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Communism's "Bright Past": Loyalty to the Party despite the Gulag

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ABSTRACT: The Soviet Gulag has joined the tragic annals of what has been described as "man's inhumanity to man". Yet some prisoners, many of whom were falsely convicted, emerged from the experience maintaining their loyalty to the system of government that was responsible for their imprisonment. The hardship of the camp experience, and the hardship of return, stamped ex-prisoners for life. In camp, they struggled to survive. After camp they struggled to reintegrate, to re-unite, and for Party members, to renew their vows with the Party. This article focusses on Gulag prisoner and returnee accounts that profess enduring faith in the Party and the Communist project. With the materials that have become available, we can now begin to understand this phenomenon. Explanations include: Communism as secular religion, cognitive dissonance, functionalism, and the traumatic bond. As we witness a persistent trend to manage national and public memory by repressing the memory of repression in today's Russia, the issue of enduring loyalty among Gulag returnees may offer some insight into questions related to national memory and the dynamics of repressive regimes.

KEYWORDS: Soviet repression; victims; survivors; belief; labor camps; trauma; Stalinism

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RESUMEN: *El "Pasado Reluciente" del Comunismo: Lealtad al Partido a pesar del Gulag.*- El Gulag soviético ha pasado a integrar los anales de lo que se ha descrito como la "inhumanidad del hombre hacia el hombre". Sin embargo, algunos prisioneros y prisioneras, muchos de los cuales habían sido injustamente condenados, emergieron de la experiencia manteniendo su lealtad al sistema de gobierno que había sido el responsable de su encarcelamiento. La dificultad de la experiencia del campo, y la dificultad del retorno, marcaron la vida de los antiguos prisioneros para siempre. En el campo, lucharon para sobrevivir. Después del campo, lucharon para reintegrase, reunificarse y, para los miembros del Partido, renovar su fidelidad a éste. Este artículo se centra en los relatos de los prisioneros y de los supervivientes del Gulag que manifestaron su fe por el Partido y el proyecto comunista tras su liberación. Gracias a los materiales que ahora están disponibles, podemos empezar a entender este fenómeno. Las explicaciones incluyen: el comunismo como una religión secular, la disonancia cognitiva, el funcionalismo, y el lazo traumático. Al tiempo que somos testigos de una tendencia en la Rusia actual a gestionar la memoria nacional y pública reprimiendo la memoria de la represión, el asunto de la lealtad persistente entre los retornados del Gulag nos puede aclarecer cuestiones relacionadas con la memoria nacional y las dinámicas de los regímenes represivos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Represión soviética; víctimas; sobrevivientes; creencia; campos de trabajo; trauma; estalinismo

When the Russian television station, NTV, announced the death of Aleksandr Iakovlev on the evening of October 18th, 2005, the broadcaster stated that Iakovlev was the only former high Party leader to apologize for the "sin of Bolshevism".[1] The listeners were implicitly invited to consider the similarities between Bolshevism and religion. Among the ideological currents that converged within this public announcement were individual responsibility, religious confession, and a repudiation of a political ideology, now increasingly viewed with nostalgia.

Iakovlev went from committed Communist and ideologue to critic of the repressive practices of the system, eventually to become a chief architect of the Gorbachevera perestroika policies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he chaired the Presidential Commission on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Unlawful Repression which eventually rehabilitated over four million citizens. In the first post-Soviet decade, Iakovlev not only denounced the former political system, but encouraged people to remember and "repent", even calling for the traditional November 7th Revolution Holiday to be renamed "The Day of Agreement and Reconciliation" (which failed because no one understood with what they were supposed to be reconciling). In a certain sense, Iakovlev escaped the gravitational field of one indoctrination –Communism– only to be drawn into another religion. By design or default the Communist Part of the Soviet Union (CPSU) appropriated this role and function in the lives of some citizens' – even those who went through the Gulag.

This article will present some of the faces and traces of Soviet Communism through the stories I gathered in the first decade of the 2000s, while doing research on enduring loyalty to the Party among Gulag prisoners and returnees (see Adler, 2012). For purposes of discussion, these narratives are divided into different conceptual categories but most of them relate to the power and function of belief. They illustrate how Bolshevism functioned as a secular religion, how Communism can be viewed as a faith-based belief, how the Party or the movement had a charismatic draw for its followers, and finally the enduring influence of assimilated ideology. This complex of factors has come to be reflected in national memory and a national narrative that marginalizes the Gulag, and by extension, its victims and survivors.

With regard to the use of testimonies as historical evidence, it has been argued that no history should be written without listening to its protagonists. Fortunately, in the last few decades, serious scholarly efforts have been undertaken to integrate memories of mass violence into the writing of history, not just out of respect for the survivors but because any history writing that would exclude the voices of those who suffered would be arguably incomplete. In my 25 years of working with Gulag survivor accounts, eyewitness testimonies have proved to be instrumental for reconstructing and understanding what happened. Such sources are particularly important, because during –and in the aftermath of– mass political violence, many stories of repression are silenced by state and/or self-censorship. These sources, of course, must be approached with a critical understanding of all their complexities.

