

Can Unhealthy Systems Create Healthy Leaders?

By [Marilyn Murray](#)

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7 Faces of the Soviet Union

TRUE BELIEVER



The Soviet system is
the best

I am willing to give
my life for it

Vladimir Filonov
/ MT

Active Party member

Solid belief in the ideology and
philosophy of the Party

The Party can do no wrong

Politically oriented

May work in the government,
military or bureaucracy

ADAPTER



Vladimir Filonov
/ MT

The system is OK

There are no other
options

I will make the
system work for me
and will receive a job,
food, clothes, an
apartment, a
university education
and other privileges

As long as my needs are met, I will
stay

Practically oriented

May work in the government,
military or bureaucracy

DOUBLE-LIFER



Vladimir Filonov
/ MT

I don't agree with the
party line, but I want
to keep my job, food,
apartment, eligibility
for university and
access to other
privileges

I will stay silent in public and
might not share my opinions with
my spouse, children or friends
because they may not be
trustworthy and may denounce
me

Risk-taker

May work in the military or
bureaucracy

INTELLIGENTSIA OR ARTIST



Vladimir Filonov
/ MT

I don't agree with the
party line and know it
is bad, but I want to
keep my job, food,
apartment, etc., so I
am silent in public

However, I work in
the underground, and
I write, publish and
distribute articles,
poems, books, plays,
etc., to help the
general public
understand that this
system is destructive
and should be
eliminated

Risk-taker

RELIGIOUS BELIEVER



Vladimir Filonov
/ MT

I openly disagree with
the party line and
know it is bad

Often sent to gulag or
shot

Family also declared
“enemies of the
state” and denied
food rations, jobs,
university attendance
and other privileges

Major risk-taker

REBEL



Igor Tabakov /
MT

I am an openly
rebellious
revolutionary

Often sent to gulag or
shot

Family also declared
“enemies of the
state” and denied
food rations, jobs,
university attendance
and other privileges

Major risk-taker

CRIMINAL



Igor Tabakov /
MT

I will make this
system work for me

An expert
manipulator who also
can possess other
survival techniques

Works on the black market; is into
extortion and protection rackets

Often does the “dirty work” for
leaders

Is into power and control

She tugged at strands of her stringy hair as she tried to evaporate into the folds of the leather couch. Her anxious eyes kept glancing around the room as if expecting danger to seep through the walls of my counseling office. She had the thin, haggard look of someone who had never felt safe from the moment she was conceived.

Fear crept through her voice as she stammered and told how her father beat her pregnant mother and how the violence continued throughout their lives. Her father threatened to kill her mother if she ever attempted to leave.

My client shared the confusion of her childhood, for her father seemed to have two faces: one

that could be loving and caring, but also one that within seconds could fly into a violent rage.

She then tearfully related her own history of a series of abusive relationships starting as a teen. It wasn't until her present husband began beating their 2-year-old son that she finally decided to break their generational cycle of abuse.

People often have difficulty understanding why someone stays in such an abusive situation. Similarly, many also question why millions of Russians remained in a destructive Soviet system for seven decades.

Being able to comprehend the aspects of a particular system, whether it is a family, organization, business, government or culture, helps a person to broaden and extend that insight to other systems. This view certainly applies both to the family described above and to the Soviet system. They each exhibited one, overarching rule: unquestioned obedience to authority. In this type of unhealthy system, the immutable authority strives for power and control.

Family members and citizens have no rights and are not allowed to make any decisions. They are kept isolated and convinced that life outside their system is more dangerous than what they experience within. They are bullied into thinking that they are powerless and of no worth and that the authority is the only one capable of leadership.

The authority ensures his subject's loyalty and commitment by providing their basic necessities and convincing them they cannot survive without him. They are inundated with lies proclaiming that their present situation is the best they will ever get.

Mistakes are not tolerated and are often punished harshly. Keeping a perfect front for the rest of the world is imperative. The authority never takes responsibility for internal errors and adamantly denies any perceived weakness within the system. Secrets abound, and when problems do occur within the system, they are never spoken of, even within the system. If, however, a weakness or mistake does become exposed to the outside world, someone from that "foreign" world is always blamed as the saboteur.

The leader controls by intimidation, fear and violence. If anyone shows the slightest sign of disobedience or considers leaving the system, severe punishment and threats of deadly consequences follow, not only for the rebel but also for other family members.

