



Rewarded For Not Thinking

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Melbourne schoolboy Maxim Bishev captures the repression of people and free thought under communism, highlighting the story of his great-grandparents' time in the USSR.

History should not be swept under the carpet when discussing politics, let alone when someone argues in support of Communism. Too often inconvenient facts are dismissed as unrepresentative of 'real socialism' when radical ideologies are propagated. For those fortunate enough to have been raised in free societies, the ruthless intolerance of authoritarianism is rarely understood. But the memoirs of those who survived it should put the philosophy of postmodernism to rest, forever. This is one such memoir, among the millions of lost and unrecorded, unatoned sins of the Soviet 'socialist paradise':

Saint Petersburg, Soviet Russia, 1947: Pavel Gorfunkel, professor of philosophy and clinical psychiatrist at the Leningrad State University, enters the designated meeting place for that night's shadowy discussion of Party politics and philosophical thought. His friends are all missing from the apartment. He later learns that during his absence from the meeting the previous week, a traitor sold everyone out to the Soviet Government as conspirators, guilty of free thinking.

Only recently, he had lost his university payments for a month, due to missing an exam. Worse, he missed the exam due to losing track of time while reading Hegel—a German philosopher. Worse still, the city has been struck by famine, so a lack of money always means a lack of food. And now his entire intellectual hub has been arrested by the NKVD (the secret police, forerunner of the KGB).

At this point his scepticism was confirmed. The Government was not concerned with the livelihoods of individuals. Pavel Gorfunkel— among so many others—had reached that conclusion and maintained that conviction until his death.

That this 24-year-old Jewish-Russian war veteran, keen supporter of the individualist movement and critic of Stalin, managed to evade the Gulags (camps of punishment and forced work, mostly in Siberia) and continued to lecture publicly can only be described as the result of remarkable courage and not a little good fortune.

His wife, Anya Gorfunkel, my 91-year-old great-grandmother, explains the challenges she and Pavel faced:

Marxist philosophy was the most important subject no matter what discipline you studied and counted heavily towards your grades in university.

Meanwhile, one's grades determined the size of one's stipend, a necessity in times of scarce food. The humanities promoted the ideal of the Soviet citizen, an idea my great-grandparents particularly took issue with. To be a Soviet citizen meant to surrender your personal goals to the doctrine of the Party; to fall into the attractive trap of identity politics rather than look inwards and examine one's character, which enables human moral development.

Anya recalls her trip as a young girl from the humble fishing village of Vladivostok to imperial and majestic Leningrad (as St Petersburg was called in the Soviet era):

After the war, I was to travel to Saint Petersburg and I was so excited. I spent half a month on trains to cross the entire country. Nowhere did expectation and reality align less than in 1940s post-war Leningrad, where the dissonance between the ideological promises and the city's Parisian-style masterpieces was in stark contrast to the daily predicaments of the citizenry.

As a young, naive and patriotic girl, I believed what I was told. We had won the war, now we needed to rebuild the nation. Lenin was the highest ideal of rigorous intellectualisation to which we were expected to adhere and aspire. Everything was viewed through a purely deterministic lens, so Leninism was 'finally and objectively true'.

Soon after her arrival Anya met Pavel Gorfunkel, and her entire world-view experienced a paradigm shift:

Several frontline combatants returning from the front were admitted into the University. Among them would be my future husband. They stood out from the culture there. These soldiers had returned from the Eastern Front wise, hardened and incorruptible. You cannot imagine what they witnessed ... death and suffering everywhere—and they knew that much of it was due to the ignorance and incompetence that characterised Soviet military planning.

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Pavel himself, after stepping on a landmine, had instructed his battalion—against their preference to abandon the task and take him to the hospital—to sever his lower leg, with no available anaesthetic, and resume the task of deactivating mines to clear a path for food supply trucks. These men had seen the willpower of the individual prevail above the charisma of the group. Veterans such as these founded the political discussion group, which ended in their arrests within two years. Some were given a merewarning but others never returned from the Gulags. This is how easily freedom dies.

