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Building Soviet Reality with Language and Metaphor

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Abstract
In this essay, the author explores the use of metaphor in Soviet Lithuania as a symbolic bridge to create a framework of beliefs and explanations that help make sense out of life. The Soviet system of pervasive, ideology-based, state communication was in essence a metaphor for Soviet life itself. Although this powerful metaphor turned personal experience on its head, it required acceptance of that new "reality" if the individual wanted to survive. The writer questions how easily state-imposed metaphors designed to repress spontaneity can be changed by a new social openness.

By way of truth in packaging, I should begin by stating that this essay rests on ten years of work in the former Soviet Union, much of it with dissidents, deportees, and members of the Lithuanian armed resistance to the Soviets. I have never met or spoken with a former official of the Soviet regime. Furthermore, at the same time that I began working in Eastern Europe, I was also starting a manuscript on the use of metaphor in promoting slavery, specifically the establishment of chattel slavery in Central and North America by the first generation of English and Spanish settlers. So I went to Eastern Europe with a developed interest in the use of state-sponsored metaphors to establish control over subject populations.

The Soviet government was ideologically based. It developed and made wide use of public media to proclaim the regime's superior nature and lofty goals. My interest here is in the link between their ideology and the proclaimed message, which addressed all aspects of national life. That link was inclusive enough, I believe, to see it as a new national metaphor. I describe metaphor at the start of the manuscript mentioned above, subsequently published. So, to begin, I will quote from that description:

> Metaphors can be seen as patterns of meaning that peoples use to explain life to themselves. Societies can have systems of collective memory and thought, image and symbol, that explain who they are and why they do what they do. ...Metaphors can function as linguistic bridges. They are images in a symbolic language that connects us with a living framework of beliefs and explanations that are convincing and satisfying enough to help us make sense of life.[1]

I am principally a writer, but for reasons I will explain, I shifted to producing a documentary film. The camera observes and records. It does not evaluate. So I found myself observing the function of state-created language rather than evaluating it. And what I concluded was that the Soviet system of pervasive, ideology-based, state communication was really a metaphor for Soviet life itself. But it was a powerful metaphor. It was powerful because it turned

personal experience on its head. And it required acceptance of that new reality, if the individual wanted to survive.[2]

Soviet ideology-based communication becomes a metaphor for Soviet life itself, page 30.
Pages from the newspaper "Naujas Rytas", founded in 1945.

Spending months with victims of state power raises questions. What happens to people when they are progressively taught to mistrust their instincts, mistrust their culture and history, their own human experience, and mistrust all the metaphors that have explained life for them and their people for generations? What is it like to be presented, often under coercion, with a new complex of state-generated images and explanations that tell them who they are and what they are to do? And further, what happens to people when these same state-generated ideas and images begin to change, sometimes radically, without warning, and without explanations, and change for reasons they are told that are good for them and to their benefit?[3]

Just as a documentary begins with a story line, so my interest in these issues and questions has a history. In 1999, I went to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. While there, I was recruited to teach a semester course at Vilnius University in the practice of family therapy. Interestingly, the social work courses were all offered as part of the curriculum of the faculty of philosophy. Lithuania, like the other Baltic republics, had been occupied by the Soviets soon after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 23, 1939, when Hitler and Stalin divided Eastern Europe between them. And the occupation was followed in short order by incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into the USSR as member Soviet republics, but with rule directly from Moscow.

Back in 1999, Vilnius was still showing the effects of fifty years of Soviet occupation. The historic center was not the lovely Polish baroque city it is today. I was living in the center of the city, on Lukiškių aikštė, Lenin Square during Soviet days. Very early one summer morning, just after arriving there and still on California time, I was awakened by the bright summer sun and went out in search of an open café. Nothing was open; not a soul on the streets. So I wandered around for a while in the summer light.

