Joseph Grigulevich: A Tale of Identity, Soviet Espionage, and Storytelling

Andrei Znamenski
Professor of History, Department of History, 219 Mitchell Hall, The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152
aznamenski@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the life of Joseph Grigulevich (1913–1988), a famous early Soviet illegal intelligence operative, who conducted various "special tasks" on behalf of Stalin's foreign espionage network. These included the murder of dissident Spanish communist Andreas Nin (1938), a participation in the assassination of Leon Trotsky (1940), posing as a Costa Rican ambassador (1949–1952), and an abortive project to assassinate Joseph Bros Tito (1952). In contrast to conventional espionage studies that are usually informed by diplomatic, political, and military history approaches, I employ a cultural history angle. First, the paper examines the formation of Grigulevich's communist and espionage identity against his background as a cosmopolitan Jewish “other” from the interwar Polish-Lithuanian realm. Second, it explores his role in the production and invention of intelligence knowledge, which he later used to jump start his second career as a prominent Soviet humanities scholar and a bestselling writer of revolutionary non-fiction.

Keywords


This paper explores the life of Joseph Grigulevich (1913–1988), a famous early Soviet illegal who operated in Europe and Latin America from 1936 to 1952. In contrast to conventional espionage studies that are more often than not are informed by diplomatic, political, and military history approaches, mine is a cultural angle. First, I examine the formation of his communist and espionage
identity as an ethnic “other” – a cosmopolitan “non-Jewish Jew”1 from Lithuania and a member of the Polish-Lithuanian Communist International (Comintern) underground in the early 1930s. Second, I explore his role in the production and invention of intelligence knowledge, which he later used to jump start his second career as a prominent Soviet humanities scholar and a bestselling writer of revolutionary non-fiction. My ultimate goal is to use the life story of this colorful character to draw attention to ethno-ideological aspects of Comintern and early Soviet espionage work. Scholarship that covers these themes, especially the writings dealing with the history of Soviet

intelligence, usually dwells on the political and the ideological, downplaying the issues of ethnicity and identity.

The original desire to write this paper came out of sheer curiosity about that man, with whom I briefly interacted in 1982 and 1983 during workshops at the Moscow Institute of Anthropology, where he chaired the department of religious studies. In 1983, a Moscow colleague enlightened me about Grigulevich’s background by scornfully whispering that the man had railroaded his scholarly career by utilizing KGB aura and connections. At that time, however, I was not yet aware about the specifics of his undercover deeds. As it was later revealed, they included the murder of dissident Spanish communist Andreas Nin (1938), an active participation in the assassination of Leon Trotsky (1940), posing as a Costa Rican ambassador to the Vatican City (1949–1952) (Fig. 1), and, finally, an abortive project to assassinate Joseph Bros Tito (1952).

Identity Matters and Espionage Studies

In this paper, I will largely skim over those well-covered colorful episodes of his career and focus instead on the making of Grigulevich’s identity and on his experiences as a participant of what one may call the production of Soviet intelligence knowledge, which helped him not only to safely survive through xenophobic Stalinist purges of the 1930s and the 1940s but also to become a scholar and, later, a successful author under Brezhnev’s “advanced socialism.” In the life of this master spy storyteller there were four major “literary” junctures that secured his place at first in the Stalinist intelligence apparatus and later in Soviet humanities. Among them, one needs to name a book of forged documents published in several languages to “prove” an alleged fascist and subversive activities of Trotskyites in Spain (1938), an adventurous script of Trotsky’s assassination that caught Stalin’s attention (1939), a book review that purchased Grigulevich a salvation in the time of anti-Semitic attacks on so-called rootless cosmopolitans (1949), and, finally, the multitude of Latin American revolutionary biographies Grigulevich produced at in the 1960s and the 1970s.

So far there has been no serious scholarly biography of Grigulevich, although in Russia his adventurous life prompted three writers with strong KGB affiliations (Nil Nikandrov, Vladimir Chikov, and Yuri Paporov) to devote

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2 For more on these episodes, see, for example, Boris Volodarsky, Stalin’s Agent: The Life and Death of Alexander Orlov (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 190–213.
to his career book-length texts. Two of these authors (Chikov and Nikandrov) had access to the Grigulevich twelve-volume dossier, which they have extensively quoted without providing exact references. Moreover, Chikov has indicated an archival call number for that set of documents in the archives of the Federal Security Service (FSB) – the successor of infamous KGB. On the one hand, such frivolous use of the archival documents handicapped the quality of their research. Yet, on the other hand, for a critically-thinking scholar, these two books represent a treasure trove of primary documents, which are not accessible to regular academic researchers in Russia or from abroad.

It is especially related to Chikov’s book. Unlike Nikandrov, a skilled writer who weaved primary documents into his narrative, which makes it harder to single out a particular source, Chikov compensated the lack of literary skills by diluting his wooden prose with extensive multipage reproductions of complete original documents from the Grigulevich dossier. Deeply grounded in the paranoid culture of Soviet espionage and isolationism, those three authors, who personally knew Grigulevich, have understandably valorized their character as a role model for the Soviet and Russian intelligence and even portrayed him as a poster patriot of Russia. Such approach is again especially visible in the biography produced by Chikov. From his book, Grigulevich, a diaspora cosmopolitan personality who matured and socialized in the Eastern European Russian-Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish “middle ground,” emerges as a caricature latter-day Eurasianist. Projecting to Grigulevich cultural sentiments currently popular in Russia, Chikov portrays him as a person mesmerized with Dostoyevsky, Russian soil and Russian Orthodox religion.

Being particularly intrigued with the story of him posing as a Costa Rican ambassador, Costa Rican reporter and writer Marjorie Ross also wrote a book on Grigulevich, which so far remains the best balanced account of his life. Last but not least, in his comprehensive biography of Alexander Orlov (the person who had recruited Grigulevich into the Soviet intelligence apparatus in 1936), Boris Volodarsky has devoted an entire chapter to Grigulevich. Volodarsky presents Grigulevich as a sinister and ruthless assassin, who had travelled the world, killing on behalf of Stalin. Although morally valid from a...
present point of view, taken out of the historical context, this approach does not explain much of what drew people like Grigulevich, Orlov and the like to the Communist cause in general and to the Soviet spy network in particular.

