new war against the Czechs, Serbs, and Romanians. Two Danube monitors [warships] occupied by Englishmen were taken into captivity; the French occupation troops were taken into custody. The new army will be a pure proletarian force, bourgeoisie excluded.-

Everything depends on what progress communism makes abroad and how quickly the Russians come to our aid.³

Of course, I was very curious, who that »Dr. V.« , mentioned by Ferenczi, was, since it seemed to me quite important news that a member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Society had been Minister of Finance in Bela Kun's Soviet government. This would explain why Ferenczi became a University professor just four days after the new government took over⁴ and immediately after the faculty of the Medical department had refused Ferenczi's

³ Sándor Ferenczi-Sigmund Freud, 25.3.1919, in: The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, vol. 2, 1914-1919. Ed. by E. Falzeder and E. Brabant. Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press, p. 337-338.

⁴ After the fall of the Soviet republic in Hungary all appointments were annulled and Ferenczi lost his professorship on August 2, 1919 ; cf. Harmat (1988), S. 76.

appointment.⁵ Probably, our »Dr. V.« asked his minister fellow Zsigmond Kunfi, at that time minister of education, to do him a favour.

During my research I remembered that Jürgen Kuczinsky⁶ had spoken to me on several occasions about his beloved teacher and friend Evgeni Varga. I knew that he was Hungarian-born and played an important role during the Hungarian soviet republic. It soon emerged that »Dr. V.« was indeed Jenő Varga. According to the »Korrespondenzblatt der Internationalen Psychoanalytischen Vereinigung« he had been a member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Society since March 17, 1918. On March 21, 1919 he was appointed Minister of Finance and High Commissioner for Economics in the Hungarian soviet republic.⁷ What kind of man was he and what was his scientific and political career?

Jenő Varga, the son of a Jewish teacher, was born on November 6, 1879 in Nagytétény, today a part of Budapest. At the age of nineteen he confronted his rabbi with the decision to leave the Jewish religious community.⁸ But, like Freud, he remained sympathetic towards Judaism for the rest of his life. Even as late as 1947 he was accused of employing mainly Jews in his Moscow Institute.⁹ After he had finished high school in 1902 he enrolled at Budapest University. He studied History, Economics and Philosophy temporarily in Berlin and Paris. Still a student, in 1906 Varga became a member of the Hungarian Social-democrat Party and started publishing in its newspaper, but also in Karl Kautsky's journal »Neue Zeit«. In 1907 he defended his thesis on Kant's antinomies.¹⁰ One of his teachers at Budapest University was a certain Barnat (Bernhard) Alexander. Since Varga was one of the Alexander's most important students, in 1910 he was asked to contribute to a »Festschrift« in honour of the 60th Anniversary of his teacher. This Prof. Alexander was none other than the father of the psychoanalyst Franz Alexander, who later on went to Berlin and then to the United States, where he became the first professor in psychoanalysis and founded the Chicago Psychoanalytic Society. Barnat Alexander later has published a paper on »Spinoza and Psychoanalysis« in the *Almanach*.¹¹ Here we have the first link between Varga and psychoanalysis.

Between 1912 and 1914 Varga worked as a teacher. He and his wife Charlotte Gruen had two children, Andreas, who fell in World War I, and Maria, who became a

⁵ Harmat (1988), S. 72f.

⁶ Jewish Economist, author of hundreds of books on the History of Economy and Social Sciences. Died in 1997 at the age of 93. During World War II he was exiled in London, after the war he lived in the German Democratic Republic.

⁷ The Editors of the correspondence between Freud and Ferenczi claim that »Dr. V.« is Sandor Varjas, but this is not correct.

⁸ Duda (1994), S. 251.

⁹ Duda (1994), S. 251.

¹⁰ Duda (1994), S. 32.

