Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony

Life in Russia during the Soviet Period
as Told by Those Who Lived it

by
Roberto Echavarren
New York University

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“An extraordinary portrait of repression against freedom, that reverberates with contemporary authoritarianism and coercion threatening world democracy, by one of the most gifted Latin American writers and thinkers today.”

Alejandro Varderi
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“Whether the reader is touched by the courage of the survivors or horrified by the perverse cruelty of oppression and the annihilation of human life and the human spirit, this book completes the devastating landscape of the supposedly most advanced era of human history: the twentieth century. While the monstrous "Third Reich" forever looms ominously, the focus here is the insane Leninist and Stalinist regime (and implicitly its well-intentioned supporters on the Left) that murdered incalculable millions of human beings. Like the unspeakable words and images left behind by the vanished victims of the Holocaust, these testimonies from Russian survivors are as relevant to us as tomorrow’s news because, out of ignorance, futile divisiveness, and indifference, we are on the brink of submitting to Autocracy, of allowing the Putins and the Trumps of the world to destroy civilization once again.”

Suzanne Jill Levine
Professor Emerita
University of California, Santa Barbara

“After reading this powerful and effective account of the rise of modern autocracy by prolific, award-winning writer Roberto Echavarren, one cannot help but hark back to Montesquieu’s sagacious advocacy for the separation of powers in governments. Russian Nights: Autocracy and Testimony lifts the veil of secrecy behind which autocrats hide and flourish; an incisive combination of judicious commentary and personal testimonies from those who have suffered under autocratic rule, this book reminds us how Lenin’s single party gave rise to modern autocracy’s thirst for political dominance at any cost.”

Francisco Soto
Professor, City University of New York (CUNY),
former Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences

"In 'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony,' poet and scholar Roberto Echavarren offers an intimate yet panoramic view of the horrors of Russia's totalitarianism under Lenin and Stalin. As the forces of autocracy have once again successfully clutched the gears of history (from Russia to the U.S., from China and Hungary to Brazil and Austria), this book is not only timely but an urgent appeal. In that spirit and through a heart-wrenching mosaic of first-person accounts, Echavarren gives us the true measure of the fragility of democracy and the extent to which autocracy, and even systemic and mass terror, is always and intractably a clear and present danger."

Pablo Baler
Chair of Modern Languages and Literatures
California State University, Los Angeles

"A profound and illuminating commentary on political power, incisive and thought-provoking, written with clarity and verve, this book is a combination of political essay and testimonials, a timely and singular account of autocracy in the 20th and 21st centuries, and a required reading for anyone interested in a chronicle of our times, by brilliant scholar Roberto Echavarren."

Elena M. Martínez
Professor, Baruch College and the CUNY Graduate Center

"'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony' contrasts two voices: on the one hand, the univocal litanies of the demagogue; on the other, the testimonies of those who have broken a silence imposed by prejudice, the law, the barrel of a gun, or perhaps worse, by the silence that indifference turns into oblivion. Echavarren's remarkable compilation of these testimonies is a labor of love containing an urgent warning. In any latitude, under many guises, deceitful narratives of power are sustained by the silencing of those who oppose them. 'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony' seeks out those voices, lost and now reclaimed, asking us to listen, suggesting that perhaps our collective survival depends on it."

Oscar Montero
Retired Professor at Lehman College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York;
He has been visiting professor at SUNY, Stony Brook; Princeton, and Columbia universities

"'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony,' Roberto Echavarren, one of the most intelligent critics publishing from Latin America, presents the testimonies of people who suffered the atrocities of autocracy in the 20th century Russia: the GULAG, World War II, life in the countryside and in cities under Lenin and Stalin, in its "rarity and fragility," which like "the Dead Sea scrolls" to which Echavarren compares them, enclose a powerful truth in the voice of people who refused to lose their humanity and faith in justice. It does not matter that justice has not been done—if we understand justice as the immediate punishment of the guilty—but, as Echavarren explains, the power of these testimonies lies in the work of memory, which is not only "another kind of punishment" but, above all, triggers illuminations of the past to make visible the dangers of the present and the future. The book is meticulously researched, allowing Echavarren to trace the creation of modern autocracy in Russia from Lenin, who found in terror and lies the perfect weapons to impose his apparatus of domination, its evolution in Stalin's regime of extreme terror to conclude with Putin "as an all-powerful autocrat," the fictional person with whom he uses capitalism for the benefit of himself and his lackeys. The testimonies unearthed in 'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony' show truths of what was hidden for so many decades behind the immovable wall of Russian secrecy, the reality of autocracy, a reality that must be heard because of its relevance in our present and not only in Russia in the person of Putin but in the nation that is considered the cradle of democracy, in the United States under Trump. "

María Rosa Olivera-Williams
Professor of Latin American Literature
University of Notre Dame

"The wide variety of life stories collected in 'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony' remind us that, in the bloody fresco of the 20th Century, no chapter is more brutal and less known than Russia's Red Terror. Each of the witnesses that take the stand in these pages opens up a rare opportunity for us to remedy our ignorance, pay a long-due tribute, and —more importantly— escape from a repetition of the past. Because Roberto Echavarren is right: the new wave of autocracies rising around the world today makes urgent his task of denouncing the conditions that allow the imposition of mass terror.

'Russian Nights Autocracy and Testimony' is a masterfully crafted piece of witness literature. The writing flows with the awe of the best fiction, but tragically, it surpasses what imagination could conceive. With a simple act of

listening, its pages bring back a bit of the dignity that tyranny stripped from the victims. This book is an overwhelming elegy."