Thus, I have doubts about the validity of Volodarsky’s statement that, despite his traditional Karaite upbringing, young Grigulevich nevertheless joined the Polish-Lithuanian communist movement. Such a statement simply does not fly because other prominent early Bolshevik spy operatives, agents, and informers such as Leopold Trepper, Alexander Orlov (Leiba Felbdin), Ignace Reiss (Nathan Poretsky), Walter Krivitsky (Samuel Ginsberg), Arnold Deutsch, Otto Katz, and Mark Zborowski, to name only a few, had similar traditional backgrounds. So I want to argue the opposite: Grigulevich and the like joined the Bolshevik cause and, subsequently, Soviet intelligence underground, not despite, but very much because of their “countercultural” desire to transgress those traditional backgrounds and shape a new internationalist identity to survive amid rising local indigenous nationalisms and anti-Semitism. As Adam Weisberger has pointed out, recast into a secular prophecy of universal social justice, old Jewish messianic tradition played not a small role in the shaping of cosmopolitan identity of radical elements in the Jewish diaspora. Exploring this topic, I also profited extensively from research into ethno-ideological significance of early Communism for a radical internationalist-minded segment of the Eastern European Jewry.

Methodologically speaking, in writing this biographical essay, I also greatly benefited from a study produced by Will Sunderland, who used the life story of Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg (1885–1921) (a Baltic German warrior aristocrat at the service of the Russian Empire) as a lens to explore important landmarks in Eurasian history in the first two decades of the twentieth century. A similar biographical case can be made about members of a Jewish, Latvian, and Polish diaspora at the service of the Bolshevik communist empire. Moreover, a detailed comparative study of the empowerment and disempowerment of these “imperial” (Baltic German, Polish, Jewish, and Latvian) diasporas in

7 Adam Weisberger, The Jewish Ethic and the Spirit of Socialism (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).
Russia/Soviet Empire still awaits its researcher. Existing writings on the Soviet espionage have been naturally focused on military, diplomatic and spy craft aspects of the theme, usually paying marginal attention to ethnicity and identity aspects. My research into the making of Grigulevich identity serves to partially fill this void.

**A “Non-Jewish Jew” from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth**

Joining at first the Communist International (Comintern) network and then drifting into the Stalinist espionage apparatus, Grigulevich was a typical representative of so-called mobilized diaspora who found their ethno-ideological niche and identity in the world of early Bolshevism. The Bolshevik revolution, which completely dislodged and phased out the old Russian-German ruling elite, had to deal with the illiterate peasant majority of a Slavic origin. As a result, in the early Soviet Union, diaspora segments (mostly of a Jewish, Polish, and Latvian origin), which had a higher educational level compared to surrounding Slavic masses, originally served as an essential human resource from which the regime could draw cadre for its emerging communist bureaucracy, especially in the fields of military, ideology, foreign relations, and intelligence. The expression of “mobilized diaspora” was introduced by political scientist John Armstrong for the description of the Baltic Germans who, prior to 1917, served the Russian Empire as her diplomatic and cultural intermediary abroad.10

Grigulevich, a would-be agent ofINO,11 was born in the Vilnius (former Wilno) area of Lithuania (Fig. 2), which, prior to 1917, was part of the Pale. Vilnius was a cosmopolitan multilingual city, where Grigulevich and surrounding people communicated in Yiddish, Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian.12 On top of this, many intellectuals in the area had working knowledge of German – a legacy of the former cultural hegemony of the Baltic German element

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11 Soviet foreign intelligence apparatus developed along two venues: a foreign department (INO) within the Soviet secret police (Checka-OGPU-NKVD-MGB-KGB) and an intelligence bureau (Razvedupr-GRU) within the Defense Ministry. Comintern originally maintained its own underground intelligence network, but it was later absorbed by the secret police and the military.

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in that area. Incidentally, Grigulevich, who studied German in a gymnasium, possessed excellent reading and writing skills in that language, which was confirmed by an Eastern German friend of mine who corresponded with him in the early 1980s.\footnote{In the global network of the Communist International, German language served as the main mode of communication for its agents, representing dozens of nationalities.} During the first three decades of the last century, Vilnius was the major cultural hub of the Eastern European Jewry. It enjoyed the status of the “Jerusalem of Eastern Europe” which sported publishing houses, schools, libraries, and theaters. It was also a place of competing ideologies which ranged from Zionism to Socialist Bund and to Communism with all of these groups seeking to create their own institutions, uniforms, schools and party jargon. In fact, Vilnius was considered the birthplace of the modern Jewish socialist movement.\footnote{Arcadius Kahan, “Vilna: the Sociocultural Anatomy of a Jewish Community in Interwar Poland,” in \textit{Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History}, ed. Roger Weiss (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 149–160.} What was common for Jewish groups of diverse ideological brands in this city was a dark shadow of anti-Semitism which spread over all of them.
Yet, despite his close familiarity with the vibrant surrounding Yiddish-speaking culture, by his peculiar lineage, Grigulevich was a Jewish “other.” A would-be ace of the Soviet espionage grew up as part of the Karaite Jewish community in a family of a Karaite pharmacist and a housewife of a Russian-Jewish origin. At various stages of his career, he identified himself as a Lithuanian Jew, a Karaite Jew, and, finally (since 1949), simply as a Karaite – the identity he maintained until the end of his life. This latter identification was written into his internal passport when he received his Soviet citizenship in 1949, after being recalled to Moscow in 1947 to undergo a loyalty check-up. The Karaites are a tiny splinter ethno-religious Jewish group, which historically resided in Crimea and in pockets of Eastern Europe. In the 1920s, they numbered about 2,000 people. Unlike the rest of the Eastern European Jewry, their spiritual tradition was grounded in the authority of the Tanah (Old Testament) and did not recognize the more recent rabbinical tradition that was centered on the Talmud. In their ritual life, the Karaites also relied on Hebrew rather than Yiddish, the language that was used by the majority of the Eastern European Jews.

