

## Everyday Stalinism

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As a child I was told about the Soviet union as a dangerous place. A powerful state that held their citizens in submission, and worse still, one which harbored aggressive ambitions. The Soviet citizens were imprisoned in isolation, and no doubt viewed the rest of the world with great suspicion, brain-washed as they no doubt were. The only Soviet people you encountered in the news were the leaders such as Khrustjev, Gromyko, Mikoyan and sports stars, which appeared inhuman in their invincibility. The mistrustfulness one felt against the giant neighbor to the east was augmented by the study of Swedish history, in which the Russians played the role of irredeemable foes (although if one should be consistent, the main foe of Sweden for five hundred years was not Russia but Denmark). The overwhelming emotion was the one of fear aggravated by the Cold War which dominated my childhood and youth. I recall how I once on a visit to Budapest in the summer of 1983 encountered a Soviet Tour bus. While still at the time people living on the other side of the iron curtain were thought of exotic, those who came from the Soviet union, were felt to be far more estranged, almost as if they were visitors from another planet. Clearly the gap that separated us from the inhabitants of Eastern Europe was nothing compared to that which separated them in their turn from the Soviets. No wonder that I was an anti-communist, not because so much of political reasons, as I identified that creed with Russian oppressiveness.

The idea of the Soviet union as an oppressive power was not just a case of Cold War propaganda, it had some definite basis in fact, although only a fraction of that basis was allowed to leak through the borders. The Russian revolution was a dramatic event, eminently romantic. There was Lenin and Trotsky, figures larger than life, embodying all the revolutionary phantasies accumulated since the French Revolution. The revolution, although taking the crumbling Tsarist administration with surprise, was not uncontested. Having been born it had to go through a baptism of fire and a Civil War ensued, with the white opposition lukewarmly and dutifully supported by foreign powers. Then followed a period of consolidation and compromise. The 20's was a vibrant period of experimentation, both social and artistic. Economically it benefitted from the NEP<sup>1</sup> an unobtrusive if ubiquitous capitalist presence. And then there was Stalin.

Stalin was not a front figure of the Revolution, completely overshadowed by far more charismatic figures such as Lenin and Trotsky, whose rhetorical brilliance, he was powerless even to emulate. But Stalin had his own kind of talent, in the end to prove to be far more enduring than the flashiness of the quintessential revolutionary. He was a hard worker, a listener, a pragmatist, and expert at playing one faction against another. In the end he prevailed, while leftists such as Trotsky was expelled from the party, exiled and eventually murdered, while Zinoviev and Kamenev were ousted and eventually executed as a result

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<sup>1</sup> The same acronym НЭП in Russian

of the show-trials inaugurated with their involuntary participation. In 1929 a new era started of the Soviet Experiment. While the early Bolsheviks had been romantic and fired by an ambition of world-revolution, Stalin was more of a realist, if a ruthless and irresponsible kind. The first Five Year Plan was installed, the New Economic Policy was scrapped, and the backward country was to be dragged into the 20th century kicking and screaming if needs be. The overwhelming ambition was one of a quick and thorough industrialization, and a total re-haul of the basic agricultural structure of the country. It was called building Socialism, a particular omelet that crashed millions of eggs. While class-consciousness played a very important role in the rhetorics of the revolution and also in the subsequent decade, with the emergence of full-scale Stalinism, it involved the physical destruction of millions of people, especially the so called kulaks, wealthy and enterprising peasants, the majority of which had been serfs prior to the liberation of 1861. They along with other undesirable elements, such as priests, former officials in the Tsarist Government, old aristocracy, tradesmen, especially former nep-men<sup>2</sup> became non-people, disenfranchised, barred from gainful occupation, and often exiled. In the wake of this forceful collectivization, production plummeted and wide-spread famines occurred. However, this well-known story is not the subject of Fitzpatrick's book, almost no mention of Stalinist atrocities are touched upon, and the show-trials of the late 30's are only given marginal attention, as is incidentally Stalin himself. This is not a case of a willful cover-up, only reflecting her different perspective. Her project is to illustrate the everyday life of the common man trying to lead a normal life during those extra-ordinary times.

How was it to live through that particular period? Basically it was a case of muddling through, of closing your eyes and struggling just to keep head above water and endure and survive, hoping that it would all pass. A suppressive regime can only successfully maintain power through the collusion with its subjects. What kind of power did the State hold over its citizens?