Benito del Pliego
Professor, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures
Appalachian State University

About the Author

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His most recent books are:

One Against All: Lenin and His Legacy, Washington-London, Academica, 2022.

El pensamiento chino (Chinese Thought), Amado Alonso International Prize of Literary Investigation, Spain, Pre-Textos, 2021.

El Estado de derecho: Foucault frente a Marx y el Marxismo (The Rule of Law: Foucault Facing Marx and Marxism), Argentina, Prometeo, 2020.

Archipiélago, Tres Novelas (Arquipelago, Three Novels), Montevideo, Penguin Random House, 2017.

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Foreword

This is an encompassing volume presenting an intense display, as complete as can be, of testimonies, gathered between 2001 and 2005 of actors implicated in different aspects of Soviet life roughly through the period 1917-1956.

The book is structured as follows: the Prologue sets the rationale for gathering the testimonies of people who lived under Lenin and Stalin. They were older people who had experienced Soviet life in times of peace and in times of war, from Lenin's Red Terror to Stalin's Great Terror.

The Introduction concludes the historical context, divided into three parts: a) Lenin, b) Stalin, and c) the Second World War.

One must bear in mind the political and economic conditions in which those lives developed under the repressive apparatus invented by Lenin: the one-Party rule, placed above both the government and the citizens, the restrictions to private property and private economic initiative, the abashment of the division of powers, the political police, and the GULAG.[1]

I classified the testimonies into the following categories or sections. First, the ones referring to the three fundamental aspects of ordinary life in peace time, or rather beside the war: a) the GULAG, b) everyday life in the cities, characterized by overcrowding, scarcity, and terror, and c) everyday life in the countryside, with testimonies dealing with the forced collectivization of the land and willfully induced famine.

After this, the testimonies having to do with the chronological development of WWII: a) preparations for the war and the purge of the Red Army, b) the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 and the Soviet participation in it, supporting the Spanish Republican government, c) the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, d) early Soviet defeats due to the purge or the Army and general unpreparedness for the war, e) guerilla warfare against the Nazi occupant, f) the war around besieged Leningrad, g) the battle of Stalingrad, h) European fronts: Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, and the forced repatriation of Soviet prisoners of war and Soviet slave workers in German power to the Soviet Union, where they faced death or the GULAG, i) the fall of Berlin, j) the Russian Liberation Movement, a mass movement toward democracy and freedom that developed against the two combatting autocracies.

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[1] For a more detailed account of Lenin's government I refer the reader to my book: *One Against All, Lenin and his Legacy*, Washington-London, Academica, 2022.

Each of the thirteen sections mentioned above provides a contextual historical introduction that further supports and frames the testimonies. At the head of each testimony, the reader will find a synthesis of its contents, plus a narration of the circumstances through which I became acquainted with each particular informant.

Furthermore, the reader will find an Index of historical names and an extensive Bibliography.

Prologue

> The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever. Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories produced by the human mind; they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back.
>
> Hanna Arendt, 'Truth and Politics,' *New Yorker*, 1967.

The details of the Jewish Holocaust have become part of our history through the testimony of those who survived the death camps. The details of Lenin's and Stalin's reigns of terror are far less known because they took place behind a wall of secrecy and because survivors have been loath to speak about them for fear of retribution.

Compilations of testimonies from Russians about the period 1917-1956 are few:

The Gulag Archipelago by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, composed from 1958 to 1967, and published in translation between 1973 and 1978, is a work on the Soviet prison camp system. The book was based on Solzhenitsyn's own experience as well as the testimony of former prisoners. It discusses the GULAG's origins from the founding of the Communist regime in 1918, with Lenin having responsibility. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn exposed the Soviet Union as a police State.

The Kolyma Tales by Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov is a chronicle of life in the labor camps, initially published in the West in English translation in 1966. In original Russian, it became officially available in the Soviet Union in 1987. Shalamov spent much of the period from 1937 to 1951 imprisoned in forced-labor camps in the arctic region of Kolyma. From 1951 to 1953, he remained there as a medical assistant and not a prisoner. The manuscripts of *Kolyma Tales* were smuggled abroad and distributed via samizdat.

Russian Nights does not only cover GULAG stories, such as Solzhenitzin's or Shalamov's, neither does it exclusively cover stories about the War, such as Svetlana Alexievich's. It offers a wider and more detailed perspective concerning the period 1917-1956; Lenin's takeover, the all-powerful Party, the GULAG, and the Second World War: "If you look back at twentieth-century

Russian history—Svetlana Alexievich wrote—you'll see a bloodbath and an immense common grave."

The following testimonies have been gathered by me without haste during my stays in Petersburg and Moscow from 2001 to 2005. Through my friends, teachers, and acquaintances, I was able to contact older Russians who had participated in the Russian front during WWII, inhabited besieged cities like Leningrad, or had conducted their lives either in cities or in the countryside, or in the GULAG, under the Soviet Union at the time of Lenin and Stalin. In the introduction of each testimony, I give information about how I met that particular person or people. The people I interviewed were obviously willing to talk about their experiences, and the choice of the testimonies was based on the relevance and precision of the information they gave me.

What kind of statute do testimonies have? They are not journalism; they are not literature, although they partake of both. They are fragile and in great danger of being erased or lost.

These moved me without my being able to say whether I was more touched by the mettle of the survivors or by the mixture of somber oppression and perversity of power for which the end always justified the means. Testimonies have to do with our past but also with the present autocracy. They illuminate us rather than seek our commiseration.