Just across the square from the house where I was living is a turn of the century Beaux Arts building dating from czarist days. I had been told it was the old KGB headquarters, obviously an intimidating presence. Out of curiosity, I went and peeked in the window of the big double door into the dimly lit foyer inside. As I turned to leave, I instinctively tugged at the bronze door handle, and the door slid open. So I went into the high-ceilinged foyer, looked around, and saw a small, painted door on the far side. It too was unlocked and led to an unlighted stairway going down. I fumbled for a light, turned it on, and went down to the basement. I realized immediately that I was in the old KGB prison, seemingly untouched since the Soviets had fled a few years earlier. Corridors with grim, dark cells, heavy steel doors, some strange cells, apparently designed for torture, still intimidated. Off to the side, there was even one room with a dirt floor, which I found out later was where they shot people. I wandered around alone and in silence for about two hours. It was a very unsettling experience. My Lithuanian friends, of course, were incredulous that anyone would have willingly gone into a prison that, for fifty years, all of them were desperate to stay out of.

To jump ahead. I realized soon after that what I had seen and experienced was a story that needed telling. And, as a writer, chose to tell it. That plan grew from my intended photo essay into collaboration with a colleague on a documentary film. And the story itself grew into a picture about the Soviets use of state-sponsored terror in their occupation of Lithuania and the Baltics. We filmed interviews with political dissidents who were exiled to Siberia, prisoners of the KGB, members of the armed resistance who had survived their prison terms, slave workers in the Gulag, deportees to the Arctic Coast, even deported children.[4] For political and social background, we interviewed historians from the Hoover Institute and Vilnius University.[5]

Like many Westerners, we were unaware how quickly after the start of the 1940 occupation the Soviets began to impose a different and inclusive view of truth, history, and reality on the nation. And it was a two-part effort. Not only was a new view imposed, the existing one had to be destroyed. Lenin had, on more than one occasion, said that you do not negotiate with your enemies – you exterminate them. The enemy was not, or even principally, individuals. Rather, it was a whole people's history. The Soviet occupiers were able to begin imposing the new metaphor in the Baltics so quickly because, as our historians explained, by 1939 they already had twenty years experience in Russia developing and perfecting the process.

The process was direct and coercive. A month after the initial armed occupation, a newly married young government worker in Kaunas, a major city, was called to an obligatory meeting. He was anticommunist, a reserve military officer, and had been distraught to see the Soviet occupation forces marching down Kaunas's main street just days earlier. But his new in-laws had just been arrested and taken away by the secret police in their first roundup, to no one knew where. The purpose of the meeting, it turned out, was to cheer the brilliance of Comrade Stalin in liberating Lithuania from the forces of reaction without firing a shot. They were ordered to cheer, he said, and he joined in the cheering with everyone else. The cheering went on and on because no one wanted to be seen as the first one to stop cheering.

A second example, from a school in a small village, indicates the extent of the imposed changes. The interviewee described how the newly appointed teacher told them to tear out certain pages in their history book, pages about national history.

> We were told that they were untrue and it had never happened. But of course we knew that they were true, and that it had happened. But we tore them out because the teacher told us to.[6]

Václav Havel notes in his published letters that there is a great difference between ordinary military dictatorship and the Soviet's ideology-founded system.[7] The difference is the Soviet's directive notion of history. History for Marx and the Soviet theorists was more than a record or analysis of what had happened. History was the lens looking into, even the embodiment of, an inevitable force directing where reality would go.

The difference was not just theoretical. It came to have great political importance because of Lenin's deep contempt for reformers.[8] Reforms and reformers sapped energy from revolution and revolutionaries. Reforms for Lenin were pointless, effete, and especially time-and energy-wasting games. As a Marxist, he believed that history has an inevitable direction, and the direction was clear. So you seized power. You imposed the inevitable social order. And lest anyone doubt you meant business, you used state-sponsored terror to eliminate the pointless alternatives, along with their supporters, to the new social order. As part of the new state metaphor you also had to use the state-controlled media to make the use of terror visible and prominent.