Before reflecting on the personal memories of the Gulag experience, it is useful to consider the national memory of Stalinism. Every national history is a collective autobiography which draws upon a wide inventory of events from its past. Different constituencies may select different events and assign different meanings to the same events. For a dwindling generation of Russian survivors, the Gulag was the defining institution and experience of the USSR. These survivors represent millions of people terrorized during the Stalin era. Yet, the terror imposed by the state is again marginalized in today's official version of Russia's history.

In post-Soviet Russia, the fashioning of a good future out of a "bad past" has been facilitated by the construction of a "usable past" (see Bevernage, 2010; Gow, 2007; Goti, 2010) for the national narrative. Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Stalin's popularity ascended in nationwide polls (48% of those surveyed in 2012 regarded the former leader as having had a positive role in the country's history)[2], a reflection of the longing of many to restore the country's former prestige and the security of a more strictly ordered society.[3] This rise in popularity was accompanied by a sequence of measures, including the 2009 restoration of an ode to Stalin engraved in a Moscow metro station and the creation of a now defunct state commission to guard against the "falsification of history to the detriment of Russia's interests". There is thus an increasing, in fact recurrent, trend to repress the memory of repression.[4] So to subvert Santayana's oft-quoted admonition, in post-Soviet Russia, those who do not want to be condemned by the past should remember their history from a *positive* perspective.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

A 2006 interview with a Gulag survivor illustrates a number of issues that my past and ongoing research try to address. Just after arriving in Moscow of that year, I called Zoria Serebriakova to talk to her about a new project. Zoria had been one of my interviewees in an earlier project that investigated the experience of return from the Gulag. Her father was an Old Bolshevik, a comrade of Lenin, and her stepfather was also a high-ranking Party official. Both were executed in 1937. Zoria's mother was sent to the Gulag, and Zoria to an orphanage. As it happened, Zoria had just finished reading the Russian edition of my book on Gulag survivors that the organization Memorial had published, and she was eager to tell me how she felt about it.

She picked me up outside of a subway station on the outskirts of Moscow and we talked for the hour it took to drive to her dacha. Zoria was so anxious to express her opinions that we skipped the small talk and started our discussion even as I was climbing into her car. Zoria passionately expressed her outrage at the interaction between the ex-prisoners and the government when the survivors were released from the Gulag. However, her outrage was

not directed at the *unrepentant behavior* of the government's representatives, but rather at the *ingratitude* of the returnees. She exclaimed, "how could it be that they were not grateful to the government when they were released from camp? … Those times were full of opportunity".[5]

She acknowledged that I had accurately reported the bitterness of many Gulag survivors, but she claimed that her fellow prisoners were misguided. The people whom I had described as victims and survivors were considered by one of their own as ingrates who had failed to appreciate the opportunities afforded them in the post-Stalin era. At this point I started taking notes because I knew that this would help me understand more about enduring Party loyalty, which I was investigating. I knew that Zoria was a privileged returnee under Khrushchev, and that she subscribed to the "returnee as hero" stance. According to this version, returning victims did not remain on the fringes of society, they were even sometimes received as heroes. After prisoners were released, they applied for and received rehabilitation, and they looked for and found work. I also knew that Zoria's mother had spent 21 years in Siberia, and then went on to become a Party propagandist after release, so Zoria's unwavering loyalty to the Soviet regime and Communist Party, even long after camp, was not all that surprising. Zoria focused on –and was emphatic about– the sharp distinction between the Stalin regime, which she disowned, and the post-Stalin Communist Party, which she supported.

Zoria's loyalty was accompanied by an inability to adequately recognize the validity of the bitterness of so many of her fellow returnees. This group –and they were in the majority– described themselves as having been victimized by the state both during camp and after their release. Although Zoria's allegiance to the Party (in and out of camp) was a minority view, she was not alone. There are many such examples in the life stories of survivors. While I felt comfortable disagreeing with Zoria's perspective, I felt uncomfortable because of my difficulty in making sense of her authentic feelings. Her counter-intuitive stance points to larger questions of how a repressive regime becomes incorporated into the attitudes and behavior of the people it controls, with the consequence that its citizens behave in ways that preserve the polity over their own individual interests.

Only by studying the narratives of people with similar orientations, can we understand how and why this minority point of view makes sense to people like Zoria. When such perspectives can be seen from *within the experience* of the prisoner or survivor, they may not be less distressing, but they will be less puzzling. This case also illustrates the need to subject our sources to critical scrutiny, because Zoria was describing an entirely different experience than that of many –even most– of her fellow victims.