In some of these testimonies, the terror of the regime coexists with the violence of war. Sometimes, World War II gave people a wider latitude for their choices because it disorganized in part the mechanisms of control. These lives would be anonymous if it weren't for their conflict with power. By telling their story, they collide with the reality of autocracy. They do not revert it but illustrate the ways it operates. They are the hidden side of the autocrat's blind splendor. In those gray bodies dressed with drabness, behind the mask of acquiescence, there was still a soul capable of judging.

Resurrected after decades of silence, they moved more fibers in me than what is commonly understood by literature. People were confronted by a power in front of which one had to remain silent even at the moment of death, as poet Anna Akhmatova remarked. These people really existed. Their existence could have been anonymous or lucky if they hadn't come across a power bigger than them, to which they had to adapt to survive. They emerge as the true outline of a brutal form of government. They have a most intense relationship with reality. They do not include merely strange or terrible facts that compose the minuscule balance of their lives; each of them reveals the limits of individual initiative. These lives took the plunge, put everything on the line, and for the most part, they lost. The existence of these men and women limits itself exactly to what they said. We know nothing else about

them but what is transmitted by their sentences. They are a present call of alarm before the advances of autocracy.

The composer Dmitri Shostakovich said: "I just wanted to tell what I know well—too well. And I know that when all the necessary research is completed, when all the facts are gathered, and when the necessary documents confirm them, the people who were responsible for these evil deeds will have to answer for them, if only before their descendants. If I didn't believe in that completely, life wouldn't be worth living." [1]

The crimes were not punished, but memory is another kind of punishment. One of the fundamental traits of our existence is the fact that our destinies acquire the form of our relationship with power, of our fight with or against it. The point of these lives, where their energy concentrates, lies precisely where they collide with power and attempt to escape from their traps.

For centuries, the intersections of power and everyday life had been organized to a great extent around the practice of Christian confession, *id est* the duty to say it all, the duty to translate the minute quotidian world and turn it into sins one should be ashamed of so that all could be erased, and forgiven.

There was a duty, too, in Soviet times—without an independent judicial power—to confess everything before the agents of the political police. To say everything they knew about egregious plots invented by the police itself, according to a Decalogue of stereotyped accusations. They undertook the task of arresting people, instructing their cases, torturing them to make them sign false confessions, sentencing them, and executing the sentence. This was a novel relation between power, discourse, and everyday life, placed on the margin of any legality. Power injected itself at the most elementary level of the social body: between one man and another, between the members of a family, and the relations of the vicinity, inciting people under the pressure of terror to denounce one another.

The testimonies included here speak about the actual circumstances lived by those people. They might appear similar in their accounts of suffering and humiliation just because the conditions they underwent were similar and unremitting for all. Their stories have become eloquent reports of a state of things that passed but is not over.

Lenin was the creator of a new model of autocracy, the one-Party system. This model was followed by Stalin and reproduced by Hitler, Mussolini, and

[1] Shostakovich, Dmitri, *Testimony*, edited by Solomon Volkov, New York, Harper, 1979.

Putin. Today and throughout the 20th Century, democracies are in danger of being overcome.

On the 6th of January 2021, Trump attempted a coup that almost destroyed American democracy. In 2022, Putin invaded Ukraine. Autocracy is a clear and present fact. The ascent of the State of law is subject to interruptions, surprises, and corrupt attempts to subvert it. It would be easier to dismantle power if it simply watched, prohibited, and punished instead of compelling people to act and speak according to its propaganda.

These testimonies are not taken at face value. First, there is an internal coherence to the informant's voice; second, I corroborated the consistency of their stories with research and provided them with some documentary detail.

Introduction

We were total slaves of an illegal system.
Orchestra Director Gennadi Rozhdestvenski
Youtube video on Rozhdestvenski

This will last out a night in Russia,
when nights are longest there.

Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

Lenin

Lenin described those whom he considered "class enemies" with a vocabulary fit for the control of plagues; the *kulaks* (independent, prosperous farmers) were "bloodsuckers," "spiders," and "leeches." In January 1918, he used brutal language to incite the population to carry out pogroms to "clean the Russian soil of all harmful insects, rogue flees, and bedbugs,"[1] implying that the bourgeoisie must be physically exterminated. The term "bourgeoisie" was applied broadly to two groups. One was composed of those who had historically been "exploiters"—the owner of a factory, a farmer with an acre of land. The other included those who—without considering their social status or resources—opposed Bolshevik policies. People then could be "bourgeois" objectively or just subjectively, based on their opinions.

Post-1905, the political life of Russia changed for the better. Nicholas II, pressured by the turmoil caused in connection with the Russian defeat in the war against Japan, followed the European path and granted the people a parliament and a constitution. Censorship abated. There was freedom of the press. From 1906 to 1917, Russia functioned as a parliamentary monarchy until Lenin destroyed the country's fledgling State of law.

It is common to talk about two Russian revolutions in 1917: one in February and another in October. In truth, only the first deserves the name "revolution." In February 1917, Russia experienced a genuine revolution. After three years of war, the people were starving and exhausted. A hard winter exacerbated the transportation crisis. Shortages of food and fuel struck Petrograd. Many factories closed; others stopped operating due to strikes.

[1] Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., Moscow 1958-1965, vol. xxxv, p. 204.

Workers ambled aimlessly in groups without work and without food, causing trouble. This led to the Tsar's abdication.

The Tsar was succeeded by the Provisional Government, a cabinet composed of some congressmen from the Duma (parliament). The Provisional Government was the Tsar's legitimate inheritor since the congressmen had been chosen by popular vote. It won immediate acceptance throughout the country. In order to give Russia the shape of a democratic State, the Provisional Government agreed to hold universal elections with a secret vote to choose the members of a Constitutional Assembly that was to draft a new constitution for Russia.

