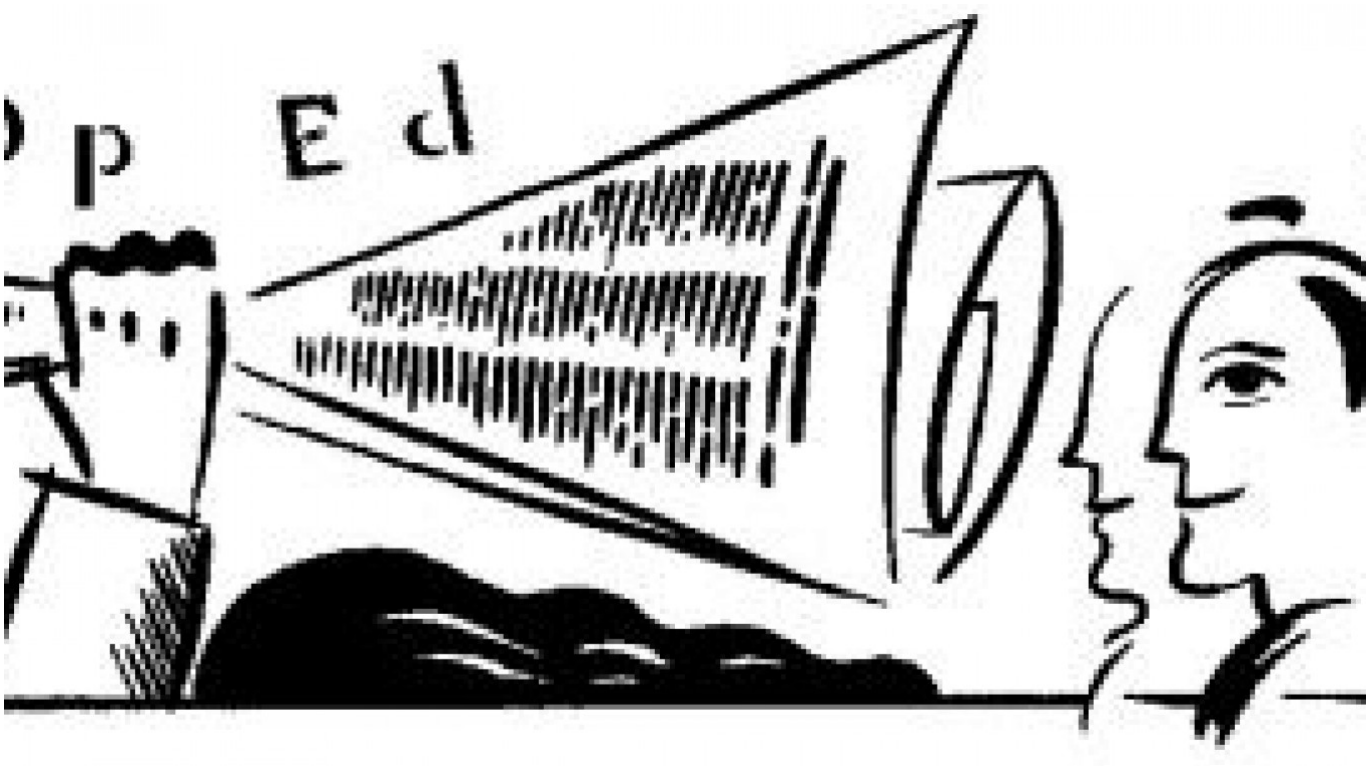
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Stalin Instilled a National Sense of Survival

By Maxim Trudolyubov

March 09, 2013



When I learned as a high school student of the tragedies and crimes under Josef Stalin, I immediately wished that I could go back in time to stop the madman. I would have started a resistance movement, somehow gotten through to the people and explained the reality of what was going on. That way, there would never have been that tragic and shameful spectacle of hordes of Soviet citizens lining up 60 years ago to pay their final respects at the funeral of a bloody tyrant. Somebody should have stopped it. People should have fought back, staged strikes at Soviet factories, boycotted the pro-Kremlin writers who distorted the truth to cover the sins of the regime, and patriotic members of the military should have publicly exposed Stalin and arrested him for committing crimes against humanity.