The Karaites were also known for their superior literacy, even when compared with the rest of the Jewish diaspora that was famous anyway for its educational level that sharply contrasted with the illiteracy of the surrounding Russian and Ukrainian peasant populations. As for Grigulevich, his mother invested much effort by placing him into a good gymnasium. From early on, in his family, Grigulevich was saturated with the book culture. At the age of 10, he was already exposed to major pieces of world classical literature. Furthermore, at the gymnasium, his teacher assigned him to take care of a school library, which he used as an opportunity to continue indulging himself in non-stop reading – his major and the only hobby.

In the 1930s, a Polish-Lithuanian Karaite community, which numbered between 900 and 1000 people, tried to empower itself by emphasizing their special status, setting themselves aside from the surrounding Yiddish-speaking

15 A KGB archivist who later defected to UK Vasili Mitrokhin, who saw a personal file of Grigulevich, indicated that the latter was identified there as a Lithuanian Jew. Christopher M. Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, The Sword and the Shield: the Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 87. Yet, in a 1949 letter, soliciting a fast track communist party membership for Grigulevich, his bosses identified him simply as “a Karaite by nationality.” P. Fedotov to G.M. Malenkov (1949), in Chikov, Nash chelovek v Vatikane, 228.


17 Mikhail Kizilov and Katarzyna Tempczyk, The Sons of Scripture: The Karaites in Poland and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century (Berlin: De Gruyter Open, 2015), 111.
rabbinical kin. The origin of that special status went back not only to their religious beliefs but also to their ethnic language, which was close to a Turkic dialect of Crimean Tatars. The latter was the product of their mingling with the Crimean Tatar population. Living around the Crimean Tatars and borrowing from them linguistically, the Karaites nevertheless maintained a separate Hebrew identity. Still, for Karaite cultural activists the interactions with the Tatars later became a powerful venue of ethnic empowerment. The emphasis on their Crimean origin allowed building up their image as descendants of “proud” warlike nomads: Crimea was at first an integral part of the Khazar Khanate, whose elite had adopted Judaism, and then part of the Mongol Golden Horde.

The peculiar religious and linguistic traits that somewhat set the Karaites aside from the mainstream Eastern European Jewry turned out to be useful when they had to deal with anti-Semitism both in the Russian Empire and, afterwards, in interwar Lithuania and Poland. Thus, in imperial Russia, the Karaites received permission to be registered in their passports as people of the “Karaite faith” rather than as Jews. As such, they were fortunate to avoid discriminatory residency and movement requirements that the Pale inhabitants had to face until 1914. Talking about their peculiar “double identity,” one aged Karaite remembered how, in the 1920s, his and neighboring children’s parents instructed them to act as Jews at home and simultaneously to present themselves as “Turks” to outsiders “on the street.”

In interwar Poland, which took over Vilnius in 1922 and which purposely segregated Jews from indigenous Poles, the Karaites sought to obtain a separate legal status. Eventually, in 1936, they were able to get it, officially becoming the Karaite Religious Union of the Polish Republic. Still, this had little effect on their daily life, in which nationalists did not differentiate, frequently piling the Karaites together with the rest of the Jewish segment as targets of discrimination. Nevertheless, that very status literally saved them during the genocidal years (1941 and 1942) (Fig. 3), when the German National Socialist regime physically wiped out the entire Lithuanian Jewish community but spared the Karaites who were able to safely pose as “Turks.”

“Mobilized Diaspora” Person: Forging Communist Identity

Overall, in the wake of World War I, the Eastern European Jewish diaspora had a very hard time, trying to survive amid emerging local nationalisms that

18 Ibid., 110.
aggressively sought to identify themselves in biological and racial terms.\textsuperscript{19} Facing rising anti-Semitism, this diaspora became a powerful recruitment resource for early Bolshevik ideological and spy apparatus.\textsuperscript{20} Given the virulent nature of nationalisms in Eastern and Central Europe, the radical Jewish youth, if they did not emigrate overseas, had little choice except to follow either Zionism or Socialism, or a combination of the both, which was represented by various “national socialists” brands such as Jewish Bund, Labor Zionist, and Poalei Zion. People like Grigulevich, found their ideological romance and spiritual solace in the radical internationalism of Communism – the extreme manifestation of the Socialist ethos. A cosmopolitan message of class solidarity and universal liberation that Communism carried in its early Bolshevik years promised a utopian vision of a “nationless” paradise, which would automatically make obsolete ethnic and religious differences along with anti-Semitism. In general, in the interwar years, for many young Jews, converting to one of the offshoots of the Socialist “faith” was both an attempt to find their identity in surrounding society and simultaneously a countercultural rebellion against the traditional faith of their fathers.

\textsuperscript{20} Slezkine, \textit{The Jewish Century}, 173–180.
Writing about European Jewish diaspora, Jeff Schatz, Andre Gerrits and Adam Weisberger pointed out that for those who chose to go socialist and communist, it was not only an act of assimilation but also very much an act of exchanging one form of identity for another. A former Bolshevik foreign intelligence operative Elizabeth Poretsky, who later defected along with her husband, stressed, “Many young Jewish intellectuals were attracted to a [communist] party which, whatever its other goals, also fought anti-Semitism. It represented a heaven where they could, although in great danger, think freely and join a society which did not discriminate against them.” Those party members of Polish origin within the Polish Communist Party used to joke that they were the only true communists as they were not in need of a comradely heaven, but could, if they wished, get back to their indigenous society.

In his seventeenth year, Grigulevich became an active militant in the Polish-Lithuanian communist underground movement, which in 1931 led to his arrest, two-year imprisonment, and eventual exile from Poland. Using generous financial assistance from his well-to-do fellow-Karaite sponsors Eli and Abraham Lopato, prominent tobacco merchants and philanthropists, Grigulevich moved to Paris. There, living on the Lopatos’ monthly allowance of 1,000 to 1,300 francs a month (an astronomical stipend at that time), he spent ten months at the Sorbonne University in Paris, studying social sciences and becoming deeply involved in Communist International (Comintern) activities. Eventually, in 1934, the Comintern sent him to Argentina to engage local Jewish and Polish immigration networks to boost communist labor mutual aid work. This assignment also provided him with an opportunity to rekindle relations with his father who had moved to Argentina as early as 1924 and who had opened a small drugstore there. While in Argentina, Grigulevich continued hanging around “people of the book”: local and immigrant intellectuals. His Argentina Comintern colleagues, who obviously expected from him more involvement with indigenous proletarians, somewhat lukewarmly noted that habit of his in

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23 Ibid.

their 1936 confidential memo to Moscow. Among others, Grigulevich liked to socialize with the local Marxist philosopher Emilio Troise, author of the Stalinist brochure *Materialismo dialéctico* (1938). Incidentally, the same Comintern memo already stressed Grigulevich’s adventurist nature, his passion for traveling, and tale-telling. Later, his secret police curators, who were similarly apprehensive of these traits, nevertheless concluded that, when tamed, they could be very useful for spy craft.

