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CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Fear and Loathing in the Soviet Union: Roy Barton and the NKVD

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American ethnographer Roy Franklin Barton (1883-1947) spent most of the 1930s living and working in the Soviet Union (Willard 2000). The U.S. State Department recently released documents under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) that shed light on some of the dire political forces with which Barton and other Americans living in the U.S.S.R. during this period had to contend. In Barton's case these documents establish that the NKVD (Peoples Commissariat of Internal Affairs—the KGB's institutional predecessor) pressured him to collect and report intelligence information. With time the increasingly coercive nature of this relationship caused Barton to fear for his life and freedom and led him to leave the U.S.S.R.

Barton was a gifted self-trained ethnographer who developed his own ethnographic style, using autobiographical narratives to help build powerful representations of indigenous voices (1938). He first worked as a teacher in the Philippine highlands in the early 1900s and in 1916 returned to the United States to study dentistry at the University of California, Berkeley. His years there brought him within intellectual circles that included Alfred Kroeber, T.T. Waterman, Robert Lowie, and Max and Paul Radin—though the influences of these individuals on his work were mixed. While he did not get a degree in anthropology, Barton wrote important ethnographies of Ifugao law and economics (1919; 1922). During the 1920s he practiced dentistry at various locations around the United States, in the course of which he developed an interest in the Doukhobors and various worker collectives in the United States (Kroeber 1949:92).

In 1930 Barton moved from the United States to the Soviet Union. He had long-standing interests in collectivist and communal alternatives to American capitalism, but as Kroeber noted in Barton's obituary, his resettlement was at least in part "precipitated by an alimony judgment against him which he considered exploitative and unjust" (Kroeber 1949:92). Although he arrived with the hope of employment as ethnographer, during the first six months Barton served as a dentist in the clinic of the Stomatological Institute in Leningrad. Subsequently, however, he became affiliated with the Institute of Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he worked with Waldemar Bogoras and other Soviet ethnographers, and later helped on the Leningrad Anti-Religious Exhibit, which stressed the roots of religion in superstition, and its role as a mechanism of social control. While Barton had a definite interest in Communist and Socialist movements, it is not clear whether he ever joined the Communist Party. In his obituary, Kroeber argued against that possibility, suggesting that his motivations had more to do with the professional opportunities than Marxism:

"[He] certainly was not an accepted Communist nor pretended to be nor passed as one: he kept his American citizenship throughout, and later he showed some bitterness against the Russians, when it seemed that they might not allow his wife and child to join him in America. Barton was just too independent and ruggedly cross-grained ever to belong wholly to any one group. The Russians appear to have recognized this and made wise allowances which they would not have made for their own nationals"(1949:92).

Barton conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippines in 1937 under combined American and Soviet sponsorship. Upon the completion of this fieldwork he conducted additional research at the British Museum and then returned to his wife and daughter in Leningrad.

By 1940, however, Barton no longer felt safe living in the Soviet Union, and on May 23rd of that year he came to the American Embassy in Moscow, fearful of his pending arrest, to request the renewal of his American passport. The State Department records recently released shed light on Kroeber's observation that Barton held some "bitterness against the Russians." Revealing a hitherto undocumented coercive relationship between Barton and the NKVD, they provide insight into the level of fear and restraint that overshadowed scholars working in the Soviet Union during this period. The events they recount transpired in the wake of the "Great Terror" of assassinations, show trials and purges of 1935-38 in which Stalin used the NKVD and other apparatuses to control and eliminate both real and imagined enemies (Conquest 1990; Getty 1985). The fear expressed by Barton should not be seen as unduly paranoid or unreasonable. He was concerned not only that he might be arrested or killed by the NKVD, but also about the safety of his wife Nina Lvovna Brun (identified by the State Department as a Circassian working as an Intourist guide) and his young daughter Erica.

The State Department originally claimed to have only a few files pertaining to Barton, but these additional documents were released after I filed a series of appeals arguing that Barton's presence must certainly have led to a greater bureaucratic notation than indicated by this initial release of records. (see Price 1997; the document below should be referred to by its State Dept. FOIA ID: 10JUL2001|199901326).

