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How State Surveillance Turned Into Nurturing

By Marilyn Murray

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As my niece and I entered the battered little elevator on the eighth floor of their old Stalin-era apartment building, she looked down at her 5-month-old daughter and said, "I am worried I don't have her dressed warm enough." It was a beautiful spring day in southern Russia, and I smiled and reassured her that her baby girl was adequately dressed. She shook her head and frowned, "I'm just afraid some old babushka will yell at me for not dressing my child correctly."

I remember thinking this was excessive concern and naively thought that surely no one would criticize her for this "infraction" of parental care. After we walked a block into the park, an elderly woman approached my niece and rudely shook her finger, berated her and pointed to the baby. She kept raging until my niece was in tears. I was shocked. My niece immediately turned around, went back up to the eighth floor and found warmer clothes and a blanket for her little one. The baby perspired the rest of the day.

It was my first adventure with the Russian conviction of their right to correct anyone who is seen doing anything deemed improper. Since that time in 2002, I have witnessed this phenomenon many times and still am surprised that people usually do not react and set boundaries with the intruder. In fact, they often take on the look of a child and submit to the scathing reprimand as one would with a parent or teacher.

When I ask colleagues and students why this is such a common occurrence here, the answers I generally receive concerning the Soviet system and their ideology are:

Communal living was encouraged and often was the only option. With many families living in close quarters, children could be scolded and disciplined by any adult living there. One man said: "I always felt like I had six mothers or grandmothers. All the women in the apartment told me what to do and screamed at me when they thought I was doing something wrong."

Adults, especially women, felt it was their right and duty to criticize, correct and discipline anyone, be it children or adults. It was their responsibility to maintain proper behavior. As a result, they consistently only looked for mistakes, for anything they deemed needed chastising and rectifying. Many women in my classes today admit this has become a destructive habit for them, and they rarely say anything positive to others. Their only focus is to point out their flaws.

During Soviet times, denunciations often became everyone's worst nightmare. Josef Stalin firmly believed the country was riddled with spies, foreign agents and saboteurs. He began to see everyone as an actual or potential enemy — even family members, close friends, work colleagues and millions of innocents who by a twist of his whim happened to fall into his lethal web. He said it was every Soviet citizen's duty to be vigilant and denounce anyone who was even slightly suspected of opposing Soviet policy.

The Cheka and NKVD, the precursors to the KGB and the FSB, had several types of informants: paid employees of the organization; volunteers who truly believed in the system and displayed their loyalty by diligently reporting anyone they suspected of the slightest infraction or opposition to the Communist Party and the system; those who were forced into service by threats and intimidation and who served by fear; and the many who were malicious and reported their bosses, colleagues and neighbors out of revenge, anger, envy and greed. It was an effective way to gain retribution, eliminate competitors and make way for a new position for yourself and even to acquire a larger, better apartment by the arrest of the present occupants.

In the 1920s and 1930s when Stalin needed huge numbers of laborers for his gigantic industrialization and building projects, he set quotas for the number of persons who should be arrested and sent to the labor camps. As a result, denunciations became more intense as people feared for their own lives and decided to first denounce others in the hopes of saving themselves. Soon, a climate of universal fear overtook the country as men, women and children were told it was their duty to denounce traitors to the Soviet system. If they did not denounce others, they could be suspected of disloyalty and arrested.

Every office, communal apartment, school, hotel and place of business had informants who were the government's paid eyes and ears. It was common knowledge that janitors, housekeepers and office workers reported the daily activities of others. The government

thrust itself into the most intimate aspects of people's lives and demanded to know the actions of every person in the entire Soviet Union.

Perhaps as a result of this ubiquitous surveillance and obligation to monitor the lives and actions of others, many Russians today still continue to give and receive criticism on a daily basis where their families, friends, work colleagues and even strangers on the street are concerned.

An interesting thing happened last week when I was speaking to an advanced class regarding the importance of nurturing your children and also your spouse. My translator, who knows me well, knew that my use of the word "nurture" in the present context meant "to support, encourage, nourish, strengthen or build up." She looked at me and said, "There is no word in the Russian language for nurture as you mean it." After teaching 124 classes in Russia during the past 10 years, I had never heard this before.

The class then discussed this concept at length, and I learned that the Russian word most commonly used to denote nurture is vospitaniye, which means to train, educate, correct or discipline.

It was a huge eye-opening moment for everyone. They realized that when they corrected and disciplined their children and criticized their spouses and adult family members, friends and colleagues, they were actually showing love and nurturing them. It was their responsibility to do so.

The English word nurture can also mean to train and educate, but it means much more. The realization that the word "nurture," denoting a loving, caring, supportive relationship between family members and friends, was actually missing from their language was a stunning revelation for my Russian-speaking colleagues.

It's not so much what was there that caused long-term damage. It was what was missing.

Everyone went home that night committed to the elimination of their destructive habits of criticism and to embracing nurturing as a new way of life.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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