



THE SOVIET GULAG

By David Satter

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Not all the mechanisms of repression in unfree societies are violent. People can be conditioned to obey, and once the proper conditions have been put in place, the influence of mass conformity renders people powerless to resist even what they know intuitively is a false political ideology and a false interpretation of reality.

Russia's role in the history of repression is central. Just as freedom and democracy moved outward from Philadelphia's Independence Hall, the murderous form of totalitarian domination that existed in the 20th century had its origin in the Bolsheviks' forcible seizure of power in Petrograd in 1917. The idea that the state is entitled to total control over the individual and that life should be organized to imitate the precepts of a demented ideology was soon accepted not only in the Soviet Union but in Nazi Germany and later, Eastern Europe, as well as in China, Vietnam, and North Korea. At one time, almost half of the world's population was under the sway of the ideas that became dominant in Russia when the Bolsheviks seized power. This event was announced by a Paris newspaper with the headline, "The Maximalists are the Masters of Petrograd."

The Soviet Union was the first nation in history to be founded explicitly on the basis of atheism, and it endowed

itself with the attributes of God. Russian and Soviet citizens were told "There is no God, there is only the party."

For many years educated people in the U.S. ridiculed those who argued, often without a great deal of philosophical background, that the theory of dialectical materialism defined a system that, by its nature, had to be evil. In fact, however, those who called attention to the inevitable implications of the theory of dialectical materialism were right. It could only be the basis of a system that was radically evil.

Dialectical materialism is the ontological core of Marxism-Leninism. It holds that everything that exists is matter in motion. There is no god, no soul, and no spirit. Proceeding from this base, Marx then offered the theory of historical materialism that sought to describe the evolution of history. According to this theory, history was driven by the interaction of material forces with progress embodied in the forward movement of the historically most progressive class. This was identified as the working class.

Lenin added to this cosmology by substituting for the working class, the disciplined revolutionary party. No one noticed that substituting the party, a conspiratorial organization, for the working class, which supposedly acted blindly in its own interest, destroyed the core of Marxist theory. What was important was that a universal theory that justified the total control of the individual and the destruction of all moral standards had been joined to a mechanism for "realizing" that theory, the totalitarian party. A party had been created that could then aspire to rule on the basis of a claimed monopoly on truth.

The Bolsheviks' conviction that they were operating according to a strictly scientific and therefore infallible theory, which was a reliable tool for transforming society, gave them the wherewithal to commit unprecedented crimes. During the last 120 years of the Tsarist regime, roughly 3,500 people were executed for political crimes, most of them in the 20th century in the years of revolutionary terror. The Bolshevik regime exceeded that figure within its first four months and the situation rapidly became worse. As discontent spread throughout the country, Felix

Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police (originally called the Cheka, later the NKVD), introduced the Red Terror, which distinguished a person's guilt from his actions. Now people were going to be killed on the basis not of individual guilt, but of belonging to a specific class.

One of Dzerzhinsky's deputies, Martyn Latsis, wrote in the Cheka periodical, *Krasny Terror* (Red Terror) that "during investigations, it was not necessary to look for evidence "that the accused acted in word and deed against Soviet power." The first question to be put to him is, "To what class does he belong? What is his origin? What is his education or profession? It is these questions that ought to determine his fate." Under these circumstances, the Red Terror spread throughout the former Russian empire wherever the Bolsheviks had power and became an instrument for destroying members of the so-called possessing class.

The Red Terror was met with White Terror. The Whites also employed mass killing, particularly in Ukraine, where 150,000 Ukrainian Jews were murdered. Once the White Terror had died out, however, the Red Terror became institutionalized. Its emphasis on the destruction of "hostile classes" became integral to the policies of the communist regime.

The communist leaders believed that since it was the key to all aspects of life, they had to control the economy, which they could then run on the basis of orders, like the post office. This was directly opposed to the ethos of a market economy that operates on the basis of millions of signals that reflect the desires of consumers and the reactions of producers. The free market was eliminated when, after the end of the civil war, the policy known as war communism was instituted. As a result, the economy ground to a halt.