First and foremost by appropriating more or less the entire economic life of the country it made every citizen dependent on the state. The sudden and wholesale transformation of the economy had disastrous consequences, because economy is not just about production, but also about distribution, at all levels not only at the end stage to reach consumers. As a result the country was thrown into a state of chronic want. Just to keep head above water became a full-time occupation, involving standing in lines for hours for basic necessities. The cities became over-crowded and living-conditions very cramped. In fact material conditions became much worse than during the previous decade, not to mention during pre-revolutionary times. It was a cowed population with no resources to organize any kind of political opposition. You either had to approve and endure or perish. As a further pillar to boost the morale of the State was the common idealistic project of building Socialism, a project that required present sacrifices of the individual in order to satisfy the collective in the future. This project fired the imagination of the young, and Solzhenitsyn has reported the excitement he and his contemporaries felt at the time. This forceful modernization in which the individual was reduced to a cog and a single reed, was very much in the spirit of the times, fascism in Central Europe taking many cues from the Soviet social experiment. And also many parties in western democratic countries were also affected, sentimentalizing

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<sup>2</sup> Traders during the NEP period

the strong leader and the father figure and the common communal effort. A naive faith in material progress and the concomitant tyranny of political correctness, a phenomenon not unknown in our times, as is neither the implicit faith in sustained growth.

The regime was faced with contradiction. How to gauge the mood of the masses when there is no general election and hence no official discussion of policies, nor any free press? To find out the state needed surveillance, in short spies, who mingled with the populace, eavesdropped and reported. An activity which also was intimately connected with punishment and hence intimidation. In the Soviet union you had to watch what you said, otherwise you would be the subject of harsh reprisals, not excluding that of execution. But the benign face of the government also encouraged voluntary submission of information in the form of letters to the newspapers or petitions to the leaders to overturn injustices meted out by the bureaucracy. Most letters to the newspapers were not printed, but that does not mean that they were not read and studied, and of course not all the petitions to officials could be dealt with, because there were simply too many. Somebody like Kalinin could expect to receive several hundred letters a day. But whether responded to or not, they provided the authorities with useful information.

Furthermore it needed expertise. To industrialize a country was not just a rhetorical project, real knowledge was needed. A large part of the population came from an unprivileged background and benefitted from affirmative action in getting an education, mostly a technical one, as the country was in dire need of engineers. Of course it did not mean a mass education, as the state had no resources for that, hence it became in spite of the class basis an elitist one. For the same reason the old bourgeois intelligentsia which had been harassed during the twenties was re-instituted. To be a professor carried status, to say nothing about being a member of a scientific academy. By wits alone you were able to reach the top, without having to go through the party and prostitute yourself politically. This also carried over to the artistic elite, which allowed writers and artists a charmed life replete with dachas way above the rubble of everyday existence. But of course the greatest beneficiaries of the opportunities of the upward mobility were party functionaries, apparatchniks as they were referred to at the less exalted levels of power. The Soviet Communist ideology was one of equality in a class-less society, but clearly some people were more equal than others.

To survive above the absolute minimum you needed contacts and patrons. It was not so much a question of financial reward as access. Access to basic consumer goods as well as luxuries. The notion of *блат* was introduced, a kind of going-ons that were parallel to that of the official line and thus illegal and seen as a form of insidious corruption. In modern western countries this would correspond to networking, i.e. a way of obtaining unearned (if occasionally deserving) advantages through knowing the right people. However, with the advent of State terror, such activity later became dangerous, as any association to an official disgraced as an enemy of the state was bound to lead to trouble, as guilt was contagious, and as any epidemic spread randomly. Extensive as the terror eventually became, it originated with the persecution of the top brass, whose guilt was assumed to be without doubt by the population at large. As its more showy parts involved high-ranking officials, whose lavish lifestyles had antagonized the general population, those persecutions were basically popular. The ramifications, however, were far more anonymous, and those

who were not directly stricken, which statistically meant the majority, either remained oblivious of them, or assumed that they were justified.

We have mentioned collusion. But of course collusion comes with a price, and that price was a kind of impotent defiance, mostly expressed in cynical jokes. While the later-day historian shares with the officials at the time the problem of finding out what was really going on in the minds of the populace, there being so little real documentation apart from the intermittent diary, the jokes at least are preserved in collective memory, as long as half a century or more, and could still be tapped into during the early nineties. While you can report on a murder without committing one yourself, you cannot report a joke without being guilty of spreading one, this is of course a powerful logical argument for the freedom of expression, and indeed jokes did come to the attention of the authorities, often resulting in punishing to the point of executions of the links. This created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion replete with rampant acts of denunciation, be they for private or ideological reasons, in which the way to survive was to create small intimate worlds of trust, which in practice meant the strengthening of family ties and private friendship. But even if you led an exemplary life you were not immune to come to grief, just as in our days, immaculate life-habits are no guarantee against disease and early death. Hence there was an urge to test the limits, to gamble, to engage in outright defiance. The ones most likely to succeed in such behavior were the intellectual elites, the writers and artists, who could walk the tight line which either resulted in disaster or glorification. Someone like Stalin was not immune to culture and the artist had as we have already remarked a high status. Culture was also part of the goal of the utopian society to which communism strove, and one which could be not only sampled prematurely but was also encouraged to be savored at the present. Thus the obvious paradox that much of so called bourgeois culture, which may have been questioned in the 20's, were reinstated. Obviously someone like Stalin was bound to have some pretty conservative taste.