¹¹ Alexander (1928).

biologist and today lives in Moscow.¹² In 1918 Varga was appointed professor in Political Economy at Budapest University, the same year he became a member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Society.¹³

On March 21, 1919, as already mentioned, Varga became Minister of Finance and High Commissioner for Economics in Bela Kun's Government.¹⁴ At the end of 1919, after the collapse of the Soviet republic Varga was sentenced to death. He fled to Austria but was arrested and detained at the Karlstein Castle. There he wrote a paper on problems of economic politics during the dictatorship of the proletariat. He was soon released and went to Vienna. He wrote to Freud and asked him for an appointment. Freud invited him on February 6, 1920 in his apartment in the Berggasse.¹⁵ Freud's information about the months of the Hungarian Soviet republic must have been fairly shocking, since he greeted Varga with the words: »You don't look very bloodthirsty!«¹⁶ In the course of the subsequent conversation Varga asked Freud for permission to take part in the meetings of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society. Freud granted that permission and, according to Varga's daughter, he attended a private seminar every week in Freud's flat. Six of his attendances between February and June 1920 are documented.¹⁷

The first of these meetings was on February 22, 1920. Hermann Nunberg presented a paper on »The Development of libidinal conflict in schizophrenia«. Varga did not take part in the discussion.¹⁸ It is worth noting, that this was the evening when another young man came for the first time to a meeting of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society -- the medical student Wilhelm Reich. He described his first impression as follows:

The Psychoanalytic Society seems to be a community of people, who combat together against a world of enemies. It was beautiful. One has to respect such kind of science.¹⁹

Probably Varga had similar feelings. He, as a communist, would easily identify with a group which faced a hostile environment. Incidentally, »Identification« was the title of a

¹² Maria Varga-Christfried Tögel, 24.1.1999.

¹³ Korrespondenzblatt der IPV, *IZP*, 5(1919), S. 59 Adresse: Prof. Dr. J. Varga, Budapest VIII, Sándor-tér 4

¹⁴ Years later, in 1937 in Moscow, Varga met Kun again. It was the time of the political trials and Kun asked Varga »How do you live«. Varga replied: »Still in freedom«. Kun thought that Varga's scepticism was exaggerated, but a short time later he was arrested himself and did not survive his detention; cf. Duda (1994), S. 133. About Varga the GPU has collected a thick volume with denunciations; cf. Duda (1994), S. 146, 381.

¹⁵ Vgl. Sigmund Freud-Sándor Ferenczi, 4.3.1920. Varga has destroyed all of Freud's letters. His daughter wrote me, that her father did not want to leave any trace of his contacts with a foreigner; Maria Varga-Christfried Tögel, 18.1.1999.

¹⁶ Vgl. Maria Varga-Christfried Toegel, 18.1.1999: Sigmund Freud-Sándor Ferenczi, 4.2.1920, »On Friday I will see Varga.«

¹⁷ Fallend (1995), S. 348.

¹⁸ Fallend (1995), S. 191f.

¹⁹ vgl. Reich (1981), S. 43.

paper given by Paul Schilder at the next meeting on March 7. Varga remarked during the discussion that projection and identification are similar in certain points.²⁰

It is ironic that the next evening²¹ was devoted to problems of »megalomania«. ²² Varga's last meeting was on June 16, 1920. Paul Schilder gave a lecture on »The causal importance of psychoanalytic results«. Varga took the floor several times and his remarks demonstrated that of all the participants he had the best philosophical education.²³ He discussed the problem of causes and effects in psychoanalysis and the relationship between real and ideal in connection with the concept of Libidio.

In June 1920 Varga left Vienna and travelled via various towns in middle Europe to Moscow, in order to take part in the II. Congress of the Communist International. On August 20 he arrived in the Russian capital. He made a good impression on the leading comrades of the International communist movement and decided to settle in the Soviet Russia. In the same year he became a member of the Bolshevik Communist Party. He changed his first name from the Hungarian to its Russian equivalent and Jenö became Evgeni Varga.

