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Elena Bonner

The Remains of Totalitarianism

I was educated in Soviet schools, where social studies and courses in the history of the CPSU were obligatory. Later at medical school I studied philosophy (naturally, Marxist-Leninist) and political economy. I did not ask myself whether there was even a grain of truth in them. Once I passed the exams, without which I could not graduate and become a doctor, I forgot everything I'd learned.

It took many years for me to understand that by not studying subjects beyond the official requirements, I had rejected an important, perhaps the fundamental, part of human culture and had become a person without an intelligible view of the world.

I am speaking of myself because I am no exception. Most people in my parents' generation and my own had a similar experience. We lived and grew up in an atmosphere of total fear, often without even realizing it. There were twenty-three pupils in my class, and eleven had parents who had been arrested. »Terror is the true essence of this form of government,« Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.*

Stalin's death and the fall of totalitarianism did not lead to the disappearance of this fear. It seemed to become part of our genetic structure, passed on to subsequent generations. That is why there was never a student movement in the USSR. On the whole our society remained one without genuine convictions. I am not speaking of state ideology – we don't have one now and we don't need one! – but of the absence of moral criteria and the ability to distinguish truth from lies, good from evil.

* All quotations from Hannah Arendt are translated from Dr. Bonner's original text in Russian.

And only a few people, like Sakharov, could develop a cosmologically whole and humanistic picture of the world that rejected lies totally.

Reading Arendt is frightening even today. Her account of the general resemblance of the Nazi and Communist regimes has been confirmed by many others. On Hitler: »He was phenomenally false ... lack of a sense of reality ... indifference to facts« (Konrad Heiden). On Stalin: »revulsion for the truth of life,« »indifference to the real situation« (Nikita Khrushchev). In Germany: »The Führer is always right.« In the USSR: »The Party is never wrong.« Hitler: »The nation will be victorious or it must perish totally.« In the USSR, as a song put it, »Bravely we'll go to war for the power of the Soviets and we will die as one in the fight.« Death camps and the Gulag. Gas was used in the former. The latter didn't need to waste money on it – hunger and cold did the job.

However, in Germany some legal court procedures were observed – for non-Jews. In our country people were executed immediately after a fifteen-minute meeting of a troika summary court. And sometimes without one. My uncle was executed on December 20, 1937, and his sentence was passed on December 31. I've read dozens of cases dealing with members of the Comintern, colleagues of my father. All of them had fifteen-minute trials followed by execution. There was an amazing resemblance between the two punitive bureaucracies – the SS and the NKVD – both in how they were above the law and how their officials were selected. In Germany propaganda frankly promoted the Nazi goal: we are the master race, destroy all subhumans, and enslave the rest. Himmler said: »We have one goal – to continue the racial struggle ruthlessly ...



We will never allow that marvelous weapon – fear – to grow dull, and we will enrich it with new meaning.«

In the USSR at this time, by contrast, internationalism was proclaimed, and songs about the friendship of peoples blared from every loudspeaker. (Is that why the Soviet Union fell apart so easily? Because it was itself a lie?) Instead of the word »Jew« the authorities used euphemisms, like »cosmopolitans,« »killers in white coats,« and »Zionist hirelings.« Political opponents of the regime who were not Jews were called »bourgeois nationalists.« And all these denunciations and calls to action, and their bloody consequences, were generally supported by the people.

One of Hannah Arendt's key conclusions was »The totality of terror is guaranteed by mass support.« It is consonant with a later comment by Sakharov: »The slogan 'The people and the Party are one,' painted on every fifth building, are not just empty words.«

Today total state terror seems impossible. But Arendt's words still hold: »Propaganda is the only and perhaps the most important instrument of totalitarianism in dealing with the non-totalitarian world.« If we substitute the word »lies« for the word »propaganda« and add that it is used more extensively inside the country than outside it, then we will have the main trait of power in the USSR and Russia during the last half-century. The inertia of falsehood is stronger even than the inertia of fear.