As well as other blacklisted literature, Pavel and Anya Gorfunkel studied German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who had predicted the loss of religious belief would lead to a value-vacuum and the subsequent rise of a totalitarian state. Holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor Frankl had provided a famous corrective: 'He who has a why can bear almost any how.'

'We fell in love and married ... and decided to devote our careers to the study of the human mind,' Anya explains. But their academic lives were not insulated from intolerance of Pavel's Jewish heritage or their shared critique of state-imposed 'equity'.

'We didn't get a larger apartment because of our Jewish last name ... sometimes a hate letter would be slipped under the door of his office in the psychology department,' Anya says.

Lev Gorfunkel, the son of Anya and Pavel, explains how the Soviet system worked: 'Marxism was not even disseminated as an independent topic ... rather it was incorporated into the fundamental principles of every academic discipline. The lure and attraction of Leninism was expressed in the word equity.'

'Teaching people not to think was their means of keeping power,' he says.

In this period, every Soviet institution contained—by law—a Party member from the KGB, whose primary role was to ensure that all speech from fellow employees adhered to Communist ideology.

Once, in the late 1960s, Lev was required to ‘just have a conversation’ with an internal investigator over his (then) mild criticisms:

They said it was just a discussion, but all the real communication in that discourse was non-verbal ... their tone and manner said: ‘If you don’t keep your mouth shut, next time we might be meeting in a very different place...’ ... My friends, too, had been interrogated and we played it off at the time, but we all admitted afterwards that it frightened us to the core.

Paradoxically, even for intellectuals the epiphanies which gave rise to their suspicions about the true value of socialist ideals often came not through logic, but through music and art. For Lev this moment came when he first listened to The Beatles:

You begin to understand that something truly other and more beautiful exists in this world.

In the later decades of the Soviet Union (officially deceased 1991), there were underground markets for American music and cinema, and, as Lev explains:

The Party made a mistake ... as propaganda we would be shown American films depicting racist actions against black Americans and greedy capitalists, while, in fact, most of us wondered: ‘How can every family there live in a whole house and own a Mercedes Benz?’

It was in this inadvertent manner that freedom of thought seeped into a traditionally brutal and oppressive state, and Western ideals (especially individualism) became popular among youth in the 1980s.

Lev Gorfunkel, who studied Law and Mathematics in the 1970s, was a vocal critic of General-Secretary Brezhnev’s economic policies and held discussions more openly at his university. After the tyranny that tormented his parent’s generation— when visits from the thought police typically took place at night, with agents kicking down apartment doors and sending the residents off to Gulags—the KGB could not hope to actively investigate every instance of deviation from the Party doctrine, and so Lev defended his intellectual ground. Like other young people, he wondered about the truth and falsehood in the Soviet Union. Still, the risks involved in thinking openly were known to all.

The Communist regime ran on the overarching idea of equality, and that was partly achieved, as Lev recollects:

We certainly had economic equality ... but people were too blind to notice that this was an equality of absolute poverty. We were equal in our poverty of wealth, and we were



equal in our poverty of freedom. To provide enough for everyone, we need a very strong economy. To have a strong economy, it must encourage open discussion, which leads to entrepreneurial innovation, such that goods of higher quality can be produced more affordably.

Thus, placing the value of 'equity' over national wealth and freedom is in no way reconcilable with compassion for the poor, because a system of authoritarian rule and planning merely equalises down, making everyone poorer.

I used my final question to Anya Gorfunkel, my great-grandmother, to ask what advice she had for modern university students feeling disillusioned with life or the economy, and who are considering supporting suppression of free speech and economic equality of outcome?

Now(adays) Marxism-Leninism is harshly criticised. If there are people who support it, I consider that to be extreme and wrong. In the case of students, if it is possible, they must acquire knowledge first. Knowledge is power, after all. A knowledgeable student will not let himself be deceived and must critically analyse everything he or she is taught. Now, memory alone is not sufficient in humanities education. We have a saying that a student is not a flask that must be filled with ideas. Rather, a student is a torch, that must be ignited, so they can critically think through everything before latching onto an oversimplified ideology. As for the education system, we must help people understand what they want in life and provide the appropriate education for that directive to be attained. That way we can value the will of the individual.

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