In 1936, contrary to the wishes of his comrades who needed him in Argentina to do a routine work of collecting funds to assist imprisoned communists, Grigulevich suddenly rushed to Spain. Driven by a romantic revolutionary idealism, he was eager to join Spanish republican forces that were desperately fighting against a right-wing army coup. Spain was a rallying call for all cosmopolitan revolutionaries at that time: almost alone, this progressive besieged republic was combatting the dark forces of world fascism and imperialism. Soviet Russia and her foreign intelligence skillfully harnessed those anti-fascist sentiments, providing a limited military assistance to the republic. This helped to mute the morbid image of the Stalin regime; by the end of the 1930s, it was quickly losing its internationalist traits and turning into a xenophobic dictatorship. In fact, in addition to the earlier internationalism, anti-fascism and the Spanish Civil War later provided another fertile recruitment ground for the Soviet espionage apparatus that was able to catch in its net numerous left idealists and fellow-travelers. Grigulevich, an adventurous book lover and a communist militant, was precisely this type of person.

**Production of Espionage Knowledge**

It was in Spain where Orlov, an NKVD station chief, noticed the 24-year old Comintern agent, who operated under an alias Jose Ocampo, and recruited him on the spot because of his strong physique and excellent command of Russian, Spanish, and German. Grigulevich was attached to the Administration of

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28 Dolgopolov, "Iz nelegalov v akademiki."
29 “Lichnoe delo Peres Luis Jose (Ocampo),” Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii – The Russian State Archive of Contemporary History f. 495, op. 230, d. 10.
Special Tasks, a special unit within the Soviet secret police that was responsible for abductions and assassinations on foreign soil. A “special task” that boosted Grigulevich’s credibility in the eyes of his new Soviet handlers was his active participation in the assassination of Nin, the leader of Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM), a small group of the independent communist Left who openly denounced Stalin’s terror against his Bolshevik comrades. In fact, Volodarsky, a historian of the 1930s’ Soviet espionage, has argued that it was Grigulevich who actually executed Nin. Stalin’s goal in Spain was to use his secret police apparatus and the Spanish communist party to place the entire political and military decision-making process under the complete Soviet control.

It was also in Spain where Grigulevich had his first stint in the “production of knowledge.” In order to justify the attack on Nin and the rest of the anti-Stalinist left, Orlov assigned Grigulevich and a Spanish communist journalist to manufacture “documentary evidence,” proving that Nin and his comrades collaborated with fascists. Published as Espionage in Spain, this volume (Fig. 4) represented documentary “evidence” gathered by one Max Riegér, an imagined international brigade fighter who eagerly “exposed” the enemies of the revolution and who accompanied his “exposure” with forged letters and testimonies. For Grigulevich, the introduction into the world of “arts and letters” continued in Barcelona, where Orlov sent him to serve as an interpreter for the Soviet star writers Mikhail Koltsov and Ilya Ehrenburg, and moviemaker Roman Karmen. These three arrived in Spain to take part in a grand propaganda show called Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture. Put together in 1938 by Comintern and Stalin’s secret police, this event was designated to convert the sympathy of the world’s prominent left literati and fellow-travelers for the Spanish Republic into the support of Stalin’s regime.

In the meantime, Soviet dictatorship was increasingly acquiring “National Bolshevik” features, closing itself to the outside world and eliminating so-called Trotskyites. This trend eventually escalated into a xenophobic...
Figure 4 A book of “documentary” evidence against POUM forged by the Orlov NKVD team in Spain
campaign against all foreign and diaspora (German, Hungarian, Jewish, Latvian, Polish, Finnish, and Greek) segments in the Soviet bureaucracy, including intelligence operatives. In her memoirs (with the characteristic title *Our Own People*), Poretsky, a colleague and wife of a Soviet spy-defector Reiss, vividly described the suffocating animosity that was gradually growing around the multilingual foreign-born and diaspora elements in the Soviet military and secret police intelligence departments. She also pointed to a slowly rising provincial Slavic cadre who eventually replaced purged and executed cosmopolitan elements from all branches of Soviet intelligence. By 1952, this “National Bolshevik” trend led to a strict requirement to hire neither the Jews nor the foreign-born into the Soviet security services – a rule that is firmly in place to the present day.

By all means, Grigulevich was to be eliminated in the whirlwind of Stalin’s Great Terror because he perfectly fit the abovementioned profile of a cosmopolitan foreign-born Bolshevik. Worse still, in a desperate attempt to stay away from the slaughterhouse of the terror, Orlov, his immediate supervisor in Spain, defected from the spy apparatus with a large chunk of currency stolen from the station funds. Using his diaspora family links in New York, he settled in the United States, laying low in fear until 1953 without exposing his espionage network. Yet Grigulevich’s immanent lethal eviction from the Soviet intelligence was miraculously postponed and then terminated. His personal “hands on” experience in purging Stalin’s enemies in Spain and especially a detailed script of a projected cavalier attack on Trotsky’s compound in Mexico caught attention of Lavrentii Beria, the new chief of the secret police. As a result, he was spared in order to head one of two mobile groups which had been set up to complete the assassination of Trotsky. For Stalin, who aspired for a total control of the entire communist Left, the elimination of Trotsky and a tiny group of his supporters was the most urgent task, which was to supersede other important items on a Soviet espionage agenda. After Trotsky was murdered, Grigulevich was decorated with an elite Soviet order of the Red Star and sent away back to Argentina, where, half-forgotten, he lingered on as the Latin

33 Poretsky, *Our Own People*, 165–207.
American station chief for eight more years away from major war-time spy and diplomatic games.

