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Authoritarianism Goes Global (II)

THE LENINIST ROOTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESSION

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In 1947, Stefan Jędrychowski, a communist veteran, member of the Polish Politburo, and minister in the government, wrote a memo somewhat pompously titled "Notes on Anglo-Saxon Propaganda." He had many complaints—about the influence of British and U.S. news services in Poland, and about foreign fashions and films. But his most sustained attack was on Polska YMCA, the Polish section of the Young Men's Christian Association. Founded in Warsaw in 1923 and later banned by Hitler, Polska YMCA had restarted itself in April 1945 with some help from the international YMCA in Geneva, as well as a good deal of local enthusiasm.

The YMCA in Warsaw was avowedly apolitical. Its main tasks in Poland were to distribute foreign aid—clothes, books, and food—and to provide activities and classes for young people. Jędrychowski suspected ulterior motives, however. The YMCA's propaganda, he wrote, was conducted "carefully . . . avoiding direct political accents," which of course made it more dangerous. He recommended that the minister for state security conduct a financial audit of the organization and monitor carefully which publications were being made available and which kinds of courses were being taught. After two years of watching, the communist authorities finally decided that they had had enough. They declared the YMCA a "tool of bourgeois-fascism" and dissolved it. With bizarre Orwellian fury, communist youth activists descended on the club with hammers and smashed all the jazz records, and the building was given to something called the League of Soldiers' Friends, a state-run organization.

The reconstruction of Polska YMCA in the immediate postwar period was a classic example of what is nowadays called "civil society," a phenomenon that has gone by other names in the past. In the eighteenth century,

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philosophers first began to identify the importance of organizations such as guilds, clubs, and unions that functioned apart from the institutions of the state. Edmund Burke wrote admiringly of the "little platoons"—the small social organizations from which, he believed, public spirit arose. In the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote equally enthusiastically of the "associations" that "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form." He concluded that they helped to ward off dictatorship: "If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve." More recently, Robert Putnam has redefined the same phenomenon as "social capital" and concluded that voluntary organizations lie at the heart of what we call "community."

Burke, Tocqueville, and even Russian intellectuals believed that civil society was fundamental to democracy; Lenin believed that the destruction of civil society was crucial to totalitarian dictatorship.

But in the early part of the twentieth century, the small group of revolutionaries who became the Russian Bolsheviks developed an alternative theory of civil society. Burke, Tocqueville, and even Russian intellectuals believed that civil society was fundamental to democracy; Lenin believed that the destruction of civil society was crucial to totalitarian dictatorship. As historian Stuart Finkel has explained, Lenin believed that "the public sphere in a socialist society should be unitary and univocal," and dismissed the "bourgeois" notion of open discussion. Accordingly, the Bolsheviks regarded all independent associations, trade unions, and guilds as "separatist" or "caste" divisions within society. As for bourgeois political parties, these were meaningless. Lenin wrote, "The names of parties, both in Europe and in Russia, are often chosen purely for purposes of advertisement, the 'programs' of parties are more often than not written with the sole purpose of defrauding the public."[1] In fact, the Bolsheviks disliked independent organizations for the same reason that Burke and Tocqueville admired them: because they gave people the power to control their own lives, because they encouraged independent thought, and because they made people more critical of state power.

In this as in so many other spheres, the Bolsheviks applied their theory to reality as soon as they could. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, they created what was probably the first political party ever to have as one of its explicit goals the destruction of any institution not directly created by, and not loyal to, itself. In the Soviet Union, even completely apolitical organizations were banned, because Lenin believed that all organizations were inherently political: If they were not openly political, then they were secretly political.

From that assumption, it also followed that no organized group was

above suspicion. Associations that claimed to be interested in soccer or chess might well be "fronts" for something more sinister. The St. Petersburg academic Dmitri Likhachev—later Russia's most celebrated literary critic—was arrested in 1928 because he belonged to a philosophic discussion circle whose members greeted one another in ancient Greek. While in prison, Likhachev encountered the head of the Petrograd Boy Scouts, an organization that later would be considered highly dubious in Eastern Europe as well.

This profound suspicion of civil society was central to Bolshevik thinking, far more so than is usually acknowledged. Finkel points out that even as the Soviet leadership was experimenting with economic freedom in the 1920s (during Lenin's "New Economic Plan"), the systematic destruction of literary, philosophical, and spiritual societies continued unabated. Even for orthodox Marxists, free trade was preferable to free association, including the free association of apolitical sporting or cultural groups. This was true under Lenin's rule, under Stalin's rule, under Khrushchev's rule, and under Brezhnev's rule. Although many other things changed over the course of Soviet history, the persecution of civil society continued after Stalin's death, well into the 1970s and 1980s.

The East European communists inherited this paranoia, whether because they had observed it and acquired it for themselves during their many visits to the Soviet Union, or because their colleagues in the secret police had acquired it during their training, or in some cases because the Soviet generals and ambassadors in their countries at the end of the war gave them explicit instructions to be paranoid. In a few cases, Soviet authorities in Eastern Europe directly ordered local communists to ban particular organizations or types of organizations. In postwar East Germany, for example, they outlawed hiking groups.