In March 1921, the government cut food rations to major cities by 30 percent. A group of sailors in the Kronstadt naval base near Petrograd who had been the most loyal backers of the Bolshevik revolution revolted and were mercilessly suppressed by troops under the command of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who was to become Russia's military leader and most ruthless suppresser of opposition to the Bolsheviks (and, in 1937, himself a victim of Stalin's purges). At the same time, peasants who had suffered under the requisition system--because in the absence of a market, the grain they raised was taken from them, often leaving them not enough to eat--rebelled, triggering a massive peasant revolt centered in Tambov. Lenin, seriously worried, demanded the most brutal methods to suppress the revolt. Those methods included killing the oldest son in any family known to have had contact with the insurgents and attacking the insurgents in their forest redoubts with poison gas. This was the first use of poison gas against a civilian population ever, and it was successful. The peasants' rebellion was suppressed. But the conditions that had led to that rebellion caused mass hardship in the countryside and eventually a famine in large parts of Russia and Ukraine. It was only timely American assistance that prevented an even greater catastrophe. It is nonetheless estimated that 5 million people died of starvation.

In the years that followed, the communist leaders came to understand that they were going to render the country incapable of doing anything if they continued with their

insane policies. They instituted what became known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), which allowed Russia's overwhelmingly peasant population to exist in more or less free-market conditions. There were still government requisitions, but the peasants were allowed to raise their own food to trade among themselves and sell to the government or cities, and the country began to recover. But this was just a brief truce while the regime prepared for the next round in the war against its own people.

In the late 1920s, the Stalinist leadership decided that the time had come to collectivize agriculture in Russia. After all, if people are free to market their products and to decide how much they're going to sell, they can refuse to sell. At the same time, Stalin was convinced that war was coming and anxious to build the Soviet Union's industrial base. There were no resources to do that. The only way to do it was to take the grain from the countryside, export it for hard currency, and use the hard currency to purchase machinery. The first step in the subjugation of the peasantry was called *dekulakization*. Millions of people were identified as "kulaks" (kulak in Russian means fist). Soviet propaganda claimed they were the exploiters of the countryside. In fact, they were merely the most progressive and industrious peasants. A kulak was someone who perhaps had two cows instead of one. During those years, the NKVD was inundated with letters from party officials asking them how to identify a kulak. But there was never a precise definition. Anyone who opposed collectivization, who lived a little bit better or was a little more politically aware, was rounded up and deported, often sent to uninhabited areas of Siberia and Central Asia where the mortality rate was horrific. At the same time, "dekulakization" terrorized the rest of the peasants, who then agreed to go into collective farms.

But this wasn't the end of the horror. The government increased its demands from the newly formed collective farms for grain that they could be sold abroad for help in financing industrialization. If the government took 15 percent of the harvest under the NEP, in the first years of *dekulakization* this was raised to 30-35 percent. By 1932 it was up to 40 percent, which left virtually nothing for the rural population. The peasants fought back by stealing and sabotaging the process of grain requisition, and the Politburo decided to starve them into submission.

The countryside became a huge death camp. Peasants were not allowed to leave their villages. The cities were off limits, the railroad stations were guarded, and the peasants were left without food. In 1932-33, Ukraine but also parts of Russia, the Volga valley, and Kazakstan, the areas where there had been the greatest resistance to the Bolshevik grain requisitions in the 1920s, were the scene of an artificial famine. The Soviet Union and Ukraine raised enough grain to both export it and feed the population, but not on the scale that the government was demanding.

Probably 6-7 million people starved to death under conditions that defy description. People resorted to cannibalism. Only a few books describe this, notably *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust* (1987), by Ukrainian famine survivor Miron Dolot, and Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986). It's one of the least heralded great crimes of the 20th century, and it still stands

as the Soviet regime's greatest single crime. Tragically, it achieved its purpose. All resistance was broken. From that point on, the Soviet government didn't have to worry about negotiating with peasants or meeting their needs. Although food supplies and production collapsed, the regime controlled what production there was.

