

The Soviet Chamber of Horrors: Reminders on the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



In 1842 the German poet Heinrich Heine warned that “Communism, though little discussed now and loitering in the hidden garrets on miserable straw pallets, is the dark hero destined for a great, if temporary, role in the modern tragedy. . . . Wild, gloomy times are roaring toward us. . . . The future smells of Russian leather, blood, godlessness, and many whippings. I should advise our grandchildren to be born with very thick skins on their backs.”

November 7 marks the ninetieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the beginning of that dark future that Heine sensed was coming 75 years before Lenin and his Bolsheviks came to power. Since the beginning of recorded history the state has attempted to control the economic activities of its subjects, as well as commanding their personal conduct. But nothing in modern history compared to the communist determination to mold man and society for an alleged paradise on earth.

What made this experiment in creating a new man in a new society so diabolical was precisely that many in the first generation of Bolshevik leaders truly believed in what they were doing. For example, Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founding head of the Soviet secret police, loved children and said he wanted to make a better world for all of them. To liberate Soviet society from its enemies and make that better world, he created the vast slave-labor system that became known as the Gulag. As part of his studies of government mass murders in the twentieth century, political scientist R. J. Rummel estimated that up to 64 million innocent, unarmed men, women, and children were killed in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1986 in the name of “building socialism.”

Sixty-four million is so large a number that it is easy to lose sight of the inhumanity of murder and terror involved. The famous Russian sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin (who went on to found the sociology department at Harvard University) was a young professor in Petrograd (later Leningrad and now St. Petersburg) during and following the Bolshevik Revolution. After he was expelled from Russia in 1922 as an “enemy of the people,” he came to America and published *Leaves from a Russian Diary* (1924), which contains the following entry from 1920:

The machine of the Red Terror works incessantly. Every day and every night, in Petrograd, Moscow, and all over the country the mountain of the dead grows higher. . . . Everywhere people are shot, mutilated, wiped out of existence. . . . Every night we hear the rattle of trucks bearing new victims. Every night we hear the rifle fire of execution, and often some of us hear from the ditches, where the bodies are flung, faint groans and cries of those who have

not died under the guns. People living near these places begin to move away. They cannot sleep.

When Sorokin wrote those words the Soviet state was still in its infancy. As the decades went by, numerous histories and personal accounts were written about the “socialist experiment” by those who had either escaped or defected from the Soviet paradise. Only when the formerly secret archives of the Communist Party and the KGB were partly opened to researchers, just before

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and then after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, did a fuller and clearer picture come into view about the brutality of the regime.

Demitri Volkogonov, a Soviet general-turned-historian, gained access to many of the closed archives during the last years of the Soviet regime and wrote a biography of Stalin titled *Triumph and Tragedy* (1991). Volkogonov told an American correspondent:

I would come home from working in Stalin's archives, and I would be deeply shaken. I remember coming home after reading through the day of December 12, 1938. He signed thirty lists of death sentences that day, altogether about five thousand people, including many he knew personally, his friends. . . . This is not what shook me. It turned out that, after having signed these documents, he went to his personal theater that night and watched two movies, including *Happy Guys*, a popular comedy of the time. I simply could not understand how, after deciding the fate of several thousand lives, he could watch such a movie. But I was beginning to realize that morality plays no role for dictators. That's when I understood why my father was shot, why my mother died in exile, why millions of people died.

The Donskoi Monastery and Kalitnikovskiy Cemetery in Moscow served as a dumping ground for thousands of bodies. A Russian historian trying to preserve the memory of these evil times told David Remnick, author of *Lenin's Tomb* (1993): "In the purges, every dog in town came to [the cemetery]. That smell you smell now was three times as bad; blood was in the air."

No End with Stalin

The Soviet nightmare did not disappear with Stalin's death in 1953; it remained at the heart of the system practically to the end. In the 1960s and 1970s Yuri Andropov was the head of the KGB (he later briefly served as general secretary of the Communist Party after Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982 until his own death

in 1984). He accepted a view developed by Soviet psychiatry that anyone who opposed the Marxist idea of scientific socialism was by definition mentally disturbed and needed to be "treated" in a psychiatric hospital. This was the fate of Alexei Nikitin, a coal miner who complained about the safety and health conditions in the mines of the U.S.S.R. He was found guilty of subversion and committed to a mental institution in Ukraine. They began using various drugs to bring him back to his socialist senses. His story was told by Kevin Kloze in *Russia and the Russians* (1984):

Of all the drugs administered . . . to impose discipline, sulfazine was at the pinnacle of pain. . . . "People injected with sulfazine were groaning, sighing with pain, cursing the psychiatrists and Soviet power, cursing everything in their hearts," Alexei told us. . . . "If they torture you and break your arms, there is a certain specific pain and you somehow can stand it. But sulfazine is like a drill boring into your body that gets worse and worse until it's more than you can stand. . . . It is worse than torture, because sometimes torture may end. But this kind of torture may continue for years."

Nikitin endured this drug and several equally terrible ones for more than two years before he was finally released on the promise that he would no longer doubt or question the "correctness" of the Party line.

Twentieth-century socialism is an unending story of crushing tyranny and oceans of blood. As Russian mathematician and Soviet dissident Igor Shafarevich expressed it in *The Socialist Phenomenon* (1980), a history of socialism in theory and practice through the ages: "Most socialist doctrines and movements are literally saturated with the mood of death, catastrophe and destruction One could regard the death of mankind as the final result to which the development of socialism leads."

The 64 million killed during the nearly 75 years of the Soviet Union cry out with the truth of this conclusion.



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