One of the paradoxes of Soviet Communism was that a system of governance that enforced its ideology by executing, imprisoning, and exploiting the labor of dissenters, alleged dissenters, and alleged associates of dissenters still retained the allegiance of some of its victims, sometimes for decades. A goal of the research described here was to understand how and why this (minority) point of view makes sense to the people who hold it.

THE STUDY AND THE DATA

Until now we have only had the sketchiest knowledge of Gulag prisoners' attitudes toward the CPSU and how their incarceration in the labor camp system affected their subsequent attitudes toward the Party. However, much material could be found on this subject in the Central Party Archive, the General Procuracy, the Supreme Soviet, the memoirs of Old Bolsheviks, the Memorial Archive, in the memoirs of returnees and the perished, and by exploring the rich but vanishing trove of information stored in the oral histories of the survivors.

The repression cast a broad net and imprisoned people with a variety of political histories. Some prisoners had themselves played an active part in the repressive operations. Their distress at their own misfortune was sometimes tempered by the belief that, although the system had erred in their particular case, the system itself was justifiable because conspiracies really did exist.

Among the survivors and victims were also the dogmatists who did not lose faith in the Party but lost faith in particular leaders. They switched their devotion from Stalin to Lenin, blaming the terror on Stalinism. A memoir by Nina Gagen Torn, who spent eight years in the Gulag, described such camp-mates as "hard-core Leninists". They ardently clung to "Leninist ideals", a faith that allowed them to "live without breaking". Hundreds of Kolyma-bound prisoners endorsed this idea. Gagen-Torn recalled how, even as they were marched under armed guard, they sang, about their "selfless love for the people" (Gagen Torn, 2004: 22). These prisoners sang in spite of being butted with rifles, and even when they were thrown into the hull of the "death ships" from Vladivostok to Kolyma. Many were later executed, but according to this returnee's account, they maintained faith in *their* vision of Communism to the end of their life.

In the course of this research I interviewed Natalia Rykova, who was age 90 at the time of our meeting. She was the daughter of the Old Bolshevik Aleksei Rykov who was executed in 1938. Natalia's mother was also executed and Natalia spent years in labor camps because she was a family member of an "enemy of the people". Following her release (after Stalin's death) she campaigned to secure her father's Party rehabilitation. When I asked about her attitude toward the Party, she replied with a derisive question and answer: "Which Party? That wasn't the Party we knew [and created]".[6] Nevertheless, it was important for her to strive for her father's reinstatement –even in the existing Party– "for the sake of justice". He was reinstated under Gorbachev.

My approach to this question of enduring loyalty employs at least four overlapping but distinguishable hypotheses:

1. Communism as secular religion or faith-based belief that provides meaning to the lives of its citizens;

2. Cognitive dissonance – how one has to think and feel to convince themselves to succeed in a quest;
3. Functionalism – pragmatic concern for housing, employment, university placement, as they depend upon social status;
4. The traumatic bond – identification of the repressed with the repressors.

Victims' accounts have offered varied insights into these issues.

COMMUNISM AS SECULAR OR POLITICAL RELIGION

For the "loyalists", belief in the CPSU served as a labor incentive. They considered themselves to be Soviet patriots and the builders of socialism. Their faith in the morality of socialism was largely unshaken by the repression which they interpreted either as a perversion of an inherently good ideology or as an opportunity to "offer up", as it were, tangible physical labor in support of the ideology. The redeeming value of religious suffering, even martyrdom, comes to mind. Viktor Frankl has nuanced this notion by pointing out that "suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice" (Frankl, 1959: 115).

It was the predicament of many that a fulfilling life, and perhaps life itself, depended on being in good standing with the Party. Some prisoners went to great lengths to prove their loyalty. Lev Gavrilov was arrested in 1937 and sentenced to ten years of incarceration. He spent the early war years in Kolyma, and wrote about his experiences in his memoirs. He entitled his story, "*z/k: zapasnoi kommunist*" (reserve Communist) – a play on words with the Russian word *zek*, meaning 'prisoner'. This narrative provides a graphic, but telling illustration. In his memoirs, Gavrilov (2004) describes how he extracted his own gold teeth to contribute to the war effort. When he tried to give them to his interrogators, they did not want to accept this offer from an "enemy of the people". Gavrilov did not accept their assessment that he was someone who had violated his right to be a Communist, hence the title of his narrative.

The following story illustrates the religion-like quality of Bolshevism and also attests to the usurpation of family loyalty by the Communist Party. Oksana Lazarevna taught socioeconomics at Odessa University and was the mother of two. She was also the wife of an "enemy of the people", who had been arrested and taken away. Oksana was a committed Party member, but as she watched the arrest of one after another of her cohorts, she suspected that the enemy had "penetrated the Party, and it was the NKVD [Stalin' secret police]".[7] One day, while Oksana was nursing her infant son, they came for her too. The NKVD agents tore the baby from her, and dispatched her sons to her parents. Oksana was brought to an Odessa prison. There, the suspicions she harbored when she was free were confirmed by what she witnessed in prison.