Lenin immediately appreciated Varga's talent and exhaustive knowledge. In the summer of 1921 Lenin asked Varga to prepare the foundation of an information institute which should collect material in Western Europe for Russian newspapers.²⁴ That very year Varga was sent to Berlin and worked there for nearly 7 years as an advisor at the Trade delegation of the Russian Federation. It is worth noting that Viktor Kopp, the first official representative of Soviet Russia in Berlin, also had a very close relationship with psychoanalysis. In 1909 he worked together with Joffe in Vienna at the newspaper *Pravda* under Trotsky and had very close contacts with Alfred Adler. Later he became one of the Vice-presidents of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society.²⁵

Varga meticulously prepared the foundation of the Institute, but realised very soon that there was an unbridgeable gap between Lenin's idea of the aim of the Institute on the one hand and the ideas of Trotsky, Zinov'ev and Radek on the other.²⁶ The project was never realised and the function it should have fulfilled was carried out by the already

²⁰ Fallend (1995), S. 195.

²¹ Am 21.5.1920, vgl. Fallend (1995), S. 199f.

²² Later on we will see that Varga's relationship to the "megaloman" Stalin was by no means trouble-free and that he was certainly aware of the dictator's pathological personality.

²³ Fallend (1995), S. 202f.

²⁴ Lenin-Varga, 31.8.1921 »Dear Comrade Varga! Herewith I send you my remarks. If you think it is necessary, we can discuss them by phone. Regards Lenin.« On August 13 Lenin had proposed the foundation of the Institute in a letter to Zinovyev; cf. Duda (1994), 35.

²⁵ During that time Kopp was also representative of the Foreign Office and responsible for the coordination of foreign trade, diplomacy and foreign currency; cf. Etkind (1997), S. 250.

²⁶ Evgeny Varga-Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 31.8.1921.

existing »Bureau for Foreign Science and Technology«²⁷. That bureau was founded in March 1921 in Berlin and it was intended to establish contacts with Western European scholars, in order to guarantee the long-term exchange of scientific research between Russia and the West.

In January 1923 Varga contacted Freud again²⁸ and offered him to help with the communication between German-speaking and Russian psychoanalysts. The most important partner was the Berlin group. On April 1, 1923 Abraham, Eitingon and Sachs wrote, in a still unpublished circular letter to the Secret Committee:

»Thanks to Prof. Varga, we have once again tried to establish contact with the Psychoanalytic Society in Moscow. V., a former member in Budapest and now a member of the Russian Embassy will enable the correspondence by courier.«

Varga himself did not undertake any psychoanalytic activities after his emigration to the Soviet Union. After his return from Berlin to Moscow in 1927 he was appointed Director of the Institute for World Economy and World Politics.²⁹ He remained in this post until 1947. After World War II Varga restricted himself to scientific activities and retired from politics. After Lenin's death and until his own, Varga suffered constant conflict between his Marxist conviction and the »real socialism« in the Soviet Union. During that time Varga and his wife became close friends with Lenin's widow Nadezhda Krupskaya and they supported each other during the disappointments and embitterment of Stalin's dictatorship.³⁰ In 1925 Varga had already written:

I don't think that it is the task of a scientific Marxist to recite Marx's ideas impeccably again and again, but to apply them in their spirit to our reality.«³¹

This was increasingly difficult for him. For example, during World War II Varga tried to convince Stalin that the Soviet Union might benefit from East-West cooperation and that the division of the world into economic blocs would be devastating. But Stalin's rejection of »consumerism« and the western opposition to new loans from the United States and the World Bank condemned his attempts to failure.³²

In 1947 Varga fell into disgrace, but was rehabilitated in 1949. Shortly before his death he distanced himself from Stalinism. In his memoirs he wrote about the time when

²⁷ It was more popularly known as the »Statistical Bureau for Information of the Comintern«.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud-Sándor Ferenczi, 25.1.1923: »Varga works at the Russian Embassy in Berlin; some days ago he wrote me a letter.«

²⁹ Institut mirovogo khoziaistva i mirovoi politiki, Akademia nauk SSSR.