On the other hand, the October events that led to the fall of the Provisional Government on behalf of Lenin were not spontaneous, but planned and were executed by a small group of conspirators. The Bolsheviks had mounted a paramilitary organization, the Red Guards, led by Antonov-Ovseenko, that was wholly loyal to the Party. These Bolshevik militias attacked a few strategic points: railway stations, bridges, the power station, the telephone exchange, the telegraph office, the Petrograd Telegraph Agency, and the State Bank. The Ministers of the Provisional Government were besieged in the Winter Palace as they were holding a session. The Bolsheviks invented the modern coup d'état.

Before Lenin, the State comprised the government and the governed. Lenin introduced a third element: the Party, which dominated both and was placed beyond their control. A "Party" that was not really a party governed without being a government ruled in the name of the people without their consent. Rather than a party, the Bolsheviks were an order without a platform, a cohort around a boss.

The summons of a Constitutional Assembly had dominated the hopes of Russian society since the fall of Nicholas II. It was the big word of the February Revolution: an Assembly elected through universal suffrage, invested with undeniable legitimacy, the sole representative of everyone's will. The elections would prevent the Bolsheviks from affirming, as they did incessantly, that they were the representatives of the people.

Lenin took power after the Provisional Government had set a date for the elections. He was somehow committed to allowing them. The other parties—especially the Social Revolutionaries—were counting on the elections to bring the Bolsheviks to reason. At the start of November, they embarked on a very active electoral campaign. Lenin had no choice but to tolerate the elections. There was high voter participation, especially in rural areas. It is not insignificant to mention that women voted. [2]

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[2] Pipes, Richard, *The Russian Revolution*, New York, Vintage 1991, pp. 540-543.

The elections were great, thanks to the degree of awareness of the electors. With the exception of a few incidents, they were completely fair. The Social Revolutionaries obtained 40% of the votes, and their Ukrainian counterpart totaled 52%, whereas the Bolsheviks reached only 24%. The liberal parties, headed by the Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets), earned 7% of the electorate. From a total of 703 seats, the Social Revolutionaries obtained 419, while the Bolsheviks only 168. Society was aware of the challenge. To ensure the results, a Committee for the Defense of the Constitutional Assembly was created with representatives from all parties. [3]

Upon the inauguration of the Assembly on January 5th, 1918, the atmosphere was far from calm, and the non-Bolshevik deputies needed great fortitude to overcome the aggressive barrier of troops positioned by Lenin around the Tauride Palace.

Lenin presented the "Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People" to the Assembly. The deputies rejected it with a difference of 137 votes. They preferred the program created by the Socialists.

The Constitutional Assembly—and to a great extent, the population—was hostile to the Bolsheviks.

Aware of the threat of dissolution that loomed over the Assembly, the deputies were determined—despite the deplorable conditions and their own exhaustion—to leave a mark on history with their work, even if they couldn't make a mark on the present. As the clock struck 4 o'clock in the morning on January 6th, they interrupted the session and agreed to meet again a few hours later.

All instruments of the government and army were in Lenin's hands. When the deputies arrived at the Tauride Palace the next day, the guards denied them access. A decree was posted above the door that dissolved the Assembly. That decree appeared in *Pravda*, while the daily newspapers that reported on the debates and resolutions of the Assembly were immediately closed and their editions confiscated.

Violence accompanied the death of the Constitutional Assembly. Uritsky, head of the CHEKA (political police created by Lenin in November 1917) in Petrograd, ordered the soldiers to shoot protesters in the street. He also murdered two liberal deputies, A. I. Shingarev and F.F. Kokoshkin, much to Lenin's content, who, upon hearing that his adversaries had denounced the excesses, said: "Let them shout. It's the only thing they know how to do."

To Trotsky, he made the following comment: "The dissolution of the Constitutional Assembly by the government of the soviets means the

[3] Pipes, Richard, *The Russian Revolution*, pp.541-542.

liquidation of the idea of democracy on behalf of the dictatorship."[4] The only path to dictatorship was terror. As Krylenko, the Bolshevik prosecutor, said, "We must not only execute the guilty. The execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more."[5] Innocence was no guarantee. The best way to survive was to go unnoticed, not attract attention, and never protest. The greatest hope for safety was to abandon any autonomous activity. Any relationship with public affairs was full of dangers. By shooting hostages, the CHEKA made it understood that it had no qualms about killing the innocent. The only thing to do was take refuge in a strictly private world—although there was no right to privacy— and turn into a musk turtle, huddled under the fetid leaves of a swamp.

It is absurd to talk about red terror as a deplorable policy forced on the Bolsheviks by foreign and domestic opponents. As was the case for the Jacobins, terror served the Bolsheviks not as a weapon of last resort but as an expedient that supplied the popular backing that escaped them. As popular support vanished, the terror increased, up to the point that in the fall-winter of 1918-1919, it was taken to the level of indiscriminate butchery.