We lived, and continue to live, in a state of lies. The great lie calls Russia a democratic state. The barely created election procedures were violated during the elections in Chechnya, which took place during the first Chechen war, and, subsequently, in Yeltsin's 1996 election victory, which was decided largely by money and not the will of the voters. Then came the appointment of Putin as Yeltsin's heir, as if Russia were a monarchy, and here, besides money, the main electoral lever became so-called »administrative measures,« that is, direct pressure from the regime. The electoral machinations spread easily to elections for governors and local officials. And where there are no valid elections, then, by definition, there is no democracy. When it comes to Belarus, everyone agrees this is so, but they are afraid to say it about Russia.

The vertical regime constructed by President Putin – dividing Russia into seven okrugs, headed by presidential appointees, standardizing the constitutions of the national republics, changing the way the upper house of the federal assembly is formed and limiting its functions – is being presented as a program to bring order to the Russian state. But these transformations contribute to the unlimited power of the president and in fact turn multinational Russia from a federated state into a strictly centralized and unified one. And they are subverting our national Constitution.

Simultaneously, people from the security establishment – that is, from the KGB-FSB and the army – have been, and are being, appointed to high government posts, reinforcing their influence on the entire life of the country. Yet another development of recent years has been the series of arrests and court trials that smack of lawlessness. These include the case of the American businessman Edmond Pope, the diplomat Valentin Moiseyev, the journalist Grigory Pasko, and the navy captain Sergei Nikitin. These men were accused of spying. Not to mention the obviously trumped-up case against the journalist Andrei Babitsky last year. And yet not a single political murder of recent years – and there have been more than a few – has been completely resolved.

Another dangerous phenomenon permeated with lies is the expansion of state control over the mass media, under the cover of punishing financial violations and fighting corruption. While the state is destroying some holding companies and trusts that managed publications and TV stations, it is

creating, under its own control, others that are more powerful and even more corrupt. This applies as well to other actions by the authorities that are being passed off as part of the fight against corruption. And while the world knows about the government's attempts to take over national television, and about the government's campaign against Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, whose persecution is clearly colored by anti-Semitism, very few people have heard about what is happening to the mass media in outlying regions of the country. Similar affairs there end in violence too often for this to be considered exceptional. It looks as if in a short time there will be no truly free and independent TV stations or other mass media in Russia. Instead we will have the recently promulgated »Doctrine on Information Security«, which calls for government supervision of the press and television.

But the greatest disaster and shame of the new Russia are the two Chechen wars and the de facto genocide of the Chechen people. The wars were preceded by widespread anti-Chechen propaganda. And lies. After many years of use in the USSR and Russia of the word *chuchmek*, a derogatory term for all non-Slavic people, a new ethnic label came into being: »person of Caucasian nationality,« used not only in the streets, by the »masses,« but in official documents.

The first war was needed by Yeltsin to raise his ratings in the polls and it was used by his entourage to enrich themselves with billions of rubles. It ended with the total destruction of the city of Grozny, which had a population of half a million people. There were three hundred thousand refugees, and war atrocities in Samashki and other villages – atrocities for which, we may be sure, there will be no Nuremberg-style trials. The war took the lives of more than 100,000 civilian residents, Russian soldiers, and Chechen fighters. This was called the »reestablishment of constitutional order«. Western leaders (friend Bill, friend Helmut, and all the rest) took this phrase at face value (or pretended to – lying is as contagious as the plague), and thought it appropriate to appear in Moscow at the height of the war to attend a military parade marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II.

The second Chechen war was needed by the heir of Russia's first president. The inexplicable attack on Dagestan by two Chechnya-based guerrilla lea-

ders and, more importantly, the explosions of apartment houses in Russian cities which caused hundreds of casualties guaranteed this war almost complete national support, and Putin high popularity and certain election. (I don't know who was responsible for these explosions, but psychologically they were the contemporary analogue of the Reichstag fire.) Now the Chechen war has a new, respectable-sounding name: »the fight against international terrorism«. The Western nations accept this (or say they do); they also make a show of defending human rights by passing nonbinding resolutions deploring atrocities in Chechnya at the Council of Europe and similar forums. But they seem to be waiting for a »final solution«.