Enclosure No. 1 to
Dispatch No. 567 of
June 25, 1940 from the
American Embassy,
Moscow, U.S.S.R.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL.

Moscow, May 25, 1940

Mr. Barton, who called at the Embassy on May 23 for the renewal at his passport, called again this morning and stated that he was in great trouble, that he expected to be arrested during the day, and that his Soviet wife in Leningrad had either been arrested the night before or would be tonight.

When asked what the trouble was, Mr. Barton started telling a story, being very vague in all his statements. When I started asking him questions and making notes, he became even more nervous and inquired whether I was sure there were no Dictaphones in the Office and asked what I would do with the notes, stating that if the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) knew he was telling me this story they would shoot him at once. When assured that it would be kept in strict confidence he continued with his story, as follows:

He arrived in the Soviet Union in 1930 to work for the Institute of Ethnography in Leningrad. He resided in the Soviet Union continuously until 1937, during which time he married a Soviet citizen and a daughter, Erica was born to them. Erica has been registered at the Embassy as an American citizen.

In April 1937 Mr. Barton states that he was offered a position by the National Science Research Council, 2101 Constitution Avenue, Washington, for a scientific expedition to the Philippine Islands. When he started making arrangements for his departure, he attempted to obtain a Soviet reentry visa as he desired to return to his wife and child. He was informed that it was likely that he would not be permitted to return to the Soviet Union, and that certainly, a reentry visa would not be granted at the time of his departure. Mr. Barton stated that he wanted very much to go on the expedition and yet was afraid that it would be in effect abandoning his wife and child, which he did not want to do. He states that he thought about the matter for two weeks, trying all the time to obtain assurances from the Soviet authorities that he would be permitted to return. Then, he states, he was approached by a representative of the Leningrad NKVD and was told that if he would keep his eyes and ears open while he was in the Philippines, and upon his return to the Soviet Union write all his findings regarding the activities of the Japanese and White Russian colonies in the Philippines, his return to the Soviet Union could "easily" be arranged. This he agreed to do and departed from Leningrad in April 1937, proceeding to the Philippine Islands where he worked until November 1937. He then proceeded to London, where, he states, he spent his vacation but did not work or have any connection with the Soviet NKVD. He returned to Leningrad in February 1938, at which time he submitted his report to the NKVD in Leningrad concerning the activities of the Japanese and White Russians in the Philippines. When asked what his report consisted of he stated, "Nothing that could not be published in the newspapers", and refused to go into greater detail.

He states that he returned to work for his Institute in Leningrad where he had no trouble until August 1938, at which time the Soviet authorities refused to renew his vid na zhitelstvo (i.e. residence permit) for more than one or two weeks at a time, and began to threaten him with expulsion from the country. He states that he again became very anxious for the welfare of his wife and daughter and began to consider applying for Soviet citizenship. This continued until December 1938, when he was again approached by an agent of the NKVD and another proposition was put to him in return for which he was to be permitted to live in the Soviet Union.

He states that he agreed to the proposition, which follows, carried it out and was given regular renewals of his vid na zhitelstvo during the next year.

He was very vague concerning his activities, but stated that he was sent to Riga, via Estonia, where he was to investigate rumors that "a company in London" was sending spies into the Soviet Union across the Peipus Sea, and that many Estonian peasants, formerly Russians, were coming into the country the same way. When questioned as to the "company in London" he at first stated that he did not know or remember the name then later stated that he thought it was the Flax Company. Upon being questioned he stated that he was instructed to contact a Dr. Bell, address unknown, in Tallinn, and that while in Riga he contacted his wife's brother, Mr. Yuri Viskovadov, Alberta iela 5, but that the latter contact had no connection with his mission. He stated he returned to the Soviet Union, Leningrad, on January 2, 1939, and made his report to the NKVD. Upon being questioned as to his findings while abroad and his report on his return, Mr. Barton stated that they amounted to nothing, but I feel that he was not telling the truth.