Living in a society in which you have no real trust in the state as a benign entity, even if you are wholly dependent on its services, you need to learn to read between the lines, never take anything at face value. This of course heightened the intellectual capacities of the reading and reflecting public and enhanced their critical faculties, as well as fostering a certain cynicism. It also stimulated serious literature, as writers were challenged to sharpen their wits and exploit their imaginations to express subversive truths, to a large readership which was both eager and trained to decode hidden messages.

Was it a happy time? For many it was disaster resulting in personal catastrophe including extermination, for most it was a time of hardship. Yet for the majority untouched by the extremes it was extraordinary times, to be savored as a survivor many decades later, especially if the 30's were the times of your youth, a period in life that tends to positively color everything that happened around you, even, or maybe especially hardship.

The picture painted by the author lacks the immediacy of a literary presentation aiming instead for some kind of objectivity. Although invariably bleak the impression is ultimately one not so much of evil and bumbling. The shortcomings of the society, as experienced by the majority, was the result of ineptness not of malice. The officials may be corrupted and cantankerous, but basically the system was well-meaning, and when grievances were able to penetrate the walls of protection, they were generally met with

understanding. The system was perpetrated by human beings, with all the weaknesses such invariably display. What was wrong was the system itself not those who were trapped in it, be they ordinary citizens or officials. After the West won the Cold War and the Soviet union was demoted from being the supreme adversary to just another of those unwieldy and flawed societies, there is more of impartial understanding. Why are we so aghast at the material want of the Soviet union when we take it as normal in the Third World? Throughout 20th century the basic fact that Russia along with its client states was a third world country after all, was obscured by the romanticism of the Russian revolution and the subsequent social experiment, undertaken on such a scale that its eventual failure, according to Popper, taught us nothing. The Polish journalist Kapuscinski refers to a colonial empire, colonized by itself. A vast territory mostly flat and unprotected save for its very expanse on which a thin layer of civilization gained a precarious hold. The very geographical vastness of Russia could indeed be viewed as an incentive by itself to conduct an imperial experiment.

Yet the pressing question of comparing Stalinist Soviet union with Hitler's Germany is not touched upon. Hitler and his co-horts were obviously rather inspired by the Soviet project as well as being appalled by it. In fact much of their popular success can probably be ascribed to their painting of the Bolshevik menace. Life in Germany in the 30's was far more pleasant than the hardships endured by the Soviet population<sup>3</sup>. While the economy and the governmental structure was in shambles in the Soviet union, it was very competently managed in Germany. The benefits were however not universally distributed. Being Jewish was definitely a drawback in Germany, but so was being a kulak and enemy of the people in the Soviet union. The loss of civil rights suffered by the non-people were definitely comparable to those the Jews were subjected to. It was a discrimination based not on what you did but what you were. The main difference being that the Soviet authorities were not as efficient as the German, thus there were room for more arbitrary action. Even if you were related to kulak, or to non-desirable elements, there was a possibility of hiding it. If you were a Jew in Germany they authorities would know. Of course it is not possible to make a sharp demarcation between being Jewish and non-Jewish, so the German authorities had to invest much ingenuity in order to handle the grey-zone, complete with gradations of Jewishness and concomitant loss of civil rights. It was all very formal and bureaucratic, and thus in many respect legal, be it a travesty of the concept. While in the Soviet union the discrimination was more chaotic. In Germany there were some marginal exceptions, Jews with a distinguished military record in the First World War or married to aryans were privileged compared to others. Such fine points were of course only invoked in Germany, the Ost-Juden were seen as an indifferentiable mass. Jews expired in harsh labour camps, along with other ethnic groups, but so did many enemies of the Soviet Union in the Gulag. When it comes to mere numbers the excesses of the Stalinist regime probably caused more death than the Nazis had time to effect<sup>4</sup>, but it is not clear whether this is an appropriate measure. Enemies of the people could be rehabilitated in

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<sup>3</sup> When the Soviet soldiers entered Germany they were stricken by the wealth and could not understand what the Germans had wanted to do in their own country. They were obviously not in want of anything.

<sup>4</sup> Had they been victorious against the Soviet union in the war, there might have been a holocaust of Slavs in their capacity as a vanquished and hence redundant population

the Soviet union if the whims of the authorities had pressed for such measure, the Nazi showed more consistency in this regard. Most importantly though, the Communist regime never set up pure extermination camps as did the Nazis. From a cynical point of view, they did not have to, most of their victims were automatically killed by the harsh conditions of Siberian labor camps. Stalin had the advantage of space, he could dump his garbage out of sight, he did not need to set up processing plants in the suburbs.

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