As in postrevolutionary Russia, the political persecution of civic activists in communist Eastern Europe not only preceded the persecution of actual politicians, it also took precedence over other Soviet and communist goals. Even in the years between 1945 and 1948, when elections were still theoretically free in Hungary and when Poland still had a legal opposition party, certain kinds of civic associations were already under threat. In Germany, Soviet commanders made no attempt to ban religious services or religious ceremonies in the first months of occupation, but they often objected strongly to church-group meetings, religious evenings, and even organized religious and charitable associations that met outside the church in restaurants or other public spaces. Private trade remained legal in many places in the late 1940s and early 1950s, even as members of Catholic youth groups were arrested and persecuted.

In the postwar era, other countries influenced by Bolshevik doctrine adopted some of the same policies. Communist China and North Korea are the two most obvious, and indeed they might be said to have equaled or exceeded the Bolshevik mania for destroying independent organiza-

tions. Perhaps less obviously, several Arab dictatorships, including those in Libya and Iraq, followed similar policies. Muammar al-Qadhafi was so fanatical about destroying civil society that he blocked even the creation of a single state political party, preferring to govern alone. The absence of alternative associations is one important reason for the rise of radical Islam in the wake of the Arab Spring: In many countries, the mosque had for many years been the only functioning independent institution.

From Repression Springs Dissent

In a very real sense, the complete repression of civil society made the Soviet Union, its colonies, and its imitators unique. Although Hitler may have had similar aspirations, he was not in power long enough to destroy all of Germany's civic institutions. The Bolsheviks and their followers, by contrast, had plenty of time to eliminate not only opposition political parties and private enterprise, but all kinds of youth groups, sports clubs, educational societies, and more—and to move them all beneath the umbrella of the state.

In the end, the Bolsheviks' thoroughness may have been one of their most important mistakes. For Lenin did not see that by attempting to control every aspect of society, totalitarian regimes would eventually turn every aspect of society into a potential source of dissent. The state had dictated high daily quotas for the workers—and so an East German workers' strike against bad working conditions in 1953 mushroomed quickly into a protest against the state. The state had dictated what artists could paint or writers could write—and so an artist or writer who painted or wrote something different automatically became a political dissident. The state had dictated that no one could form independent organizations—and so anybody who founded one, however anodyne, became an opponent of the regime. And when large numbers of people joined an independent organization—as when some ten-million Poles joined the Solidarity trade union in 1981, for example—the regime's very existence was suddenly at stake.

Over time, some political opponents of the communist regimes came to understand that this was an inherent weakness of Soviet-style totalitarianism. In his brilliant 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless" Czech dissident Václav Havel famously urged his countrymen to discard false and meaningless jargon and to "live in truth"—in other words, to speak and act as if the regime did not exist. More to the point, he also called upon his countrymen to take advantage of their rulers' obsession with total control. If the state wanted to monopolize every sphere of human activity, he wrote, then every thinking citizen should work to preserve the "independent life of society," which he defined as including "everything from self-education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others, to the most varied, free, and civic attitudes, including instances of independent social self-organization."

In due course, some version of this "independent life of society"—"civil society"—began to flourish in many unusual ways. Hungarians joined academic discussion clubs. Czechs created jazz bands. Poles organized underground Scout troops and, eventually, independent trade unions. Everywhere, people played rock music, organized poetry readings, set up clandestine businesses, held underground philosophy seminars, sold black-market meat, and went to church. They also told jokes, which were often very subversive indeed. In a different kind of society, these activities would have been considered apolitical, and even in Eastern Europe they did not necessarily constitute "opposition," as such. But they gave people control over some aspects of their own lives—and, in practice, gave them what they felt were spheres of freedom and independence from the state.

At times, they also had a very profound impact on politics. In 1956, tiny Hungarian academic-discussion groups slowly grew larger, became public meetings, and eventually led to the Hungarian Revolution. In 1980, Solidarity briefly won the legal right to exist before it was crushed a year and a half later by martial law. And then in 1989, East German Protestant groups and independent activists organized a series of marches in Leipzig that helped precipitate the fall of the Berlin Wall.

After communism had come to an end, it once again became possible to speak freely and to organize freely in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. But in many places this was easier said than done: The private, civic, social, and charitable institutions through which citizens had once channeled their independent intellectual, political, benevolent, or athletic initiatives no longer existed. Neither did the legal system to support them. Much has been written about the loss of the work ethic in communist Europe and the absence of stock markets and capitalist institutions. But by 1989, the habits, customs, laws, and even etiquette associated with everything from the culture of a responsible newsroom to the organization of annual charity balls also had been missing from much of the Soviet Union for seventy years, and from Central Europe for forty. They were no easier to replace.