A Cosmopolitan against “Rootless Cosmopolitans”

In 1947, he was back on the radar of his Moscow handers, who recalled him to the Soviet Union to be vetted and carefully screened. This again could have potentially severe repercussions for the agent who was returning to the country that saw another more vicious round of an escalating attack against internationalists. This ideological campaign, which targeted so-called rootless cosmopolitans, was building on the xenophobic trends of the 1930s and patriotic sentiments unleashed by World War II. The declared goal was to insulate the Soviet Union from Western cultural influences and simultaneously to celebrate all things Russian. Soon this campaign acquired unspoken anti-Semitic notions. As “cosmopolitans” with potential diaspora links to their Western kin, many Jewish professionals were driven out of universities, research institutions, hospitals, and governmental bureaucracy, including those few who remained in the Soviet foreign intelligence apparatus.

Like in the 1930s, by his sheer cosmopolitan ethnic background and international experiences, flamboyant and outgoing Grigulevich could easily have become a target. As a test of loyalty, while keeping his Mexican-born wife in Russia as a hostage, Moscow intelligence bosses sent him briefly to New York City to handle a drop-box for Rudolph Abel, another famous Soviet illegal.35 A true believer, who was fully committed to the secular faith of Communism and to his spy craft, at that point Grigulevich was also driven by a pure survival instinct. Later, during Perestroika time, answering a question posed by a friend, a former KGB operative-turned writer, about what was the major driving motive in his work in the 1930s and the 1940s, Grigulevich openly replied, “Fear! Fear of possible repercussions for not doing something, for not fulfilling an order.”36 Although Grigulevich returned, the foreign intelligence bureaucrats continued to maroon him, keeping both him and his wife in dark about their future. Not yet fully sure about the couple amid the reigning xenophobic campaign that by 1949 acquired hysterical proportions, the distrustful superiors were not in hurry, double-checking them and simultaneously trying to figure out in what capacity they could use them. It was during that state of limbo, which continued for an entire year, that the foreign intelligence service

35 Chikov, Nash chelovek v vatikane, 223.
36 Igor Damaskin, Stalin i razvedka (Moskva: Veche, 2004), 98.
suddenly was able to save his career as an agent and give an indirect boost to his subsequent literary career of a scholar-publicist. Grigulevich was granted an opportunity to plug into the anti-cosmopolitans campaign on the “right” side. Alexander Korotkov, his immediate boss who supervised Soviet illegals, approached him, suggesting that Grigulevich write not another classified report but an analytical book review for *Bolshevik*, the chief communist party ideological magazine. Scarce KGB records point out that such a strange assignment was not simply an attempt to keep confused and idle Grigulevich busy. It was rather an effort of the espionage bureaucrat to kill two birds with one stone: to get some ideological scores in the unfolding anti-cosmopolitans campaign and simultaneously a way to save his agent. His assignment was to review a 1948 monograph on US policies in the Caribbean Sea area, which was produced by Lev Zubok (1894–1967), an American-educated Soviet historian. Like Grigulevich, this idealist scholar was part the Eastern European Jewish diaspora. He similarly took seriously the internationalist message of early Bolshevism about the coming “nationless” paradise, and in 1924, after ten years of living and learning in the United States, he chose to leave the “den of capitalism” and moved to the Soviet Union, where he devoted himself to studying and teaching contemporary history of the United States.

The book produced by Zubok was a serious Marxist study of US foreign policy that would remain a model for other Soviet Americanists well until the end of the 1960s. Like the rest of Soviet scholarship, from an ideological viewpoint, the text was an impeccable politically correct product, which was decorated with references to the “sacred books” of Marxism, ritual praises of Stalin, and repeated denunciations of American imperialism. Nevertheless, Zubok was condemned as a “rootless cosmopolitan” along with several hundreds of other Soviet intellectuals and professionals. The reason this historian was chosen as an object of the ideological attack was simply a “lethal” combination of his Jewish ethnicity and the very fact of living and studying in the United States, and, on top of everything, teaching some of his courses in English. Driven by the unfolding hysteria about all things Western, his academic colleagues were actually the ones who sparked the whole witch hunt against him personally. Most certainly, not a small factor that made him a perfect “sacrificial lamb” was the fact that in the mid-1930s he was able to wiggle himself out of hazardous foreign espionage work assignment in the United States that the Soviet foreign intelligence wanted to impose on him. In the totalitarian matrix of the secret police bureaucracy this was a sign of a questionable loyalty. Moreover,

unlike many other Jewish professionals, Zubok refused to repent his cosmopolitan “sins.” Amid a quickly escalating Cold War confrontation with the United States, people like Zubok became easy and convenient targets that provided a ready-made human material both for the secret police and Stalinist ideologists to chew on.38

Intelligence bosses decided to involve Grigulevich, who already had experience in the literary black ops, into that ideological campaign. In the meantime, desperate to end the unclear situation regarding his future fate, the dormant agent was begging to finalize his ideological identity and admit him to the Soviet Communist party. To this “Red Templar,” if granted, a party membership might have appeared as a sign of the ultimate ideological trust. It is notable that Grigulevich, who at first was not aware of appropriate bureaucratic procedures, was more concerned about securing his membership in that Bolshevik “sacred order” rather than in getting Soviet citizenship that was in fact a routine prerequisite for soliciting that membership.39

Korotkov, who wanted to stay a step ahead in riding the emerging anti-cosmopolitan ideological trend, hinted to Grigulevich that his future party membership depended on the content of his review.40 The review assignment, which contained a clear invitation to smear Zubok with dirt, was to give a chance to their former Latin American agent to boost his ideological credentials. Korotkov had the Bolshevik editorial team approached Grigulevich, formally soliciting from him an expert opinion about Zubok’s view of the US policies in the Caribbean Sea area and Central America in general. The whole noise about the book review was actually a part of concerted efforts of secret police bureaucrats and party ideologists to invent and expose “cosmopolitans” in order to ride the ideological crusade. The latter ricocheted against the old editorial team of Bolshevik that was fired in 1949 for not being active enough in exposing “cosmopolitans.”