By the time Oksana was sent on to the Gulag, she had resolved to "clear the names of honest Communists".[8] From her barracks, she began to write letters to Stalin and the Central Committee. She charged that, "lawlessness reigns in the organs of the NKVD … it has lead to the destruction of the Odessa Party ranks and many sincere Leninist-Communists".[9] Her camp-mates were terrified. They warned, "you will have to give these letters to the NKVD authorities in the camp. Don't you understand what the consequences will be? You will die, and you will kill your children". In her response, Oksana illustrated how the human dedication to a set of values can override even so strong a human devotion as motherhood, let alone personal survival. She declared: "I am a Communist in the first place, and after that a mother".[10] Oksana was transferred, and her story, recorded in the memoirs of a camp-mate, ends there. This author, also a committed Party member, was writing in 1963, and was clearly inspired – if not constrained by – the Khrushchevian vision on how to frame the past. Witness her conclusion to Oksana's story:

> In these days of the triumph of truth and justice, the complete unmasking of the cult of personality of Stalin, the restoration of the Leninist principles in life and Party leadership, I would love to know what ever happened to Oksana Lazarevna – a sincere Communist with a Capital C.[11]

We know that it is unlikely that Oksana even survived or made it to transport to the next camp. What is likely is that she maintained her faith until the very end. Others in this category re-conceptualized the camp experience to come out in favor of Party values.

What can such narratives tell us? From most of the accounts of committed communists, the question of "why", and the issue of guilt (*Die Schuldfrage*), as Karl Jaspers so aptly termed it, was not much more relevant than they would be for a religious devotee. Personal misfortunes are accepted with resignation or satisfaction in the fulfillment of a greater purpose for the collective, the Party, and the motherland. While the cognitive frames of secular systems answer *what* and *how* questions, religion answers *why* questions – the purpose and meaning of events. A further distinguishing characteristic of religious systems is that their claims are not falsifiable. As Bolshevism increasingly came to operate as a non-falsifiable system, it merged with the practice of religion. Inconsistent empirical evidence –if admitted at all– could be interpreted as serving a higher purpose.

People live for belief systems, die for them, and kill for them, and as these stories illustrate, for ardent believers, allegiance is not impaired by contradictory evidence. Some of the stories suggest that there was no contradictory evidence because the world view of true believers admitted none.

In addition to the immortality attendant to belonging to the collective, Bolshevism promised a workers' paradise in this life – a promise that seemed credible because it was consonant with the Russian Orthodox belief that an ultimate paradise was achievable here on earth.[12] Howev-

er, Bolshevism did not have an eternity to create this paradise. So, how does one account for the failure to deliver on their promise in this life? It appears that this conundrum was resolved by a combination of denial of official misbehavior or deflection of blame, discrediting dissident voices, propaganda which supported the position that the promised reward was just ahead and within reach, and the fact that there was no precisely stated delivery date.

On a different, but related note, there are many examples of how the bond to the Party was stronger than the maternal bond in my investigation of the stories of the so called "children of the repressed", specifically daughters whose mothers had been Communist loyalists. And the loyalty that had survived in the returnee parents had also sometimes survived them – in their children. Many of this generation did not report any sense of indignation or even surprise at their mothers' enduring loyalty to the Party – even after losing their husbands and being incarcerated in the Gulag. In fact, in my interviews almost two decades after the end of the Soviet Union, even in hindsight, these daughters of repressed parents had questions, but they did not condemn the Party; they praised the sincerity of the efforts that had been made to build Communism.

A number of my interviewees whose fathers were executed and whose mothers were incarcerated recalled growing up in orphanages, and having difficult reunions with their returnee mothers. The mothers of this cohort had entered and left the Gulag maintaining loyalty to the Party. One such case was Dina Sidorovna, whose husband was executed and who spent ten years in the camps and longer in exile. After camp, Dina would not even commit to babysitting for her grand-daughter because "there might be a Party meeting". Her emotional dependence on the Party was so central to her experience of life that she held no (at least public) opinions contrary to the Party line. She was grateful to Khrushchev for liberating her, and never conceded that she was guilty of the crimes for which she was imprisoned, but did not blame those who had imprisoned her. The Party took priority above all else. Her daughter, Gerta (whose name meant "heroine of labor") recalled a vivid illustration of how powerfully her mother was motivated by the Party. Dina was addicted to nicotine, and smoked incessantly, in spite of frequent admonitions from everyone. Dina would respond by saying: "if I am reinstated in the Party, I will stop smoking, but now I need it for my nerves".