Isaac Steinberg, a left-Social Revolutionary, collaborated briefly with Lenin as Commissar (Minister) of Justice from December 1917 to mid-March 1918, when he resigned. During a meeting of the Council of People's Commissars in February, Lenin presented the draft of a decree, "The Socialist Fatherland in Danger!" In it, there was a clause calling for the execution "on the spot," meaning a loose category of criminals defined as "enemy agents, speculators, burglars, hooligans, counter-revolutionary agitators, [and] German agents." Steinberg considered the decree a "cruel threat ... with far-reaching terroristic potentialities." As he objected, "Lenin resented my opposition in the name of revolutionary justice. So I called out in exasperation, "Then why do we bother with a Commissariat for Justice? Let's call it frankly the 'Commissariat for Social Extermination' and be done with it!" Lenin's face suddenly brightened, and he replied, "Well put ... that's exactly what it should be ... but we can't say that". [6]

In 1923, having been warned that he was in danger of assassination, Steinberg moved to Germany and took his young family to live with him in Berlin. There he joined the International Working Union of Socialist Parties (Vienna International), after which the All-Russian Central Executive Committee

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[4] Quoted in Carrère d'Encausse, Helene, *Lenin*, Paris, Fayard, 1998, p. 294.
[5] Steinberg, Isaac, *In the Workshop of the Revolution*, London, 1955, p. 227.
[6] Pipes, Richard, *Communist: A History.* Modern Library, p. 45.

deprived him of Soviet citizenship. From exile, he described the Leninist terror machine:

> Terror is not an isolated and random individual action, […] terror is a system, […] a plan legalized by the regime for the purpose of mass intimidation, mass compulsion, mass extermination. […] Terror is a heavy blanket of suffocation thrown from above on the entire citizenry of a country; a blanket is sewn from distrust, vigilant control, and vengeful delight. […] Under terror, the force is in the hands of a minority, the notorious minority, which feels isolated and fears this isolation. Terror exists just because the minority, power in hand, confronts a growing number of groups and strata of the population as its enemy. […] This "enemy of the revolution" is expanding. […] The notion is spread to a degree where it ends up encompassing the entire territory, the whole population, and, in the end, 'everyone except the government' and its collaborators.[7]

The elimination of legal restraints, the elimination of the law itself, and its substitution with something called "revolutionary consciousness" was the first step toward introducing mass terror. In 1918, Lenin defined a dictatorship as a "government not limited by any law."[8] In one stroke of the pen, he liquidated the entire Russian legal system that had been developed since the reforms of 1864. A decree in November 1917 dissolved all courts, including the Senate (High Court of Appeals). It abolished professions related to the judicial system, including the legal profession. In March 1918, Lenin replaced local courts that judged minor crimes with "people's courts," which became too slow and annoying for him. As a result, he relied increasingly on the CHEKA, the political police established by him, which he gave a license to kill without having to comply with even minimal legal formalities.

Most victims of the terror were randomly chosen hostages, possibly because of their former class, fortune, or connections to the old regime. If anything happened that, in the opinion of the local CHEKA, justified the "application of mass terror," an arbitrary number of hostages were taken from the dungeons and executed.

The Bolsheviks considered those massacres necessary, not just to suppress concrete threats but also to intimidate citizens and force them into submission. On September 5th, 1918, a resolution determined that the

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[7] Steinberg, Isaac, *Gewalt und Terror in der Revolution*, Berlín, 1974, pp. 22-25.
[8] Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., Moscow 1958-1965, vol. xxxvii, p. 245.

regime's " class enemies " should be “isolated in concentration camps” if not executed immediately.[9]

Much of the communist holocaust from 1918 to 1920 has remained hidden. Executions were carried out in secret, though sometimes lists of names of those executed appeared in the newspapers. Families were not notified of their relatives’ deaths.

In 1920, Russia had become a police state in the sense that the political police, the CHEKA, created in 1917, had developed and grown to become, virtually, a State within a State. It monitored and supervised all institutions, including those that were in charge of the economy. Taking into account its unlimited power on human lives, its administrative surveillance became another form of terror. No Soviet employee, whether Communist or not, could escape. Felix Dzerzinski was a Polish political activist who joined Lenin in 1917. When the political police was created in December 1917, Dzerzinski became its first Director. In accordance with the growing presence of the CHEKA in every area of government, in March 1919, Dzerzinski was named Commissar (Minister) of the Interior without losing his job at the CHEKA.

Among the main responsibilities of the CHEKA was the organization and operation of the forced labor camps. The inventor of the Bolshevik camps was Leon Trotsky. In 1918, he ordered the construction of the first camps to lock up the “sinister agitators, counter-revolutionary officers, saboteurs, parasites, and speculators” who had not been immediately executed.[10]

They were designed as places to detain citizens who could not be charged specifically and who, for one reason or another, the authorities had decided not to shoot. In a telegram sent to the city of Penza on August 9th, 1918, Lenin used the term “concentration camp” in the same sense as Trotsky. He ordered that the *kulaks* (regular farmers) opposed to the regime be subject to an “implacable mass terror”—read execution—but that “the doubters be incarcerated in camps outside the cities.” That policy went into effect legally and administratively in the “Resolution on Red Terror” on September 5th, 1918, which ordered that all un-executed “class enemies” be isolated in concentration camps.[11]

Large-scale construction of camps started in the spring of 1919 at Dzerzhinsky’s, the head of the CHEKA initiative. His report on February 17th,

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[9] *Dekrety*, III, pp. 291-92. Quoted in Pipes, Richard, *The Russian Revolution*, New York, Vintage, 1991, p. 819.

[10] Trotsky, Leon, in *Izvestia*, n.º 171, august 11, 1918.

[11] Quoted in Pipes, Richard, *The Russian Revolution*, New York, Vintage 1991, p. 835. op. cit., p. 819.