It was essential that the Grigulevich review was neatly timed to fit the efforts of Mikhail Suslov, the newly appointed party propaganda chief, who issued a special memo, specifically blaming the old Bolshevik’s editorial staff for closing their eyes on “cosmopolitan mistakes made by Minz, Zubok, and others” in

39 In fact, in 1937, Grigulevich personally asked Beria to admit him into the Bolshevik party, when he was undergoing training in spy craft in Moscow. Then he unsuccessfully approached him for a second time with the same request in 1940 before leaving for Mexico to finish the Trotsky assignment. Chikov, Nash chelovek v Vatikane, 209–210.
40 Ibid., 227.
“the field of history scholarship.” In fact, Grigulevich’s attack on Zubok, which was orchestrated by Korotkov behind the scenes, preceded the Suslov memorandum by a month. Thus, a “correctly” phrased ideological review written by Grigulevich, who diligently exposed Zubok as the worst example of a cosmopolitan and as an apologist for American imperialism, contributed to the xenophobic ideological crusade and simultaneously served as Grigulevich’s ticket into the communist party. KGB-affiliated biographer of Grigulevich, who is conveniently silent about the content and the whole story behind the book review, nevertheless, spilled the beans: “This essay received a wide social resonance and was highly appreciated in the Central Committee of the Communist Party.” Incidentally, this review was the first time when Grigulevich took up the pen name Joseph Lavretskii, which he later used in all of his popular biography books on Latin American revolutionaries published in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Thus, maneuvering through a minefield of “cosmopolitan traps,” he had his superiors assured of his reliability and loyalty. This finally granted him the Soviet citizenship and cleared him for a new espionage assignment in Italy at the end of 1949. Simultaneously, Grigulevich’s superiors forwarded a letter to the Communist Party’s Central Committee, in which they asked to bypass regular procedures in order to immediately grant him a candidate membership in the Soviet Communist Party. Permission was promptly issued and Grigulevich made his first step toward a full-fledged membership in the chief ideological “order” of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, in that solicitation letter, his Jewishness was never mentioned. Instead, they referred to him as a “citizen of the USSR” and a “Karaite by nationality.”

When in Italy, Grigulevich was again in his familiar role of a bohemian, joker, story-teller, and traveler. By posing as the bastard offspring of a

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42 Iosif Lavretskii [Joseph Grigulevich], “Imperialisticheskaia politika SShA v stranakh Latinskoi Ameriki (o knige L.I. Zuboka ‘Imperialisticheskaia politika SShA v stranakh Karibskogo basseina’),” Bolshevik 9 (1949): 66–72. It is notable that the Grigulevich essay was read by the top bosses of the Soviet espionage apparatus and approved by Suslov’s ideological department. Chikov, Nash chelovek v Vatikane, 227.

43 Ibid., 228.

44 After the maiden name of his mother, who died, being devastated by his arrest, an expulsion from the gymnasium, and subsequent imprisonment.

45 Chikov, Nash chelovek v Vatikane, 228.

46 Ibid. The same identification was written into his passport of a Soviet citizen that he received in 1949.
deceased Costa Rican aristocrat, he was able to acquire a Costa Rican citizenship. Then he proceeded, situating himself among the elite of that country, and, finally, had himself appointed as a Costa Rican ambassador to Vatican. His Soviet bosses, provincial bureaucrats being raised in the Great Terror environment and fearing to take an initiative, were at first utterly appalled and even upset by such adventurism and open violation of their spy craft protocol. Yet, later, giving the whole thing a second thought, they were happy to accept his new status, removing him from several conventional spy assignments and turning him into the provider of political intelligence.

Now, the newly minted “diplomat” moved to writing in earnest. Grigulevich painted with wide strokes on large geopolitical canvas, sending reports to Moscow with such loaded titles as “New Political Situation in Europe,” “Vatican Crusade against Democracy,” and “Vatican is Black International.” Filled with large amount of diplomatic gossip, hearsay, and extensive personal speculations, Grigulevich’s texts nevertheless acquired the status of essential sources as coming from a “vital center” of imperialist commanding heights. In these reports, Grigulevich scared the paranoid and conspiratorial minds of Moscow espionage bureaucrats, who had rarely seen the outside world, with the overwhelming power and might of Vatican, which allegedly spread its tentacles all over in an attempt to control the world. Since the United States was now becoming the major opponent, Grigulevich began to stress that American imperialism could easily use the wide international networks of Catholic organizations for its aggressive purposes. Moreover, he devised grandiose plans of how to combat that expansion by creating alternative split-away Catholic organizations to be financed and navigated by Moscow. When Grigulevich was in the prime of his double life of a bohemian diplomat, in December of 1953, after Stalin’s death, he was abruptly recalled to Moscow and expelled from foreign intelligence along with many other agents and Moscow-based officers who were deeply entangled into the dictator’s “special tasks.”

Lives of the Others: On Catholics and Latin American Revolutionaries

Unlike other illegals, when evicted from the Soviet foreign intelligence apparatus, Grigulevich was able to quickly rebrand himself into a scholar

47 Paporov, Akademik nelegal’nykh nauk, 136.
48 Grigulevich insisted that anti-Semitism was very much behind his sudden enforced retirement in 1953, when he was still in his prime: “I felt animosity to my success, especially from Korotkov. God damn, was he envious of the luxurious life-style I lived abroad?
and writer by using the skeletons of the abovementioned reports as blueprints for his 1957 dissertation on Vatican policies and finances and his first five books on Catholic Church that he promptly released between 1957 and 1963.\textsuperscript{49} In fact, while still in Italy, he began dreaming about a second career as a writer. He took first steps in this direction by going to Vatican libraries and doing research on Papacy and the Inquisition.\textsuperscript{50} Forced to retire at an early age in 1954, Grigulevich entered the world Soviet scholarship by quickly learning USSR bureaucratic culture and networking. In 1960, he was able to get himself hired as a research fellow by the prestigious Institute of Ethnography (currently the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology). Simultaneously, using his 1949 Russian-sounding pen name, he began producing popular biographies of Latin American revolutionaries. The whole generation of Soviet young adults was raised on his romantic life-stories of Simón Bolívar,\textsuperscript{51} Francisco Pancho

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Complete lack of understanding of what was going on in the outside world! Korotkov started as an elevator attendant at Lubianka in 1937 [in 1928 – A.Z.]. He did not complete a secondary school. I also repulsed him as a Jew. Stalin died, but surely he was not the only one who initiated the Jewish doctors’ case.” Paporov, \textit{Akademik nelegal’nykh nauk}, 155. Although this statement looks credible in the light of a general Soviet intelligence apparatus policy not to employ foreign-born individuals or people of the Jewish descent, one should treat his words with skepticism. After all, Grigulevich did safely pass his ethn ideological loyalty test during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in 1949 and reinvented himself as “a Karaite by nationality.” Later in his life, Grigulevich might have been looking for a more “meaningful” explanation for his expulsion. This anti-Semitism narrative shared with friends and colleagues during the Perestroika years, when mainstream media for a short while was focused on the exposure of Stalin and later Soviet anti-Semitism, was very timely. Contrary to what he said about Korotkov’s alleged anti-Semitism, his daughter and several other friends stressed that Grigulevich had never experienced any problems with his boss. The most obvious explanation for Grigulevich’s expulsion was the fact that after 1953, he, along with many other agents associated with Beria, became superfluous in the wake of Stalin's death.