A similar example can be found in the Il'in family. Ilía, the father, had been a prominent Communist Party official who served as the Secretary of the Kiev Provincial Party Committee, and then as the Secretary of the Astrakhan City Party Committee. He was arrested in July of 1937, executed in November of that year in Moscow, and then buried in the notorious Donskoi Cemetery. Mariia, the mother, was the director of a silk combine in Kiev when she was arrested in 1937 as the "family member of an enemy of the people".

Upon their parents' arrest, Mariia (their daughter) and her two brothers, Feliks and Vladimir, were sent to orphanages.[13] Vladimir had turned sixteen shortly after his arrival at the children's home, so he was soon dispatched to a camp in the Far East. Mariia's mother had managed to keep track of her children's whereabouts even from camp, and begged the authorities to take her son out of the Gulag and send him to the front so that he could die an honorable death. But the authorities paid little heed to the requests of families of "enemies of the people". Her plea was not granted, and Vladimir died in the camp.[14]

Mariia, reflecting on her mother's life, tried to understand how her mother had dealt with the personal and material losses of the repression. In brief, she concluded that those losses were bearable because they were not what her mother most valued in life. She told me: "My mother was very bright, she found happiness not in material things, but in spiritual things. Spiritual was not God, but the Party – you give your life in service and sacrifice". Having found this spiritual connectedness to the Communist ideology in the same way that others find it in religious faith, Mariia's mother could sustain her loyalty to Communism, even if she had disappointments in the behavior of some Communists.

Mariia herself was an idealist who was inspired by the Party, and she and her mother maintained their idealized vision of the Party even after their experience of repression. As Mariia explained, her mother found a way to look past what had happened to her own family, and focus, instead, on the goal:

> She knew there were enemies. She believed in the progress of the socialist system... She believed in the victory of the Revolution. She just figured there were mistakes, and there were chips. You know the expression "when you cut wood, chips fly", she was a chip... [She resolutely expected that] a just, wonderful Communist society would be built.[15]

In this case, that belief passed from one generation to the next.

However, the increasing public attention to the repression under Gorbachev was having an unanticipated influence on Mariia. Mariia found it harder to maintain her belief in Communism after the information from the archives became public. This challenge to her faith in Communism was confusing because the archives should not have revealed much more than she already knew from personal experience. A new meaning to old events was now reflected back to Mariia through the response of a different audience.

Until Gorbachev lifted the censorship on public discussions of the terror and exposed it to the scrutiny of public discourse, Mariia had been able to maintain a limited view of the chronology and scope of the repression. Now she was forced to revisit and critically assess the old, mutually validating interpretations of the repression that she had learned from her mother and her cohorts. She admitted: "I was the last of everyone I knew to really understand that so much of the system of repression started with Lenin, we always wrote everything off to Stalin".[16]

Mariia would have preferred to remain oblivious to this because it undermined so much that was foundational to her understanding of her family and her country. She explained, "it was very hard, you lose the ground beneath your feet because you don't understand what the truth is".[17] She wondered if, perhaps, her father had died in vain and her mother had labored in vain. She reluctantly acknowledged, "I guess what they did wasn't right, but they were fighting for the good of the people, sincerely fighting. It was not for themselves".[18] As we talked, it became clear that the part that "wasn't right" presumably referred to her father's work in Kiev.

Mariia acknowledged being "very upset" by the fact that her father had occupied a high position –Secretary of the Provincial Committee in Kiev– at the time of the 1932-33 famine in Ukraine. She could not understand how he could have overseen the Party's murderous policies of confiscating grain from starving peasants. She claimed that her mother was unaware of this, though they had all been living there at the time.

I asked Mariia if, perhaps, her mother knew what was happening but had considered it too risky to discuss the famine with Mariia, unless she could circumscribe the mass starvation with an ideological justification. This risk would have been at two levels: for one, it might have diminished the Party's standing in Mariia's eyes; for another, any balanced discussion of Party policy could have been interpreted as an expression of anti-Soviet sentiments. Mariia conceded that these would be plausible grounds for her mother's censorship.

Ironically, the very archives that Mariia had dreaded to read, provided her with a potentially positive view of her father. This provides a rich example of the Catch 22 legal/ethical conundrum that still stymies the rehabilitation process. When Mariia was finally able to read his case file, she discovered that he had been accused of disagreeing with the Party's policies in the villages. If this was really true, rather than fabricated charges trumped up to justify executing him for other reasons, then she could valorize her father as a "hero". However, the materials necessary to corroborate her speculation were not accessible. And though she was aware that most of the charges in these files were fabricated, she was comforted by the hope that her father was nobly guilty as charged.

Yet another of my interviewees, Evgeniia Smirnova, had a much less positive view of the Party and the system. This daughter of repressed parents went to work for the organization Memorial. As Evgeniia gathered stories of victims, she struggled to understand how her ideologically principled mother and her similarly principled cohort could have remained devoted to a system that had victimized them, along with millions of others. She recognized that her mother's devotion to Communism provided her life with an enduring sense of meaning, such that even the labor camp could be a satisfying labor of love, but Evgeniia found it painful to think about how different and devoid of meaning the incarceration must have been for the majority of the victims.