The Paris Commune failed, Marx said, because after its initial victory it compromised with the existing system. You do not compromise with capitalist systems – you exterminate them.[9] For someone intent on constructing a new national metaphor, the business of extermination lends itself to useful images that are both compelling and memorable. Given the great importance of religious and imperial images in Russia before the Revolution, creating new, opposite, and equally compelling images became a basic tool for the new Soviet regime.[10]

Lenin's revolutionary goals were born to urban Western intellectuals and envisaged a revolution among industrial workers. Great Russia – the Empire's central land of Russian speakers – was a region whose people were a rural, semi-literate peasantry, deeply steeped in a long-established culture. They were tied to the ancient rites of the Russian Orthodox Church, at least as they supported village life and the seasons, albeit with little respect for the clergy. Newly freed from serfdom, they had little sympathy for reforms that would take away the gains they had made in recent generations. Their revolutionary goals went little farther than advancing the peasants' control over their land and promoting their own sense of village life. That life and all its traditions and values were communicated wonderfully well from generation to generation. The peasants were illiterate, but their metaphors were masterfully communicative. So the clash between the urban Bolshevik regime and the peasantry was more than a clash of wills. It was a clash of mutually exclusive metaphors for life and identity.

The clash came very quickly. Lenin's new government was quickly forced to wage war with the peasants in order to confiscate their grain crops. The chaos ushered in by the collapse of the Czarist system and the popular uprisings left Moscow and St. Petersburg short of food. The peasants refused to let go of their stored grain. Without it, Lenin feared he could soon be facing revolt in the cities from hungry mobs. He sent armed men to confiscate the grain.[11]

But he also set up a propaganda machine designed to demonize any resisters. Ordinary peasants could be – and were – pictured as greedy landlords, wreckers, enemies of both progress and the people. That the images bore no relation to reality was irrelevant. The images became the reality – that was their purpose. This new, propaganda-created class of rural exploiters was then peopled, often randomly, by unlucky individuals who were publicly charged and tried, and then publicly and visibly punished for their crimes. Whether there was, or was not, a crime was again irrelevant. Their crime and guilt were necessary, just as the existence of their artificially created class was necessary, to the new world of state-created truth.[12]

In a land of almost universal literacy and instant communication, where truth is verified by reference to some kind of observable reality, it is not easy to appreciate the role of images in a land where most are semiliterate and communication is very limited. And when the images are the creation of the state, designed to eradicate the old culture and remake it with the state's own visions of reality, language itself takes on a new meaning. When the new language is accompanied with universal, state-sponsored terror, then the eradication of the old metaphors and the imposition of the new ones have much help. Language begins as an official state act. It becomes a means whereby intellectual reflection can be grounded in people from the outside. It does not rise with spontaneity from within the individual.[13]

Earlier, I mentioned that I had been asked to teach a semester course in the practice of family therapy. In a few months, my students would receive their master's degrees in social work and then go out to work in schools and hospitals around the country. Schooled until recently within Marxist theory, they were becoming interested in how family therapy was practiced in the United States. I knew that unemployment, alcoholism, verbal and physical abuse within the household, and drug use in the villages were not rare. And I presumed that they could well be the only professional person in their setting with any training in these issues. My goal was to prepare them to deal with the effects these situations could have on the students in the schools where they would be working. But it was clear to me early on that my approach and their expectations were very different.

So I asked them, if you had troubled students what would you do? I received the same answer. They would administer the prescribed psychological tests to determine the student's personality type. And then, once you understood the personal makeup, you would select a procedure described in the texts to fit that personality, which could bring about a change in the student's behavior. There was no reference to issues beyond the person. And it sounded like good Marxism to me.

Since I had been asked to teach from an American perspective, I decided to risk it. I told them that, from our point of view, there is no such thing as personality. Personality is an abstraction, a heuristic model. Only people are real. And what you should try to do is help the students deal with the real problems of life in a dysfunctional family. Only about half the students, I suspect, had any idea what I was talking about.
Havel wrote about life in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 80s. He wrote that the inner aim of the Soviet system "is not the mere preservation of power in the hands of the ruling clique, as first appears. Rather… self preservation is subordinated to something higher, to a kind of blind automatism which drives the system. ..."[14]

I was teaching students who looked and acted like the university students I see in Berkeley. But I was left with the suspicion that I was talking with the heirs of fifty years of state-controlled Soviet communication, backed up by police intimidation. In Havel's words, was fifty years of exposure to that blind automatism, which had shaped social communication since before they were born, still at work? I did not know. Can state-created and state-imposed metaphors designed to repress spontaneity be changed by a new social openness to spontaneity? I think about these questions, but I have no answers.