1919, argued that the terror measures for fighting sedition were not sufficient, adding:

> Even today, prisoners' work is not used for public tasks, hence I recommend that we retain the concentration camps to exploit the work of people under arrest, people who live unoccupied, and those incapable of working without coercion [...]; this means of punishment should be applied to those with an irresponsible work ethic—for negligence, arriving late, etc. This way, we can even lock up our workers.[12]

In 1919, the Central Administration of the Camps was created for the entire territory of the Soviet Union. Later it was called the Main Camp Administration, or GULAG. It was the destination for all types of undesirable people and "categories of individuals," which is to say, vast groups and entire segments of the population. A decree from May 12th, 1919, established that "the costs of administering and maintaining the camp [...] should be covered by the work of the prisoners. The responsibility for any deficit falls on the administration and the prisoners".[13]

That was how the Soviet concentration camp was born: an enclave where human beings lost all rights and became slaves to the governmental economy. In late 1920, Russia had 84 camps. Three years later, in October 1923, that number had increased to 315. According to reports from survivors published by the social revolutionary Victor Chernov in Germany in 1922, famine was permanent. Besides hunger, typhus and cholera killed between 15% and 20% of prisoners per month.[14] In the Kholmogory camp in the north, prisoners were executed based on the most trivial pretexts. If a prisoner working in the fields ate a vegetable he had harvested, he was shot on the spot. If a prisoner fled, it automatically led to the execution of nine others, based on the criterion of shared responsibility, which was later applied by the Nazis. A recaptured fugitive was not always shot, but frequently buried alive.[15]

Trotsky, Lenin, and Dzerzhinsky engineered these new forms of concentration camps. Stalin merely expanded them.

We might ask what the difference in status was between a prisoner in the camps and an ordinary Soviet citizen. Nobody in Soviet Russia had any personal rights or the possibility of judicial recourse. According to the decrees

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[12] Istoricheski archiv, n.º 1, 1958, 10.

[13] Quoted in Pipes, Richard, The Russian Revolution, New York, Vintage 1991, p. 835.

[14] Stéphane Courtois et al., The Black Book of Communism, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 106.

[15] Quoted in Pipes, Richard, *The Russian Revolution*, New York, Vintage 1991, p. 837.

of forced labor, anyone could be sent to work anywhere the State deemed fit. Therefore, the dividing line between prison and freedom was blurry.

In May 1919, for example, Lenin decreed the mobilization of the workforce for military constructions on the Southern Front. He stipulated that the force should consist "primarily of prisoners from concentration camps," but if they were insufficient, "the authorities could also require the local residents to work."[16]

Trotsky maintained that the ability of socialism to recruit forced labor was its main advantage over capitalism. He considered it was more effective to force workers than stimulate them through the market.

Without stimulus from the market, which Lenin continued to reject ideologically, there existed no means of influencing workers other than the repeated threat of force. This was the basis for militarizing heavy industry. Strategic factories were placed under martial law that operated with military discipline in the workshop. Absent workers were shot for "deserting" the "industrial front." In the late 1920s, already 3,000 enterprises, mainly munitions factories and the mining industry, were militarized in that way.[17]

In 1920, enforced manual labor began to spread to other areas. Millions of peasants were enlisted in work teams to harvest the crops, cut, and transport wood, and build roads. Trotsky expected that the entire population would be mobilized in regiments of workers who would act as an army or a militia on a war footing.

Rationing was introduced in nearly all areas of consumption: food, clothes, tobacco, fuel, and even books. More time and energy were wasted on distributing products than their actual value. An ordinary person spent several hours per day going from line to line, from office to office, trying to exchange his coupons for goods that were promised but not given or that were only rarely delivered. Bolsheviks fell into the trap of their utopianism. They thought they could create socialism by the sheer force of will.

In 1918, Lenin imposed the forcible seizure of grain. The system was ineffective and violent. Not only were the grain quotas unreasonable, but farmers were also prohibited from selling surpluses from their harvest. Knowing that everything would be confiscated from them, they planted less and less, just enough to cover their own needs. This led to a remarkable decrease in agricultural yield. By abolishing the grain trade, the Bolsheviks suppressed the market and, therefore, the economic incentive to produce.

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[16] *Dekrety, v, 511-12*. In R. Pipes, op. cit., p. 836.

[17] Figes, Orlando, *A People's Tragedy, The Russian Revolution* 1891-1921, London, Jonathan Cape, 1996, p. 788.

From 1918 to 1920, the forcible requisitioning tripled. The peasant rebellion seemed to have increased in the same proportion.

After three consecutive years of forced requisition of grain coupled with a drought that principally hit the Volga region, the profile of disaster was completed. In 1920, people were starving in the central provinces. Siberia was the only place where there was still a grain. Dzerzhinsky, head of the CHEKA, was sent there as a plenipotentiary. He established itinerant judges who went from town to town, sentencing those who had not provided what was demanded. The judges incarcerated and executed the peasants or sent them to forced labor camps.

Hunger spread to the cities.

Lenin watched starvation spread as if he were paralyzed. The news from the rural areas alarmed him, but he did nothing. Even after the catastrophe had grown to massive levels, he still did nothing because he was incapable of doing any other than attributing the national disaster to the bourgeoisie and the imperialists. For the first time, he was faced with a problem of his own creation that could not be solved with force. Finally, in 1921, pressured by independent journalists and intellectuals, the Soviet government accepted for a brief period foreign aid from the American Relief Administration to help with the famine (unlike in 1932-33). The famine affected 30 million people; 5 million died. [18] Cannibalism was a more common and widespread phenomenon than historians assumed.

In June 1921, a group of agronomists, economists, and university professors from the Moscow Agricultural Society established a Famine Inquiry Commission at the margin of the government but not in overt confrontation. The 63 members included prominent writers (Korolenko, Gorky), thespians (Stanislavsky), liberal politicians (Kishkin, Prokopovich), a journalist (Ekaterina Kuskova), a Tsarist ex-minister (N.N. Kutler), a veteran populist (Vera Figner), famous agronomists (Chayanov, Kondratev), an ex-minister of food from the Provisional Government, engineers, doctors, even Alexandra Tolstaya (daughter of Leon Tolstoy), who had spent the last four years in and out of CHEKA prisons and work camps.