We cannot help but recognize the familial resemblance between the profile of a violent family and that of the country of Russia. Mother Russia is the quintessential battered wife. She has been married to a series of unhealthy leaders. Once the bloom of romance fades and the "groom" acquires a taste of power, the old pattern is repeated. Like the wife of a violent husband, Russia has been governed by totalitarian authorities with their own agendas regarding the "family rules."

Invariably, however, there are those who attempt to protest these imperatives. The Soviet system initially was formed in rebellion to an autocratic, aloof tsarist regime that was often brutal and was insensitive and unresponsive to the desperate needs of the people. For many of the original Bolsheviks, the objective was to create a place where people were treated with mutual respect.

Tragically, this ideology was overtaken by Soviet dictators who turned it into a vicious system even worse than the one it replaced. These imperfect leaders were unwilling to address their own character defects and unhealthy belief systems. Even though some of their ideologies originally were founded on mutual respect, the leaders assumed they were entitled to rule — and they ruled with violence.

Josef Stalin became infamous for his brutality and savage use of intimidation, fear and blood. Innocents were destroyed by the millions in his fierce fight to prove he was in control.

But during all the internal assaults, Stalin also was the smiling "Uncle Joe" to the allies of World War II and was "Papa" and "Dear Comrade Stalin who loves and takes care of us" in the propaganda that poured relentlessly into the citizens at home.

He could be gracious and charming in one moment and vicious and sadistic the next, even sending family members and close friends to gulags or execution in the bowels of the Lubyanka.

Over the centuries, Mother Russia became a fierce fighter to protect her children from outside invaders, yet she has been unable to protect herself or her children from the victimizers who are members of her own family.

So why does she continue to marry unhealthy leaders and remain in destructive unhealthy systems? Because like all battered wives, she seeks what is common and familiar to her. The Soviet system became a classic example of an unhealthy system in which implicit submission to an immutable authority reigned and those living within the system were kept ignorant about the possibility that life could be any different.

In my classes I have listened to stories from multitudes of persons who grew up in the Soviet Union. I have been intrigued by the accounts of how they and their families dealt with the positives and negatives of growing up as Soviet citizens. While many positive aspects such as housing, jobs and education were guaranteed to them in a fairly stable lifestyle, they were not free to think and be responsible for themselves, to express their thoughts and feelings openly, and to travel and experience life outside the Soviet Union. And very often, they were not safe.

During the Soviet years, the children of Mother Russia learned different modes of survival, which often changed over time. The following chart lists some of the major survival techniques employed by those who had no choice but to remain in the Soviet system:

As my students view this chart, they immediately begin to share the choices of their various family members. Many reveal that their parents (or grandparents) started out as True Believers, then shifted to Adapters and eventually became Double-Lifers. When the Soviet system collapsed, they had to establish new means of survival. Some progressed to becoming entrepreneurial capitalists, others transferred into the new bureaucratic and political positions, and others even slid into the shadows of the burgeoning criminal world, which often intersected with the other two.

Several students related that their fathers were high-level military officers and/or Communist Party leaders, but when the Soviet system collapsed, they quickly moved into the

business realm and now have successful lives in a quasi-capitalistic economy. But success is never cheap and is always accompanied in Russia by obligatory, costly "gifts" that must be paid into the ranks of bureaucracy and political leadership.

Can this unhealthy system ever engender healthy leaders? Yes.

Unhealthy systems depend upon isolation and keeping their populace oblivious to the reality of their circumstances and without other options. However, their narcissistic leaders often underestimate humanity's innate drive to be free.

They personalize every protest and dissent and refuse to recognize that their system is destined to fail.

In the past, Mother Russia did not have options. Today she does.

Her family is now becoming populated by many adults who are no longer children dependent on the unhealthy system. They are educated, traveled, technologically savvy and internationally connected. They are angry that their despotic "father" treats them and Mother Russia with blatant disrespect and disregard. They are sons and daughters who have witnessed their mother being battered and have pledged not only to protect her from further abuse but also to become the healthy new leaders of the future.

They are willing to protest and fight for the freedom to determine their own destinies. As they make major changes in their personal lives in order to create new, healthy systems, they also are realizing that good leadership starts at home.

They now understand that healthy systems are based on the law of mutual respect and are assimilating core beliefs that regard all persons to be of equal value. The leaders of the new healthy systems are men and women of integrity who role-model congruity, responsibility and accountability and have a willingness to sacrifice for the good of those for whom they are responsible. Personal gain and power are not their objectives.

They will provide leadership that works.

Marilyn Murray is a therapist and educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation. More than 2,000 people have attended her classes in Russia and other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her column "Time to Live" appears in The Moscow Times on Tuesdays, and her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer.

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