She lamented,

> Look at who is listed in [Memorial's publication] *Rasstrel'nye Spiski* (*Execution Lists*).[19] People with a low education, accused of anti-Soviet agitation. It's just horrible... These poor souls did nothing, they had no relationship to the system whatsoever ... they didn't bother anyone...[20]

Evgeniia wondered why her mother and her mother's peers had retained their ideological beliefs during and after the Gulag, when the political outcome seemed so different from what they had originally expected. She contrasted this with her own outcome-dependent assessment of the Communist Party and that of others: "There are people who, when faced with new circumstances, change their opinion". She attributed her mother's changeless convictions to her "internal constitution". Evgeniia also recognized that her mother and many of her dedicated peers had framed the Gulag experience as a meaningful, redeeming ideological journey destined to achieve the goals of Communism. Retaining their beliefs may also have helped loyalists survive the camp and post-camp experiences, and so their enduring allegiance was, at the very least, a matter of self-preservation.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

A 1957 doomsday cult study recognized a stratagem for reconciling the difference between expectation and reality and identified it as "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger, 1957). When people are coerced by circumstances into behaving in a way that is in conflict with their cognitions, there is a tendency to alleviate the ensuing psychological tension by changing their thinking to fit their behavior.[21]

One of the relevant points is that social consensus and social validation are mainstays of individual beliefs. Thus, the larger the community of believers, the greater the subjective confidence in the validity of the belief (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 1997). Since the 1920s, when all competing factions were banned, the Communist Party had a monopoly on power in the Soviet Union. In this climate, "fitting in" by exhibiting *partinost* (a sense of Party) was essential to normative social function and sometimes even physical survival.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued an amnesty that liberated 1.2 million Gulag prisoners. Subsequently, the newspaper *Pravda* published the following letter from a teacher in Kishinev:

> The decree is clear evidence that we are successfully moving along the road to communism in our country… The decree is a historical document which mobilizes and inspires our countrymen to new labor achievements for the glorious goal of the complete victory of communism, in whose name the Great and unforgettable Comrade Stalin labored to the last heartbeat.[22]

It is interesting to note the perspective on the issue of prisoners being released. This letter-writer does not ques-

tion why so many fellow citizens were incarcerated in the first place. Nor does the letter address the fact that an even slightly greater number still remained in the camps. It takes the amnesty decree to be an affirmation of the good work of the Party and the Soviet government rather than an indictment of Stalinism. Other writers to *Pravda* may have raised these concerns and were not published, or worse – and there may not have been such a teacher from Kishinev.

Whether this letter was written by a teacher or the editors of *Pravda* it can be understood as a cognitive stratagem for turning the dissonant perceptions of the Party as repressor into consonant perceptions of the Party as liberator. Its propagandistic success will depend on the readiness of individual readers to ignore dissonant facts.

Examples of countervailing consonant evidence to reduce dissonance are provided by loyalists who call attention to the industrial, educational, and social benefits provided by Communism, trumpet the scientific achievements in the name of the Party and the motherland, and laud the Party's successful mobilization of the nation's resources to wage and win the Great Patriotic War.

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism is the least complex explanation for the phenomenon of post-camp Party loyalty. Membership in the Communist Party, offered instrumental social advantages for housing, job placement, and professional advancement (Inkeles and Bauer, 1961). In the 1950s and 1960s, many Communist returnees met with dissident historian Roy Medvedev, so I interviewed him for this research. According to Medvedev, there were no uniform stories of how former prisoners related to the Party, but a number of individual stories offer informative portrayals.

Some stories began simply with the returnee's apolitical pursuit of ordinary material satisfactions that had long been denied. He described a woman who, upon return from the Gulag said, "I am disappointed in everything and believe in nothing anymore, but I have one desire – not beauty, not love, but to eat ice cream every day…". The pursuit of such immediate satisfactions was fairly common among the deprived and emaciated returning prisoners. She recalled how much she loved ice cream in her childhood, how little food there was in the camp, and how the luxury of eating ice cream epitomized her image of the good life. However, in order to eat ice cream regularly she had to have a refrigerator for the ice cream, and an apartment for the refrigerator, and a pension to pay for the apartment. All of this was contingent upon restored social status, a very political goal. If an ex-prisoner could receive rehabilitated status, with Party rehabilitation, the chances of a normal civil life, including material benefits, were much greater.[23]

A TRAUMATIC BOND

The "Stockholm Syndrome", or traumatic bond, is a recognized psychosocial process whereby forced isolation, anxiety, physical threat, and other forms of stressful conditions can lead to social bonding between jailers and prisoners or captors and hostages (Simpson and Roles, 1994).