The regime then began to turn on itself. The process of destroying the last base of potential social resistance, the peasantry, had given the leadership a taste for blood and convinced Stalin that he could commit atrocities on a mass scale. At the same time, it made Stalin and the people around him even less willing to tolerate disagreement within the party. Up to this time, there was some limited ability to disagree within the party. That area of tolerated discourse became narrower and narrower. In part because of the famine, however, dissatisfaction with Stalin began to rise in party circles. At 1934 party congress, "the Congress of the Victors," there were signs that the party leader in Leningrad was gaining support. This worried Stalin a great deal. He became convinced that he had to eliminate those people who had made the revolution, who had some tradition of thinking for themselves and who potentially could oppose his rule.

The result was what became known as the Great Terror. Stalin established his total control over the secret police, which sent out quotas for each region for the number of people to be killed as counterrevolutionaries or arrested and sent to labor camps. The general population was now exposed to some of the horror that had been unleashed in the countryside. Black vans traveled the streets at night, disgorging NKVD officers who wore special boots with cleats. The sound of those cleats on the steps meant that someone was going to be arrested. People were up all night listening for the cleats, for the sound of the elevator, to see what floor it stopped on. They would hear the banging on doors, followed by a search of an apartment. The victim would be arrested in front of his wife and children. Children would say said goodbye, never to see that person again.

Of course, the regime's idea was to stamp out all opposition. The way to do that was to generate denunciations, just as during the Spanish Inquisition. Did anyone say a disloyal word, tell a joke, have a foreign relative, travel abroad, associate with someone who had been arrested? Had anyone failed to denounce someone who had been arrested? One woman who was in Moscow during those years told me that if a foreigner approached on the street, people scattered like mice, afraid to be seen even talking to a foreigner. In one memoir, a Russian recalls how one day his mathematics teacher, who had a Lithuanian name, did not show up for class. Another teacher took over the class. The class never learned what had happened to the former teacher. Fifty years later, when lists of the names of those who had been shot began to be published in St. Petersburg, he found his teacher's name. He finally understood what had happened to him.

People disappeared and no one dared say a word or ask or even show sympathy. The usual charges were counter-revolutionary or terrorist activities, and the newspapers were full of purported confessions. The contagious effect of terror was such that when an individual was arrested, his entire factory or office would unanimously demand he be

mercilessly executed. Those who attended the meetings where such demands were made often feared that if they did not loudly support them, they would be next. To help a family member of a person who had been arrested was an act of supreme courage in those years.

By the time the great terror was over, 800,000 people had been shot. Another 800,000 were arrested and sent to labor camps where almost none of them survived. With all potential intellectual or political opposition crushed, the terror finally abated, in part because even with the NKVD's fertile imagination, there was almost no one left to arrest on political grounds. But the arrests continued on other grounds. The regime was based on slave labor. The Soviet system was still inefficient, and it still needed slaves.

During WWII a number of nationalities were accused of disloyalty--the Chechens, the Ingushy, the Kalmyks, the Volga Germans--and deported to labor camps. When Soviet prisoners of war and civilians who were deported to Germany and used as slave labor returned home, many of them were arrested and sent to the camps. So after WWII, even though the number of shootings had been reduced, there were 5 million people in various forms of confinement: labor camps, prisons, and exile. This only began to change with Stalin's death in 1953. Although Khrushchev had been an active participant in the purges while they were going on, to the point of personally singling out for death his loyal subordinates, he did take the initiative to free the prisoners. Millions of people were released from the camps and returned home. In 1956, after destroying the archives that showed his own participation, Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes.

Under Khrushchev, a new situation developed. People began to lose some of their fear and to gain confidence that if they did not engage in political activity, they were safe from the secret police. But at the same time their mentality had been changed. A friend in Russia described it to me as follows: "If you take a herd of animals and kill one in ten in front of all the others, you don't have to keep on killing in order to get them to go in the desired direction. All you have to do is crack the whip." The modern, post-Stalinist Soviet system had been formed. From this point on, it was the memory of terror passed on from father to son that engendered obedience. The regime also, however, relied on a system of repression that could be applied to take care of those who did not passively comply on their own. This system consisted of three parts: repression at the work place, incarceration in political labor camps and commitment to psychiatric hospitals.