Notes:

1 O'Rourke, America's First Settlers, 8–9.
2 Richard Pipes traces the start of Lenin's use of terror to mid-February of 1918. In response to his fear that the German armies were going to crush the new socialist government, Lenin authorized the new security police, the Cheka, to execute suspected enemies, spies or resisters "on the spot," without mention of trials or hearings. (*A Concise History*, 173). In his major work, *The Great Terror*, Robert Conquest shows the development of and key role of state terror from the start of the Soviet regime up to the Stalin purges of 1936–1938.
3 "Communist propaganda strove, and to a surprising extent succeeded, in creating a fictitious world side by side with the world of everyday experience and in stark contradiction to it, in which the Soviet citizens were required to believe or at least pretend to believe." Pipes, *A Concise History*, 313.
4 Latvian documentary filmmaker Dzintra Geka has produced several well-researched films on the deportation of children to Siberia. *2003 Siberian Diaries* is a four-part story depicting both the lot of deported children in Siberia and the unwillingness of neighbors and relatives to receive them after their release as adolescents or adults. The fact of their deportation left them with an exile-imprinted status as "enemies of the people," any contact with whom could itself be a crime. A second Dzintra Geka documentary, *Once There Was Siberia*, tells the story of the children deported to Siberia on the night of June 14, 1941, when approximately 30,000 people considered capable of resisting the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were rounded up and deported.
5 T T hese interviews and incidents are in the documentary film produced by this writer and Ken Gumbert, *Red Terror on the Amber Coast*.
6 Both these examples are from filmed interviews in the possession of this writer.
7 Havel, *Open Letters*, 135.
8 The principle guiding Lenin was a dictum Marx had pronounced rather casually in 1871. ...Analyzing its failure, Marx had concluded that the Communards had committed a fundamental mistake in taking over instead of liquidating the existing political, social, and military structures." Pipes, *A Concise History*, 118.
9 Ibid.
10 Figes, *A People's Tragedy*. Figes describes very well the social and national diversities of Russia and the peoples before and during the revolution. From the intransigence and incompetence of the czar; the diversity of the peoples within the empire, the majority of whom were not Russian; the great gap between the intellectuals, the military, the gentry, and the peasants; and the increasing reliance on the Ministry of the Interior to stem by repression any moves toward change, we see a nation moving toward complete collapse. In that picture we also see the challenge that lay in Lenin's plan to impress his socialist revolution on the nation and the role that state terror inevitably played in it.
11 Lenin opened a war against the peasantry. As Figes writes, the Bolsheviks convinced themselves that "unless they extended their power to the countryside and launched a crusade against the grain-hoarding peasants" their revolution would be destroyed by starvation. To prevent that they declared that all surplus grain would henceforth be the property of the state. *A People's Tragedy*, 615.
12 Pipes quotes a May 1918 decree of the Central Committee "…we must confront the question of …creating in the village two contrasting and hostile forces…" Lenin chose to demonize farmers who resisted the confiscation of their grain as kulaks and, in an exhortation, decreed "Merciless war against these kulaks!. Death to them." Pipes, *A Concise History*, 206, 208.
13 At the start of his chapter "Culture as Propaganda" in *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, Pipes quotes Joseph Brodsky: "But then that was precisely the goal of the whole enterprise: to uproot the special spiritually to the point of no return for how else can you build a genuinely new society? You start neither with the foundations, nor with the roof; you start by making new bricks." 282.

14 Anne Applebaum asks whether or not the Soviet leaders actually believed in what they were doing. “The relationship between Soviet propaganda and Soviet reality was always a strange one: the factory is barely functioning, in the shops there is nothing to buy, old ladies cannot afford to heat their apartments, yet in the streets outside banners proclaim the ‘triumph of socialism’…” But whether it was belief or stratagem, it was carried out, and it was effective. Applebaum, *Gulag*, 23.

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