I realize that I am speaking dangerous words. But it is impossible not to mention the bloody bombings and continuing killings of Chechens, as well as the detention camps, the uncounted dead children, women, and old people, the thousands of refugees dying of cold and starvation under open skies and in tents. If this is not genocide, then what is it? And with these two wars Russia has lost its newborn democracy.

Before the two Chechen wars there was the Afghan war. It was started by the USSR, which, once it withdrew from Afghanistan, then behaved as if it had nothing to do with it. But to this day the flames of war fanned by the USSR are still raging there. Meanwhile, the USSR immortalized its part in the war in bronze. Everyone in Russia and the countries of the former USSR who fought in it received a medal engraved with: »To an international warrior from the grateful Afghan people.« The lie of that medal is insulting – scorched earth, a million and a half refugees, a hundred thousand dead. Gratitude for what?

It is intolerable how many lies and falsehoods have been poured into the minds of people during these wars and also with reference to industrial and other catastrophes (the nuclear reactor explosion at Chernobyl, the earthquake at Neftuyugansk, the loss of the Kursk submarine). At the same time we continually hear official lies in Russian daily life, recalling the lies in the USSR during Stalinism and in the post-Stalin period. Truth could hardly stand up to the total impact of so many lies. A young man once said to me about the Prague Spring: »That was when the Czechs attacked us.«

Brought up on lies, a society cannot mature or take on responsibility. It is an adolescent society

with all the characteristics of adolescence – needing a leader and his imitators, being aggressive and quick to take offense, simultaneously lying and trusting. In literature, William Golding described it in *Lord of the Flies*. Those who sensed the falseness of Soviet society intuitively fled the lies of the humanities and took up concrete professions, becoming engineers, doctors, musicians. When it became possible, many emigrated. My mother, a professional Party worker, went back to study architecture in 1933. It did not save her from the terror. Arrested in 1937, she designed barracks for prisoners and then, with her camp inmates, she built them.

With the fall of the totalitarian regime – with Stalin's death, Khrushchev's speech, the Thaw, and the emergence of the *shestidesyatniki*, the liberals of the 1960s – came the era of the dissidents. Among them were disproportionately large numbers of physicists, mathematicians, engineers, and biologists, and almost no historians or philosophers. But the dissidents were only a handful, just a few hundred people in a country that then extended over one sixth of the planet. It is hard to say whether they had a distinctive philosophical view, but the clarity of their vision differed from that of millions of other people. This gave them the strength to reject lies and preserved their self-respect, without which there is no respect for others and for life in general, and which in the final analysis brings a sense of happiness. Why do so few people have it? People speak of conscience. But it seems that conscience is the supreme existential value only for a very few people. For most it is a chimera; and as we see from history, it is easily shrugged off.

In the preamble to his draft for a Soviet constitution, Sakharov wrote: »The goal of the peoples of the USSR and its government is a happy life, full of meaning, material and spiritual freedom, well-being, and peace.« I do not know the goals of Russia's government today. But in the decades after Sakharov, Russia's people have not increased their happiness, even though he did everything humanly possible to put the country on the path leading to that goal. And he himself lived a worthy and happy life.

Hannah Arendt had the fortune to be born Jewish, which helped her to make the right choices in the Germany of the 1920s and 1930s. She had the fortune to be in love and to write her doctorate about Saint Augustine and love. In her study of the

life of the eighteenth-century Jewish intellectual Rahel Varnhagen, she could find parallels with her own life and write a book that has meaning for the women of our time. She had the courage in 1950 to write about the similarity of two bloody regimes, when most of the intellectuals in the West shut their ears at any mention of Stalin's terror. Like Orpheus visiting the kingdom of the dead out of love for his Eurydice, she plunged into historical and political materials that to this day elicit an almost cosmic horror in order to leave us her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as a lesson and a warning.

Will humanity at the start of a new millennium heed this warning? That is the question for today. Andrei Sakharov wrote: »The future can be wonderful, but it might not be at all. That depends on us.«

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