He stated that subsequent to his return he was summoned to the Leningrad NKVD approximately every two weeks and was questioned, but that he had no other trouble and his residence permit was extended regularly. He refused to go into detail as to what he was questioned about stating that it was "just generalities", and was not important.

He stated that his life in Leningrad was normal, other than the periodic NKVD visits, until the Embassy started validating passports, at which time he again began having trouble in getting his vid na zhitelstvo renewed.

After the validation of his passport at the Embassy (the Ambassador gave him only one month from March 25 to April 25 1940, and for travel to the United States) he applied again for the extension of his vid na zhitelstvo and was told that it would be renewed only if he would submit a written statement as to what the Ambassador had told him concerning the reasons that American citizens were being forced by the Embassy to leave the Soviet Union. He stated that he submitted the document on which he said that the Ambassador had told him "that each American citizen in the Soviet Union was a potential source of friction between the United States Government and the Soviet Government and that conditions were bad enough as it is." I asked him if the Ambassador told him this and he replied in the affirmative. I asked if he had told them anything else concerning his visit to the Embassy and he replied in the negative.

Mr. Barton states that he again began to be worried about his family since the Ambassador had told him that his passport would not be validated again and that he began to consider 1) taking his wife and daughter out of the Soviet Union; 2) applying for Soviet citizenship and 3) taking only his daughter. He stated that he decided on the latter since his daughter could be included in his American passport should she be given permission to leave the Soviet Union whereas his wife's departure would mean a long delay as he had not taken any steps toward establishing her immigration status, and also since his wife had worked for the NKVD (he stated that she necessarily worked for them prior to their marriage as she was an INTOURIST guide, and that she had "never gotten free from their clutches") it was possible that she would have difficulty in leaving.

He then obtained a document from his wife giving her consent for their daughter to accompany him abroad and he filed an application for her to be permitted to go abroad as a Soviet citizen. Barton said that he felt he had been misled in putting in the application but thought that it would speed things up if she were given permission to leave as a Soviet citizen, and since after his departure from this country, he could have her included in his American passport and forget that she was a Soviet citizen, he felt it was the best way.

When he applied to take his daughter with him, he was again approached by the operator of the NKVD and told that if he wanted to expedite the matter he should bring copies of his application to Moscow and establish contact with a person here who would make him a proposal and, if he accepted, would assist him in obtaining permission for his daughter's early departure.

Mr. Barton's passport was renewed on May 23 to be valid for three months beyond its present validity (i.e. until September 25, 1940) in order to give him time to obtain permission for his daughter to accompany him. He executed forms and left photographs for the inclusion of his daughter and was told that he could have his passport amended by mail if he would send the certificate that she was no longer considered to be a Soviet citizen. (The foregoing story was unknown at the time Mr. Barton applied for the renewal of his passport.)

On the night of May 23 after his passport had been renewed, Mr. Barton contacted the person designated by the agent in Leningrad. When questioned as to the name of the person, Barton said at first that he did not know, then said he called him "Vasili". He stated that Vasili had told him to be at a certain address at 6 p.m., that he was there and Vasili picked him up in an automobile and that they drove to the country and parked and talked. Vasili's proposition was "very general". In return for a speedy and favorable decision in his daughter's case, Barton was to keep his eyes and ears open wherever he went and warn the Soviet Union of anything going on that might be harmful to them. He agreed to this proposition, he states, with the mental reservation that as soon as he got his daughter out of the country he was not going to have anything more to do with them. Upon his agreement, Vasili instructed him to call a certain telephone number on May 25 at 12 noon, and he would be given instructions as to where to meet "two men" who would give him the details of what he should do and the manner in which he should submit his reports.

Mr. Barton, in telling the above story to the Embassy stated that he was to make the call at 12 and that he expected to meet the men and be arrested, and that the Embassy would probably never hear from him again. He deposited \$15 in American currency and a letter of credit No. D65-1214 issued by the National City Bank of New York on November 11, 1937, with a letter extending the validity to and including October 31, 1940, with a request that it be held for six months then transmitted to his brother for disposition in the manner indicated in his letter of May 25, 1940, attached hereto.