\textsuperscript{50} Dolgopolov, “Iz nelegalov v akademiki.”

Villa, Francisco de Miranda, Benito Juarez, Ernesto Che Guevara, Salvador Allende, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Augusto César Sandino. On top of this, he wrote a biography of William Z. Foster, the leader of the US Communist Party (under another pen-name of I.R. Grigoriev). Many of these titles saw numerous foreign translations, including languages such as the Chinese, Bengali, and Hindi. The life story of Che Guevara (Fig. 5), which is still in print, became especially popular. The sheer speed with which the former spy produced all those books later led to a rumor that there were some ghost writers out there who helped him put all those texts on a publishing conveyor belt, which was not true. In reality, these books were his own creation, representing heavily fictionalized quick compilations from Latin American history and biography books, which he peppered with his on-site observations of Latin American life and scene.

In hindsight, it is clear that part of the appeal of these books to readers was that the author not only empathized with all his rebel characters, most of whom happened to die in their prime, but also tried to link himself to the lives of these “others” as if rekindling his own exploits and experiences that were so abruptly interrupted. Those who read Grigulevich’s volumes immediately sensed that the author somehow had a hands-on experience of living in

53 Iosif Lavretskii, Miranda (Moskva: Molodaia gvardia, 1965); idem: Francisco de Miranda y la lucha por la liberación de la América Latina (Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1978).
54 Iosif Lavretskii, Juarez (Moskva: Molodaia gvardia, 1969).
56 Iosif Lavretskii, Salvador Al’ende (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1974); idem: El presidente del pueblo (México: Editorial Nueva Sociedad, 1974); idem: Salvador Allende (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1975).
57 Iosif Grigulevich, Siqueiros (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1980).
Figure 5  A Cover of Grigulevich’s book about Che Gevara
all those exotic and rebellious countries. This type of literature flourished in closed societies such as the former Soviet Union where readers always craved for and appreciated a well-crafted narrative filled with cultural details of living in some overseas country. Another important reason why his Latin American biography series was shining was that those books translated into all major European languages were conveniently tuned to a romantic fascination with Latin American revolutions. In the 1960s and the 1970s, this romance was reigning both in the Soviet Union and in the West. Skillfully playing on that mass interest in revolutionary Latin America and also on the omnipotent status that KGB enjoyed in Soviet society, Grigulevich easily opened the doors of all major publishing houses. By the 1970s, he acquired the charisma of being the major Soviet expert on Catholic Church and Latin America.

Yet, being dwarfed to the status of a scholar and locked within the insulated Soviet bureaucratic matrix, Grigulevich was no longer able to “shape” history and travel the world as he used to during his Latin American and Vatican days. Telling the life-stories of great modern Latin American revolutionaries may have been an intellectual outlet, which allowed him to revisit idealism of his youthful days. Although Grigulevich was clearly fascinated with his characters, movers and shakers ready to exercise revolutionary violence, it appears that he was gradually shedding off that very idealism, turning into a career-seeking cynic. Thus, signing one of his Latin American biography books, he once threw the following remark: “You see, I write the same shit as all of us, but I produce more of this shit than everybody else. That is why I received more money than all the rest [of scholars] together.”

An Academic Storyteller in the World of “Advanced Socialism”

Another intellectual and spiritual outlet was sharing bits and pieces of his adventurous life story with frequently changing plots and characters. In fact, this very habit of anecdote- and story-telling in the company of friends and colleagues helped him very much in building his charisma and networking. Grigulevich successfully imported into his new Soviet life that personal signature trade craft, in which he excelled so much during his spy years. Grigulevich usually peppered tales of his underground exploits with heavy doses of imagination, cynicism, absurdity, and with what one might call a humbling humor. Eventually, many colleagues and friends, who were confused about factual and fictional in his stories, began referring to him by the nickname of “Alexandre

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60 Paporov, Akademik nelegal’nykh nauk, 168.
Dumas” after the nineteenth-century French writer who became famous for his historical novels of high adventure such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers.*

For example, Grigulevich could present himself as the one who blessed and handed a lethal icepick to Ramon Mercader (the person who killed Trotsky), which was not true. At the same time, he could humble himself by jokingly saying, for instance, how he came to New York City all ready to murder a Soviet defector, when at the last moment, when stopping in a street café for a morning coffee, he learned from a newspaper that the man had already committed suicide. The latter was a reference to the mysterious death of Krivitsky, another idealistic “cosmopolitan” spy from the Eastern European diaspora who ran into the xenophobic Stalinist machine that eventually crushed him. This particular episode could or could not take place, for Grigulevich indeed visited the New York City around the time when Krivitsky committed suicide in 1940. Grigulevich’s earlier approved scripts of direct action against the Trotskyites and his unsuccessful attempts to reach out to his former colleagues with various adventurous schemes eventually after 1953 mutated into his tale about an indirect encounter with mighty Stalin. As this particular story went, Grigulevich was awakened in the middle of the night and taken into the KGB headquarters allegedly to receive a response from comrade Stalin regarding one of Grigulevich’s projects. A general, who was assigned to deliver to Grigulevich Stalin’s reply, opened a file and in a solemn voice read from it, “Comrade Stalin instructed me to convey to you that you are a damned fool.” Such tales of empowerment through self-humiliation are textbook examples of pseudo-masochistic display, when a jester unconsciously wants to win the admiration of an audience and regain one’s dignity.

