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STALIN’S FIRST VICTIM:  
THE TRIAL OF SULTANGALIEV

From June 9-12, 1923 the Central Committee, Central Control Commission and responsible workers from the national republics and oblasts met in Moscow for the fourth (and probably last) time since 1920. The subject of their meeting was the "trial" of Mirsaid Sultangaliev, the most prominent Muslim Communist in the Soviet Union and the leader of the Volga Tatars' in the state and Party apparatus. He was accused of treason for corresponding, with a view towards an alliance, with the Basmachi, specifically with one of their leaders, A. Z. Validov. Secondly he and, by implication, his followers, were also accused of having engaged in unlawful factional activity and the formation of a deviant line—Sultangalievism or "national Communism"—opposed to the Party line.

This was the first show trial of any major Communist and was linked to a subsequent purge of national "deviationists" in 1923-24. As such this trial and purge were events of the first magnitude in Soviet history. They impinged on the subsequent nationality policy of the Party and upon the rise of Stalin to leadership. They also are of profound importance for assessing the nature of the show trial and purge phenomenon and the linked issue of GPU involvement in Party affairs during the NEP. Inasmuch as the trial's ramifications and its causes in Sultangaliev's undeniable disenchantment with Soviet rule are covered in extenso elsewhere, I propose to focus attention upon the issues relating to the Stalin succession and the related phenomena of the purge and GPU involvement.

The necessity for doing so is not just traceable to the lack of Western and Soviet assessment of this trial's significance. New theories concerning the nature of the purge process in the mid-twenties, propounded by J. Arch Getty, which have aroused much controversy, enable us to test the validity of his theories against the actual record of events. According to Getty, the term purge should be restricted to those operations which were membership accountings, usually inaugurated after periods of mass enrollment in the Party. 


Purges were generally, but not always, responses to specific situations. As responses to large-scale membership increases they were regularly decreed affairs during the twenties, as in 1921. After 1921 responsibility for conducting purges was vested in the Central Control Commission. Using as his model the 1929-30 purge for which he claims the fullest data is available, Getty claims that if it were a model for those of the twenties then the main targets were the corrupt, opportunists, careerists, hangers-on, those who were of class-alien origin (itself a criterion which lent itself to abuse though he does not notice that in his statements), the inactive, passive, criminal, and so on. It was not done, at least explicitly, to rid the Party of all dissenters or oppositionists even when such people, by virtue of intelligentsia origin or values might have been expelled by proletarian committees for being "alien elements." This view implies that the purge was not primarily a political instrument and that Party cadres had little reason to fear them as long as they executed Party policy. Moreover, they were not directed at the "Verkhovniki" of the Party, its elite. By examining the circumstances surrounding Sultangaliev's arrest and trial we can test this hypothesis.

The period of 1921-23 was one of acute political tension at the center as well as in the nationality republics. In every borderland and national republic uprisings against Soviet power took place, frequently lasting for several years. Secondly, every nationality Party was a source of acute and persisting national rivalries from the Ukraine to Central Asia. At the center the struggle against various oppositions and worker-peasant discontent soon linked up with the growing intrigues around Lenin that antedated his first stroke and only intensified once his succession became the issue. Thus the institution of the Party purge and the use of the Cheka or later the GPU to quell dissent in Moscow or the republics entered into the government's agenda at this time. Sentiment in favor of strict discipline against dissenters on the national or any other question grew steadily. Already in 1919 the Ukrainian Party Central Committee resolved that any raising of the national question in struggle against the KPU was all the same whether done by bourgeois parties, or Soviet and semi-Communist parties, i.e., an attempt to undermine the proletarian dictatorship. In 1919 Stalin "jokingly" threatened dissenting Ukrainian Communists, Mazlakh and Shakhrai, with the Cheka for protesting against centralization there. From below the same mentality was on display at the Ninth Perm' Gubernia Party Conference in 1920 which announced,