³⁰ Personal communication by Jürgen Kuczinsky, 3.9.1986.

³¹ Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz, 5(1925), Nr. 21, S. 278.

he still believed that negative developments were merely temporary distortions of a system otherwise worth supporting,:

They destroyed and arrested systematically the best members of the party, the thinking revolutionary comrades. With a heavy heart, without understanding anything, as director of the Institute of the Red Professorship I saw how they arrested the best of my pupils. For decades I heard nothing from them. Sometimes I learned only of their death ...³³

He gave the memoirs to his daughter with the strict instruction not to read them and not to show them to anybody for at least 20 years. About Stalin he wrote:

In the end I have to say that, although Stalin has sent to death tens of thousands of the best Russian and foreign communists, he saved me twice: in 1938, when the GPU was ready to arrest me on the basis of countless false accusations, and in 1943, when the villain Vyshinsky charged me with the defence of Hitler-Imperialism. I have no idea why Stalin did this! Maybe he thought that he might need me again ...³⁴

One of the expressions of Varga's ambivalence to the regime was that, despite his tremendous influence, he always tried to hide in the background. The following anecdote seems to be typical of him:

When Varga was Stalin's advisor at the Potsdam Conference When in 1992 I first read the (then unpublished), he visited the destroyed Reichskanzlei in Berlin. There he saw lying about a lot of orders and he took a Ritterkreuz with him. Years later – after being decorated himself with three Orders of Lenin – when he told the story to a visitor in the presence of his wife (who usually addressed him by his surname), she asked him: „Varga, I have never seen that Ritterkreuz, where did you put it?” And he replied: “Over there, where all my Orders are”.³⁵

He died on October 7, 1964 in Moscow.

* * *

But let us go back to the increasingly difficult situation of science and culture in the Soviet Union, as far as it influenced the fate of psychoanalysis too. After Lenin's death Stalin's methods in his battle against political and personal opponents became a model for argumentation between scientific opponents. It was, of course, only mediocre scientists

³² Cf. 20-Century International relations: The end of East-West Cooperation.” Britannica CD, Version 98© 1994-1997. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

³³ Duda (1994), S. 381.

³⁴ Duda (1994), S. 408.

³⁵ Personal communication, Jürgen Kuczinsky, 3.9.1986.

who, for want of convincing arguments, used political denunciation in order to combat their rivals. The algorithm of that kind of pseudoscientific argumentation can be described as follows:³⁶

1. Construction of a *caricature* (C) of the *theory* (T) and the confusion and often replacement of T by its *philosophical, sociological, ideological etc. interpretation* (PhI);
2. Suggestion that this *caricature* is identical with the *theory* itself;
3. »Proof«, that the *theory* contradicts the accepted philosophy;
4. Conclusion, that the *theory* is unscientific, metaphysical, idealistic or reactionary.

This scheme was first applied to psychoanalysis by Jurinetz.³⁷ As a caricature of psychoanalysis he used Aurel Kolnai's book *Psychoanalysis and Sociology*.³⁸ Since Jurinetz calls Kolnai one of the »most enthusiastic pupils of Freud«, the Russian reader gets the impression that Freud supported the same primitive anticommunism and antisovietism. Furthermore, Jurinetz replaces Freud's psychoanalytic theory with its philosophical interpretation. In this way he saves the empirical verification of psychoanalytic hypotheses and »defeats« Freud on ideological grounds.

After the Second World War this algorithm was „implemented“ in most of the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, and used for decades to discredit psychoanalysis. Apart from the so-called “Prague Spring” in 1968, it was only after 1989 that psychoanalysis became again part of the culture of Eastern Europe.

Amazing as it is, it was in a letter to Evgenij Varga, that Lenin has warned: »The truth cannot depend on whom it has to serve«³⁹

³⁶ Vgl. Danailow (1985).

³⁷ Jurinetz (1925).

³⁸ Kolnai (1920).

³⁹ Valdimir Ilyich Lenin-Evgeny Varga, 1.9.1921.

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