Along with Chekhov and Tolstoy, some of them had participated in the Famine Inquiry Commission in 1891, which affected only ten percent of the victims of 1921.

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[18] Pipes, Richard, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, p.419. Courtois, Stephane et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, p.123.

Maxim Gorky was heard in the Kremlin. He convinced the leaders that the Commission could possibly be useful. Several of its members were people known abroad. They would appeal to intellectuals in other countries, appearing as guarantors that food would reach the victims.

Lenin refused to meet with the Commission members. Instead, Lev Kamenev received them. After that interview, Lenin accused his own colleagues in the Politburo of reacting emotionally before the situation, although he conceded in the end: "That woman Kuskova should not cause harm. We'll use her name and signature and a cart or two of wheat that we get from here or there from people who sympathize with her and that type of person. Nothing more than that."[19]

In July, the Party legalized the Commission. It was given the emblem of the Red Cross and access to means of transport, and the ability to communicate with foreign bodies freely. Such concessions on Lenin's part show the catastrophe's extent and scale. The Commission requested support from Patriarch Tikhon, leader of the Orthodox Church, who created an ecclesiastical aid group.

In response to its request, the Commission obtained relief from the International Red Cross, from the Quakers, and especially from the American Relief Association, led by Herbert Hoover (who would later become President of the United States). Hoover founded the ARA to provide food and medicine to post-war Europe.

Barely five weeks after approving the initiative, once the contacts had been made and a commitment of aid had been obtained, Lenin dissolved the Famine Inquiry Commission and arrested nearly all its members. They were to be exiled from Moscow "to different and distant regions, without means of communication, including trains, and kept under strict surveillance."[20] Even Gorky was pressured by Lenin to move abroad "for health reasons"—something he eventually did.[21]

At the same time, Lenin launched a press campaign, "Instruct the daily newspapers to start insulting those lowlifes (the members of the Famine Inquiry Commission) and call them scum. Accuse them of being surreptitious members of the White Guards and useless bourgeoisie, more concerned with traveling

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[19] Quoted in Courtois, Stéphane et al.,*The Black Book , of Communism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, p. 121.

[20] Quoted in Courtois, Stéphane et al.,*The Black Book of Communism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, pp. 122-23.

[21] Quoted in Figes, Orlando, *La Revolución Rusa (1891-1924)*, Barcelona, Edhasa, 1996, 2000, p. 848.

abroad than helping out at home. In general, make them look ridiculous. Make fools out of them at least once a week for the next two months."[22]

The Committee was replaced by an inefficient and corrupt State office that ended up distributing food daily to 3 million people, while Hoover delivered food to 11 million. The ARA also sent enormous amounts of medical supplies, clothes, tools, and seeds, leading to two large harvests in 1922 and 1923.

On March 19th, 1922, when over 30 million people were suffering hunger or actually starving, [23] Lenin wrote the following letter to the Politburo:

> With the help of all of the hungry who have started eating each other, who are dying by the hundreds and by the thousands, and whose bodies fill the ditches of all roads, now and only now, can we, and therefore must we, confiscate all the property of the Church with the greatest and most implacable energy that we are capable of. This is the perfect moment to squash the reactionary clergy decisively. Acting without compassion, with a cruelty that will be remembered for decades. [24]

Famine had claimed many lives and was the direct consequence of the grain seizure policy. It was useful to Lenin. It not only ended opposition from the rural inhabitants but provided the perfect excuse to discredit and destroy the Church and, possibly, the rest of the "bourgeoisie."

Lenin looked for a stronger method of intimidation beyond sheer terror, a method that, combined with terror, would transcend everything known until then. The method put into practice was terror by starvation, called "war communism."

> The monopoly of grain, ration cards, and the universal compulsory work service are in the hands of the proletarian State, in the hands of the soviets, invested with full powers and the strongest means of control and surveillance. […] The guillotine only terrorized, it only defeated active resistance. This is not enough for us. […] We must break the passive resistance, which is doubtless the most damaging

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[22] Quoted in Courtois, Stéphane, *The Black Book of Communism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, pp. 122-23.
[23] Pipes, Richard, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime,* New York, Vintage, 1995, p. 347.
[24] Quoted in Pipes, Richard, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime,* New York, Vintage, 1995, p, 351.

> and dangerous. […] And we have the means to achieve it: the monopoly of grain, the bread card, and the conscription for compulsory work.[25]

In life and in death, people were at the mercy of the bureaucrats.

The experiment left Russia in shambles. Compared with 1913, large-scale industrial production in 1920-1921 had fallen by 82 percent; work productivity by 74 percent; grain production by 40 percent. The cities emptied. The inhabitants fled to the fields in search of food. Petrograd lost 70 percent of its population; Moscow more than 50 percent, and the same happened in other cities. The real salaries of the workers declined to one-third of their 1913-1914 level.[26]

Lenin invented what is known as "instrumental law." He conceived of justice, not in terms of a citizen's right to have their just demands taken into account but rather as a political tool of the government.

> From my point of view, the latitude for applying the death penalty should be considerably increased. […] We should proclaim without hindrance […] the politically just principle that is the essence and motivation of terror. […] Tribunals should neither moderate terror nor suppress it in any way. […] On the contrary, they must provide a solid base to neatly legalize its principle […] which must be as encompassing as possible." He explicitly asked the authors of the Penal Code to include an article that established the death penalty for "the propaganda, agitation, participation or attending organizations that help the international bourgeoisie.[27]

This reasoning was consecrated in the Penal Code of 1922, which was written based on his initiative and in accordance with the spirit of his letter to Kursky, Kommissar (Minister) of Justice. Faithful to this idea, the lawmakers wrote Articles 57 and 58—"omnibus articles"—that gave the tribunals greater power to sentence any undesired person. It gave terror the appearance of legality.