The most important part was seemingly the most innocuous: repression in the "collectives." In the Soviet Union, there was no private enterprise. All means of production were controlled by the state. Whatever your work, you worked for the government. In every "collective," there was a party organization. You could not form a society of anglers, or stamp collectors, for instance, without it being controlled by the government and having its own party organization. The party was centralized and dominated at every level by people who were concerned only to carry out the dictates of the Central Committee, which was dominated by the Politburo. There was little opportunity for opposition activities or

thought. The system began to work on basic human instincts: the desire not to think, to do what one is told, to revert to the dependency of childhood, to identify with power, to channel aggressivity toward a supposedly hostile outside world, to feel oneself part of a movement and the vanguard of the enlightened part of humanity against which the unenlightened and unprogressive part of humanity was constantly plotting. Against this background, if someone showed the slightest sign of resistance, it was relatively easy for that person to be neutralized. The KGB would be informed by the party organization, and they would determine what steps to take. The free thinker could be demoted or fired and left with no choice but to survive by menial labor. If this type of repression did not work, the next step was to sentence a dissenter to a term in a labor camp or put him in a psychiatric hospital.

In 1965, Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky, who had published books abroad, were put on trial for anti-Soviet agitation. The medieval spectacle of imprisoning people for what they wrote, however, gained worldwide attention. The first Russian intellectuals found the courage to protest. Many of them were arrested, and other intellectuals signed petitions in their defense. This was the first stirring in decades of the country's free spirit, and was followed by protests over the invasion of Czechoslovakia and then activities connected with the signing in 1975 of the Helsinki agreements, which pledged the Soviet Union to respect human rights in return for Western acquiescence to the territorial status-quo in Europe. Of course the regime had not the slightest intention to honor this pledge, but the fact that it had made it, gave dissidents a way of challenging the regime. They formed an independent group to monitor compliance, which put the government in an embarrassing position. It couldn't just arrest these people for monitoring its compliance, so for a couple of years it allowed the dissidents to emigrate or harassed them, before beginning mass arrests in 1980.

The dissidents were put in special labor camps. Compared to the Stalin era, there were not a large number of political prisoners, perhaps a couple of hundred, and, in almost all

cases, they were incarcerated for writing and circulating truthful information. This dissident material was self published and so became known as "samizdat." It was produced with hundreds of typewriters on onion skin paper with numerous carbon copies. The content was often information about political prisoners, petitions, protests, banned literature, anything that was censored. The samizdat machine was inefficient by today's standards. But once it began working, it produced an amazing amount of material.

The regime fought the dissidents, seeking in the labor camps, where people were tortured psychologically and physically, to get them to admit the error of their ways and say publicly, best of all on television, that they were loyal Soviet citizens who had been misled. Very few succumbed to the pressure, but it did happen.

Another category of dissidents didn't consciously set about challenging the regime, as the democratic dissidents had, but by their actions implicitly demonstrated that the regime was a totalitarian dictatorship--for example, by trying to cross the border into Finland or alternatively by taking the regime's promises seriously and demanding their rights. For such a person, first there were psychiatric evaluations, then psychiatric hospitals and behavior modification drugs, the equivalent of Room 101 in George Orwell's *1984*, the place where you were subjected to what you most feared.

In this way, the system of repression operated until the accession to power of Gorbachev and the beginning of perestroika. Total control over information and the attempt to enforce the ideology were abandoned. Prisoners were freed. These were revolutionary changes, and, as a result of them, the Soviet Union collapsed. But the habits of mind shaped by repression continued to exist and they threaten the prospects for freedom in Post-Soviet Russia.

Russia today is plagued by a lack of respect for law and human life and a lack of understanding of democracy. This is the main obstacle to creating a better future. Where an individual feels no protection and where he can at any moment be victimized, he inevitably seeks protection in an authoritarian system.