The Soviet state and the Communist Party were very adept at using their monopoly of rewards and punishments, particularly in the Gulag, to construct a relatively closed system. Witness another letter published in *Pravda* in 1953, and attributed to an ex-prisoner:

> We are the children of our Soviet motherland-mother. Maybe we committed an offense, disobeyed, and mother punished us. But can we really hate her for that? She punished, but she also forgave and she once again embraces her children![24]

From a psychological and social perspective, such people have never left prison. They have incorporated their oppressor's belief system, they blame themselves, and they continue to seek security in reconciliation with the Communist Party as parent.

ASSMILIATION OF – OR ACCOMODATION TO – IDEOLOGY?

One of the complexities of dealing with a history of past repression is assessing the meaning of Party allegiance. For example the question of how far down the chain of command of a repressive regime should culpability be assigned remained open in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Among other failed transitional justice measures, de-Ba'athification policies, introduced shortly after the fall of the regime, created an "epic struggle" between the regime's opponents and supporters, and with regard to what principles of justice should be applied to the lower level functionaries.[25]

Some saw their wholesale dismissal as a form of "collective punishment", while others resented the fact that hundreds of thousands of lower-level Ba'athists, who may have been guilty of abuses, were permitted to remain in civil service positions.[26] As with the lower levels of Nazi Party membership under Hitler and Communist Party membership in Russia, Ba'ath Party membership may primarily have reflected fear and careerism.[27]

Still, these determinants can lead from the accommodation to repression to the assimilation of and allegiance to a repressive ideology. This mechanism explains how it is possible for people to continue to maintain feelings of loyalty when faced with the facts of the human toll associated with the repressive regime.

Those who had adapted to a repressive regime by acquiescence and accommodation could likewise adapt to a non-repressive regime. But those who had adapted by the assimilation of the repressive ideology would probably be resistant to change in at least two ways: First, any evidence that might conflict with their assimilated ideology could be re-interpreted as irrelevant or confirmatory. For example, human rights violations would be overshadowed by the demands of patriotism, and false imprison-

ment could be viewed as a necessary personal sacrifice for the greater good. Second, the meaningful experience of feeling connected to a revered leader, a cohesive group, and a visionary ideology can be so emotionally satisfying that it needs no more confirmatory evidence than does religious faith. While the "bright future" envisioned by Communist ideology was expected to be realized in this life, on this earth, the fact that it has endured the contradictions of the repression, the refutation of the disclosures, and endless delays, suggests that it occupies a psychosocial niche similar to that inhabited by "heaven" or "paradise" in theology.

TRACES OF VIOLENCE: HOW TO FRAME THE PAST AND NATIONAL REMEMBRANCE

Conceptually, it is easy to differentiate the ideology of the Communist Party from the ideology of the Gulag. But, operationally, they co-evolved and sometimes merged. The political system generally suppressed the history of repression, and rehabilitation was an uneven process that often proceeded in opposing directions. Many discredited symbols of the Soviet system –including Stalin– are also being rehabilitated, if not officially, then unofficially. This affects the national remembrance of the Gulag. The fate of individual remembrance of the Gulag was more complicated because personal and national survival are driven by different forces.

Evidence from numerous studies of Gulag survivors suggests that the consequences of the Gulag did not end with its closing under Gorbachev, nor was its influence limited to its prisoners. The Gulag, pervaded daily Soviet life because it could ensnare almost anyone. And today, in post-Soviet Russia we are witnessing renewed repression of the memory of repression. The 2014 state-initiated dismantling of the memorial complex at the Perm labor camp site is but one recent, prominent example. Vladimir Putin, who described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century"[28] argues that Russia should not be made to feel guilty about the Great Purge of 1937, because "in other countries, even worse things happened".[29] Accordingly, the current, state approved textbooks marginalize the Gulag while maximalizing Soviet successes. In a recent review of high school curriculum, the Putin administration decreed that one textbook will be created, with a "unitary vision", in a narrative that essentially emphasizes Stalin as an "effective manager". The key message should be: "We are citizens of a Great Country with a Great Past"; Putin has recommended that there be no "internal contradictions" and no "dual interpretations".[30] At a 2013 meeting with the Moscow Russian History teachers association, I learned that there are no less than 31 controversial subjects in the history of Russia, ranging from 17th century topics until today. One question is formulated to address the role of Stalin's personality. It does not refer to Stalinist repressions, but rather circumscribes them by suggesting an interpretation of this question within the framework of a "one-Party system dictatorship and the autocracy of Stalin".[31]

All of these topics will require a delicate approach, perhaps even censorship, in order to make it into the new textbook. So, despite the introduction of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* into the high school *literature* (i.e. not history) curriculum –an initiative supported if not driven by Putin, and completed in 2010– a subtext of this history lesson is that the political ethos is perhaps not fully ready to change.