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[25] Lenin, quoted in Maximoff, Gregory Petrovich, *The Guillotine at work*, vol. 1: The Leninist Counter-
Revolution, Somerville, Black Thorn Books, 1979, pp. 45-46.

[26] Cf. Pipes, Richard, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, New York, Vintage, 1995, p. 371; Avrich, Paul, *Kronstadt 1921*, New York, 1970, p. 24, quoting *Krasnaia gazeta*; Leage of Nations, *Report on Economic Conditions in Russia*, 1922, 16n; Gimpelson, E. G. *Sovetski rabochi klass, 1918-1920*, Moscow 1974, p. 80; Akademia Nauk SSSR, Institut Ekonomiki, *Sovietskoie narodnoe khoziaistvo v 1921-1925*, Moscow 1960, pp. 531, 536.

[27] Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., Moscow 1958-1965, xiv, 190.

Stalin

Then Stalin launched his revolution from the top, establishing two extraordinary goals for his domestic policy: the collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization. The extremely high, virtually unreachable goals of his Five-Year Plan, or *Piatiletka,* were centered on the creation and development of a heavy industry that would make Russia a great power. The Plan, adopted in 1928, set up impossible deadlines: a 250 % increase in industrial growth and a 330 % increase in the growth of the heavy industry. All factories and services were nationalized. Predetermined production quotas were demanded of all managers. The unions were expected to stimulate competition and individual output *(stakhanovism).*

Stalin intended to impose pure State capitalism on the Soviet Union, in the sense that the government was the only capitalist, the only entrepreneur that accumulated capital, trading with international partners. His purpose was to eradicate every trace of personal property rights, which had functioned in a restricted manner during the years of the New Economic Policy (1921-1928). Now every citizen became directly dependent on the administration and on the police.

In the countryside, Stalin decided to move from a system in which family farms predominated to a system of large collective farms or *kolkhozes.*

Peasants had to obey the *kolkhoz* authorities and fill production quotas like factory workers. He believed collectivization would improve productivity and took control of the surplus to feed the urban industrial population and export grain in exchange for machinery and industrial equipment. Collectivization—to the extent to which it was resisted—also led to the urban migration of farmers and created a new source of manual labor for industry.

The extraordinary measures for confiscating grain turned into a violent campaign against prosperous farmers, called *kulaks,* the most effective producers. Anyone who possessed more than one cow was already a *kulak.* "Only a minority-owned three or four cows and two or three horses. Only 1% of farms employed more than one paid worker."[28] Most often, people were classed as kulaks simply on the grounds that they had resisted collectivization. Stalin's blow aimed at the elimination of the natural leaders of the peasants against the Communist subjugation of the countryside. "A decree ordered the arrest and execution of a portion of the *kulaks* and send the rest to Siberia or the North, condemning them to a slow but sure death, or at least expel them from their original area." [29] More than two million farmers were evicted from

[28] Conquest, Robert, *Harvest of Sorrow*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 118.
[29] Koutouzoff, W. N. "L'absorption de la proprieté rurale", *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Paris, 1932.

their properties, deported on freight trains to rugged areas in the North, and forced to work in mining, logging, and construction of railroads and canals. Most of them perished in transit or after a few months of unbearable work conditions. The GULAG became a key factor in the economy.

Forced collectivization, often met with fierce resistance, resulted in the death from starvation of an incalculable number of people. In his book *Stalin,* [30] Dmitri Volkogonov reports a conversation between Churchill and Stalin, in which the latter acknowledged that the collective farm policy was a "terrible struggle" that occasioned the death of ten million peasants. In *Harvest of Sorrow*, p. 301, Robert Conquest calculates a figure of 14.5 million deaths due to the rural terror, seven million plus from dekulakization, and about seven million plus from famine. Recent research in the newly accessible archives has confirmed that more than two million peasants were deported, six million died of hunger, and hundreds of thousands died as a direct result of deportation. "Such figures, however, only hint at the size of this human tragedy." [31] Uprisings in many regions were crushed by forces sent from Moscow. Police and Army units surrounded farming communities, burned their houses, and fired on the population.

In 1930, the *dekulakization* had become "complete collectivization" and eradicated individual farmers (the private sector). Agriculture was now built around collective exploitation overseen by the bureaucracy, in which the farmers had become mere laborers. They were stripped of their economic power and ability to exercise initiative, and the biggest dividends from their work were transferred to the government.

The Five-Year Plan prescribed rapid industrialization without the intervention of market mechanisms. Engineers educated under the old regime, referred to as "bourgeois specialists," who still worked in that sector were expelled or arrested. A new generation of Red engineers—educated rapidly and loyal to Stalin—took their place. Success was measured more by speed and volume than by precision and quality. Criticism was interpreted as "sabotage." Any analysis raised suspicion, and all resistance provoked the most drastic countermeasures as if the whole system could collapse at any moment.

Grain confiscation was so thorough that many producers couldn't replant because they lacked seed. Others simply refused to do so. Farmers opted to slaughter their animals rather than surrender them to collective farms, leading to the loss of vast numbers of horses, cattle, hogs, and sheep. By 1933,

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[30] Volkogonov, Dmitri, *Stalin*, Rocklin, Prima Publishing, 1991, p. 167.

[31] Courtois, Stephane et al, *The Black Book of Communism*, Harvard University Press, p.146.

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