One of the stories Grigulevich liked to share in the company of friends was a neat and cynical tale about an imagined Bolivian Indian militant nicknamed Lenin, whom he said he had met when traveling to that country on a Comintern assignment. That Native American Lenin allegedly suggested that they together make a communist revolution in Bolivia. According to Grigulevich, the Indian made an exact calculation that the whole project would cost

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$65,666.00, which involved bribing presidential guards, the chief railroad administrator, the head of local armory, and the chief postal inspector to make sure they all would stay out of the way. As Grigulevich noted, “Lenin” contemplated this project as a replica of the famous 1917 Bolshevik coup except that it was to be accomplished not through a takeover, like in Russia, but through bribes. Moscow allegedly approved the project of the revolution, but agreed to deliver only $60,000.00. Despite heavy bargaining with “Lenin,” as the Grigulevich story went, the Indian stood his ground and did not want to drop the price of the revolution. Thus, the communist coup fell short of only $5,666.00. “Psychoanalyzing” the content of that story, one may assume that it was not only a reference to Latin American rampant corruption but also might a parable that alluded to the degeneration of the Soviet revolutionary project and an endemic bribe taking and nepotism that flourished in the late Soviet Union.

By the very end of the 1970s, like several other Soviet illegals who retired into the land of the “advanced socialism,” Grigulevich began allowing himself critical remarks about various aspects of Soviet life. Yet, unlike Donald Maclean, a former member of the famous Cambridge Five gang who similarly reinvented himself as a Soviet scholar, Grigulevich never openly challenged the Soviet system by voicing his support for the intellectual dissent. Like many Soviet intellectuals and professionals, the retired storyteller-spy preferred to stay within the convenient realm of sarcasm and kitchen jokes, which the famous philosopher-trickster Slavoj Žižek neatly labeled as “totalitarian laughter.” At the very end of the 1970s, Soviet dissident historian Aleksandr Nekrich, who, as a fellow scholar encountered Grigulevich at the same work space, gave a good brief description of his personality: “He was a joyful and witty person, and, as some said, both generous and cunning, a man who did not believe in anything, neither in God nor in devil.” Given such a stance, it was natural that at the end of his life, Grigulevich was fond of sharing with friends his morbid observation that it was prostitutes, journalists, and spies who ruled the world.

A research fellow at the Institute of Ethnography, Grigulevich devoted much of his energy to spearheading his academic career, openly stressing that his ultimate goal was to become an academician. Grigulevich attempted three times

64 Chikov, Nash chelovek v Vatikane, 170–171.
68 Paporov, Akademik nelegal'nykh nauk, 169.
to solicit a correspondence membership in the academy, which was to be the first required step required on the way to the title of an academician – the highest scholarly rank in the former Soviet Union. Yet, each time, the academic elite voted him down, viewing the throngs of his Latin American popular biographies and several books on Catholic Church as well-crafted journalistic compilations rather than serious scholarship. In order to overcome this obstacle, Grigulevich had to utilize both his spy craft and Soviet corrupt practices to buy the favors of the voting committee. In one case, he helped a person to place his relative into the graduate school at his institute – a much thought not openly available academic opportunity at that time. For another academician, Grigulevich provided a very lucrative “donation” in cash. For the third one, he had a present in the form of a case of cognac delivered right to the door of that scholar’s apartment. The rest of the voting committee members received cases of Georgian wine.

Academician Boris Rybakov, then the dean of medieval Russian history scholarship who chaired the voting committee, became the object of a one man “special task” operation. Grigulevich found out what resort area Rybakov and his wife frequented. After this, he booked himself a tour to the same area, and then “by chance” met the wife of the academician. Using all his charm, he awed her with his intelligence, tale-telling, and manners. Through this woman, Grigulevich not only penetrated into Rybakov’s inner circle but also became for a short while the major intellectual entertainer during his dinner parties.69

In 1979, his fourth attempt to become a correspondence member of the academy finally proved successful. Yet, despite all his charms and spy craft, the academic elite never admitted him to the very top of the pyramid. So the retired spy had to live with the status of a correspondence member.

Last but not least, this story of identity, espionage and tale telling would not be complete without mentioning a “going back to roots” aspect in his career. At the end of his life, Grigulevich made persistent efforts to revisit his Karaite cultural heritage in Lithuania. He rekindled the links with his “soil” by learning more about religious traditions of the Karaite Jews and establishing friendship with their local religious leader. As his daughter stressed, “The father was proud of being a Karaite.”70 Although (because of Grigulevich’s death) this new interest did not lead to any “production of knowledge,” he did contemplate writing a history of his “tribe.” It should be noted that Grigulevich was not an exception in embarking on this particular intellectual route. By the 1970s, with left internationalism being deeply eroded by more potent nationalism, for

69 Chikov, Nash chelovek v Vatikane, 627; Kuksin, “Iosif Grigulevich.”
70 Dolgopolov, “Iz nelegalov v akademiki.”
many other people with the similar ethno-ideological background, “the special relationship between the Jews and the Soviet state had come to the end.”

Thus, Grigulevich’s former spy colleagues from the Eastern European "mobilized diaspora” such as Leopold Trepper, Mark Zborowski, and Alexander Ulanovsky experienced the same rediscovery of the Jewish tradition. Trepper, the head of famous World War II’s Red Orchestra spy ring, became a prominent Jewish cultural activist in the 1950’s Poland and later a dissident, working to maintain declining Yiddish legacy in Poland and then fighting for the right to immigrate to Israel. Mark Zborowski, who as the Soviet intelligence’s informer diligently reported on all Trotsky’s activities in the 1930s, like Grigulevich, reinvented himself as an anthropologist in the 1950s and the 1960s, producing a scholarly volume on the lost shtetl culture of Eastern European Jewry – a book that became a modern Jewish Studies classic. In the meantime, while awaiting his release from a concentration camp in 1954, Alexander Ulanovsky, a former Soviet station chief in the United States in the 1930s and the first handler of the famous Whittaker Chambers, was leafing through available history books and, very much like Grigulevich’s Karaite kin, discovering for himself the ancient beauty of the Khazar Khanate, a semi-mythological glorious Hebrew kingdom.

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