REFLECTION

Since the "bright future" of Communism never arrived, looking to the "bright past" (Roginskii, 2011) of achievements is an artful stratagem for maintaining national pride. For many ex-prisoners and others, coming to terms with the nation's past has required reassessing the meaning of their personal past. For the older generation who were committed to the Party, even while in camp, a disconfirmation of their original ideology could raise unsettling questions about how they (mis)spent their lives. Such unsettling questions can lead to unsettling answers. They direct us to look at how the human need for safety, meaning, structure, and social cohesion can be manipulated by the closed systems of repressive regimes. These findings might be relevant to understanding the persisting resistance of some citizens to look at their past and learn a different lesson. It is my hope that the stories of belief, disillusionment, and survival chronicled in my research will help us to understand some of the processes by which repression gets inside the individual. In consequence, we may gain a better understanding of how repressive regimes are maintained.

NOTES

1. *NTV* "Segodnia", October 18, 2005.
2. *Interfaks* "Kolichestvo negativnykh otsenok lichnosti Stalina sredi rossiian za 15 let sokratilos' pochti v tri raza", 18 October 2012; *Levada Tsentr* "O stalinskikh repressiiakh", 28 August 2012.
3. Barry, Ellen, *International Herald Tribune* "Communism's ghosts haunt Moscow streets", 14 October 2008; *30 oktiabria* "Stalin lidiruet v oprose", 88, 2008; *30 oktiabria* "Rossiia i istoricheskaia pamiat", 81, 2007; Leont'ev, Iaroslav, *30 oktiabria* "Marks perevernul'sia by v grobu", 57, 2005; *Itar-Tass* "Russia Remembers Victims of Stalinism, But Tyrant Still Popular", 30 October 2008.
4. This trend is manifested in, among others, official unwillingness to exhume newly discovered mass graves and the steady restoration of Soviet- (or Stalin-) era symbols. (See Adler (2005).
5. Zoria Leonidovna Serebriakova, interview, Nikolina Gora, 19 April 2006.
6. Natalia Alekseeva Rykova, interview, Moscow, 18 October 2005.
7. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History [RGASPI], "Vospominaniia – ocherki Sliavianinoi O.A.", f. 560, op. 1, d. 36, ll. 4-6.
8. Ibid., l. 72.
9. Ibid., l. 5.
10. Ibid., l. 73.

11. Ibid., l. 6.
12. My thanks to Leona Toker for drawing my attention to this aspect of Russian Orthodoxy through Nikolai Lossky's 1957 work, *Kharakter Russkogo Naroda* (in *Usloviia absoliutnogo dobra*). Politicheskaia literature, Moscow (1991).
13. Figes, Orlando, The Family Histories, www.orlandofiges.com. [accessed 10/March/2008].
14. Kuznetsova, Mariia Il'inichna, interview, Moscow, 15 March 2008.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. *Rasstrel'nye Spiski, Vypusk I Donskoe Kladbishche*, 1934-40. NIPTs Memorial, Moscow (1993). This work encompasses the short biographies of 670 of the Moscow victims of execution on political charges whose ashes are buried at the Donskoi crematory. The list contains only the victims' whose fates had been ascertained as of January 1st, 1993. *Rasstrel'nye Spiski Vypusk 2, Vagan'kovskoe Kladbishche* 1926-1936. Memorial, Moscow (1995). The work contains short biographical information (as of June 1995) on executed victims' of political repression whose ashes were strewn in the Vagansky Cemetery
20. Smirnova, Evgeniia, interview, Moscow, 18 March 2008.
21. On the dynamics of group systems, see Adler and Hammett (1973).
22. State Archive of the Russian Federation [GARF] "Svodka pisem po povodu Ukaza Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR ob amnistii", f. 7523, op. 85s., d. 235, l. 6.
23. Medvedev, Roy, interview at his Moscow dacha, 19 June 2005.
24. GARF, f. 7523, op. 107, d. 235, ll. 7-8.
25. Sissons, Miranda, *International Center for Transitional Justice* "Briefing Paper: Iraq's New 'Accountability and Justice' Law", 22 January 2008: 2.
26. Ibid, 5.
27. See Rolfe, Ella, *ICTJ in the News* "Addressing the Baathist Legacy in Iraq", 26 February 2010.
28. Eckel, Mike, *The Boston Globe* "In Remarks, Putin Laments Soviet Fall", 26 April 2005.
29. Birch, Douglas, *Associated Press* "Vietnam Worse than Stalin Purges", 21 June 2007.
30. Aleksandrova, Lyudmila, *Itar-Tass* "Work on Standard Russian History Manual Proves Really Daunting Task", 26 September 2013.
31. Bocharova, Svetlana, *Vedomosti* "Experty perepysivaiut istoriiu Rossii", 11 June 2013.

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