Worse, some part of the population in virtually all the former Soviet-bloc countries was, at least to start with, actively opposed to their revival. In 1989, the notion of a newspaper that publishes articles critical of the government was bizarre, even suspect, to many ex-Soviet citizens. The very thought of a school organized according to a different philosophy from state schools seemed strange. The idea that a charity could be funded entirely by private people was, to many, unacceptable and even suspicious: What would be the motives of the people who contributed? Political parties engaging in uncontrolled debate presented the most terrifying prospect of all. The spectacle of people disagreeing in public, sometimes even shouting at each other, seemed disruptive, divisive, and even dangerous.

It is also true that, in the absence of both the state and civil society, words

such as "freedom" sometimes seemed like empty slogans. You might be free to spend your time as you wanted, but the local state-run football club had collapsed for lack of funding, nothing had replaced it, and your community had forgotten how to organize football teams on its own. You might be free to engage in politics, but political parties and organizations were weak, corrupt, and poorly organized. You might feel outraged about the poverty around you, but you no longer knew how to raise money to help.

With time, of course, many citizens of former communist states adjusted to the new realities, grew accustomed to the idea of individual liberty, and enthusiastically began to rebuild civil society. Others, however, did not. Across the region, the size of these two groups still varies a great deal, depending on a particular country's history and culture. Indeed, their relative weight is extremely important: In the postcommunist world, citizens' attitudes toward civil society have, to a surprising extent, helped to determine the political situation of their countries. In Poland, "illegal" civil society had flourished during the last two decades of communism, spawning not only the Solidarity trade union but dozens of other independent organizations: artists' and writers' groups, church organizations, even an underground Scouting movement. By 1989, Poles not only were ready to legalize civic organizations, they already had some experience running them.

In Russia, by contrast, where the right to freedom of association had been repressed for seventy years—and had been very limited even before that—ordinary people were more cautious about the idea of free civic institutions. Worse, the men who came to power in the early 2000s, after the short Yeltsin interregnum, were once again blatantly hostile to them. The Putin presidency's crusade against the very notion of independent civil society in Russia has reflected, in part, the return to power of the old KGB, an institution whose primary goal was the destruction of all independent organizations inside the USSR. In the course of their training, all these men would have learned that events cannot be allowed just to happen, they must be manipulated; that markets cannot be genuinely open, they must be managed from behind the scenes; that elections cannot be unpredictable, they must be planned in advance. By the same token, they also were taught that organizations that they do not control are by definition hostile.

Putin himself had personal experience with the danger posed to an authoritarian state by independent groups. As a young KGB officer in Dresden in 1989, he witnessed mass street protests and the ransacking of the headquarters of the Stasi, the East German secret police. And he is not alone. Most of the people who now surround him were trained and educated inside the same system, and most appear to think the same way.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the return of the KGB to power has been marked by the slow but systematic elimination of all kinds of independent groups and organizations from Russian society. In November 2012, the Russian Duma passed a law that, in effect, required any organization

receiving any Western funding to register as a "foreign agent"—in other words, an agent of espionage. Spot checks and audits of a huge range of groups, including those working in education and healthcare, have led many to close their offices or move them outside of Russia. Among the more than fifty organizations forced to register as foreign agents are Memorial, an organization dedicated both to human rights and to preserving the history of Stalinism, and the Dynasty Foundation, a Russian-funded charity that supports math and science. Dynasty's Russian founder and sole funder had said earlier in the year that he would stop financing the organization if the foreign-agent designation was not lifted, and in July the organization's board decided to close it.

A more recent law gives the Russian state the right to shut down "undesirable" foreign organizations of any kind. Among the groups mentioned as possible targets are Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Under the law, Russian organizations known to "cooperate" with "undesirable" foreign organizations can also be fined or punished.

Russian society, long unaccustomed to participating in civic organizations, will now be further discouraged from doing so by fear. Very soon, it may become difficult to found, run, or join an independent organization of any kind at all in Russia; the only "legitimate" organizations will be run by the state. As long as Russia is ruled by people who have not abandoned this element of Bolshevik thinking, that is how it is likely to remain.

The question now is whether other postcommunist societies—and indeed the many other societies heavily influenced by Soviet ideology—will take a similar route. Most of the Central European and Baltic countries that made it into the European Union seem likely to maintain the right to organize freely (although Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has fulminated against the existence of some independent organizations in Hungary that receive money from abroad). The civic sector is also very strong in Ukraine, drawing on pre-Soviet Ukrainian traditions of self-help and peasant organizations.

But in Belarus, Central Asia, China, Cuba, parts of Africa, and much of the Arab world, those in power remain attached to the old Bolshevik idea that independent civic institutions are a threat to the state. There is an irony here, for in their most important goals, the Bolsheviks failed. They never did succeed in carrying out an international communist revolution, their economic theories have been discredited, and central planning is no more. But Lenin's narrower ideas about civil society live on in places as varied as Beijing, Cairo, Havana, Minsk, Pyongyang, and Tashkent—proving, perhaps, that they were always the most potent and dangerous of all.

NOTE

1. V.I. Lenin, quoted in *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Is the Leading and Guiding Force of Soviet Society* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951).