When questioned first by me and then by Mr. Ward, as to why he thought he was going to be arrested he reiterated, "I have nothing definite but I feel and I know I will be". He also felt that they (the NKVD) had lured him to Moscow in order that they could arrest his wife in Leningrad and search the apartment. He stated that should they search his apartment they would find two letters written by him to his relatives in the United States in which he had requested that they bring pressure to bear on Congress and the Senate to prevent the Ambassador from canceling his passport and American citizenship. He stated that he had been "pretty sarcastic" concerning the Ambassador in his letters, that he had not mailed them and that he intended to tear them up but never had done so.

Mr. Barton was told that it was his affair whether he kept his appointment at 12 or not, and that if he desired he could advise the Embassy of the time and place his interview was to be held and the time on which he expected to come back, if at all. This he agreed to do and then left the Embassy to make his telephone call. A special deposit has been made of the \$15 in currency, and the above-mentioned letter of credit and his instructions as to its disposition have been placed in the confidential file in the file room safe pending future development in this case.

May 26, 1940--Barton returned to the Embassy yesterday afternoon and again this morning. He kept his appointment yesterday, but nothing happened other than further discussion of the reporting he is to do once he is abroad. He will return to Leningrad this evening. He will await action for several weeks on his daughter's application for permission to depart from the Soviet Union before he himself applies for a Soviet exit visa.

June 13, 1940--Barton returned to Moscow and stated that he was going to leave the Soviet Union for Manila, Philippine Islands on June 16. He stated that he felt his case was hopeless and that he thought it better to leave as soon as possible. He stated that he applied for a Soviet exit visa in Leningrad on June 3 and that it was granted on June 9 and that he had experienced no difficulty in obtaining it. He stated that he was going to meet the NKVD representative again today.

June 15, 1940--Barton called again today and stated that he was leaving on the trans-Siberian express tomorrow afternoon. He requested the validation of his passport and the return of his letter of credit and the \$15.00. The letter of credit with the instructions as to its disposition, and the \$15 were returned to him. His passport was validated for return to the United States via the Orient.

He stated that he had talked with the NKVD representatives again and that he was supposed to warn them of anything going on wherever he might go that would be harmful to the Soviet Union. He was to convey this information to them by writing to his wife in Leningrad.

He stated that he intended to establish his wife's eligibility to receive an immigration visa for the Philippines Islands where he intends to work, and that she would bring their daughter if and when she was successful in departing from the Soviet Union.

Postscript

In 1940 Barton was permitted to leave Russia for the Philippines to conduct field research funded by the Guggenheim Foundation. In the Philippines he became a prisoner of war under the Japanese and was interned at Los Baños for over three years. After the war he was a Research Associate at Berkeley, and in 1946 he became a Lichtstern Research Fellow at the University of Chicago—an affiliation he held at the time of his death in April 1947. The deprivations associated with Barton's years as a prisoner of war brought on chronic health conditions that contributed to his death. Had Barton lived another decade, it seems likely that his admission that he had provided intelligence data to the NKVD would have led to him being subpoenaed to appear before any number of security and loyalty committees to publicly account for these statements and his years in the Soviet Union.

Surprisingly, the FBI compiled less than a dozen pages of information on Barton. Their primary interest in him concerned the distinct possibility that he had committed passport fraud in order to live in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Barton is listed in a January 5, 1950 FBI memo (two and a half years after his death) discussing a "conspiracy" that occurred between 1931 and 1938 when "a number of persons in possession of fraudulent American passports obtained their transportation through World Tourist, Inc. [the Communist Party linked travel agency] and such transportation was charged against the accounts of the Communist Party" (WFO 40-3293 1/5/50). I have located no further records indicating FBI investigations of Roy Franklin Barton, and I do not know what became of his wife Nina and daughter Erica.

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