One cannot say there was no resistance though. It did exist, but it ran up against perhaps the world's most advanced mechanism for suppressing opposition and destroying not only dissent, but the dissenters themselves.

Having put an end to armed resistance in the early 1920s, the new authorities began

systematically isolating and destroying any sources of ideological resistance. They tolerated no party coalitions, no ideologically distant forces such as monarchists or religious movements — even those that were closer ideologically to the Bolsheviks and Communists, such as the Socialist Revolutionary Party, social democrats and anarchists.

The Stalin regime undertook a large-scale campaign against peasants and religious believers, social groups that represented constantly smoldering hotbeds of discontent. Hundreds of thousands of peasants resisted collectivization and hundreds of thousands of believers resisted church closings. But the authorities met that force with still greater force. Any act of resistance — from uprisings by hungry peasants to strikes at workplaces — was brutally and consistently crushed.

Intellectuals that were deemed potentially dangerous were sent into exile, and all grassroots associations and organizations either upheld the official line or were subjected to overwhelming pressure and destroyed. Some secret groupings of underground organizations still existed in the 1920s, but by the 1930s such activities were almost unthinkable. This meant that in the 1930s the authorities had to invent pretexts for conspiracies to justify the escalating repression.

The authorities considered professional groups and class-based independent and grassroots organizations, political parties and trade unions a threat to the regime. They therefore set out to destroy all of the accumulated pre-Soviet social capital and to stop a new one from forming.

Thus, the Soviet authorities were determined to destroy the country's fundamental social capital and virtually any form of private initiative. The tools the state used to achieve this are notorious. First, intelligence agencies were given extraordinary powers. Second, citizens were regularly encouraged to denounce each other, including family members, to the authorities, breeding widespread mutual distrust. Third, granting authority to the collective over the individual was an important tool for suppressing the masses.

People behave similarly in all totalitarian institutions: prisons, punitive mental hospitals, concentration camps and the army. In such institutions, a person's private life is destroyed at its core. Their existence is strictly regulated and they must follow a fixed daily routine. They are cut off from the outside world and locked into their own, small community.

In such situations, organized activism is rare. Of course, revolts can occasionally break out in prisons, labor camps and among starving peasants, and they also broke out in the Soviet Union. But such spontaneous uprisings are out of the ordinary and have nothing in common with an organized, long-term struggle against an oppressive regime. The system deliberately created the conditions for passive strategies of coping with the regime.

Even the problems that citizens faced in the new Soviet state required survival skills more than the skills needed for revolutionary struggle — problems such as hunger, chronic shortages of goods and a lack of adequate housing and conveniences. People did not set the goal of destroying the system that created those difficult conditions but attempted to develop immunity to society's many ills to survive.

Once it became clear that the authorities had gone from threatening to use violence to actually

using it, people quickly learned to avoid all conflict and struggle, to look out for their own interests and resort to simple social conformism in hopes of surviving at any cost.

In the end, social conformism is a natural behavior, even when people find themselves in the most unnatural conditions. But the desire to improve the social reality is the product of efforts at self-improvement. Historian Yelena Osokina says it's wrong to speak of everyday resistance in the context of the Soviet system. Life was about surviving or developing a "social immunity" to the regime rather than resisting the system. In coping with the serious shortcomings of a planned economy, Soviet citizens did not set out to destroy the system that created those problems but focused on developing "immunity" to those systemic illnesses. Their only viable option was to act individually rather than collectively, concentrating their efforts on obtaining enough food and consumer goods to provide for their families and developing a network of acquaintances to gain access to basic services.

A society can achieve true resistance to the status quo when people engage in self-reflection through public debate, a discourse that gives voice not only to calls for conformity but to dissent, or an alternative reality can effectively challenge the status quo. And they need to be able to clearly communicate those alternative values to the wider public.

A society in which the collective constantly spies against the individual, and where those advocating alternative values and ideas are destroyed is powerless to stop politically motivated violence against its citizens. Under such conditions, the overwhelming majority of people will respond by remaining silent and passive rather than risk imprisonment or death. That is why, even if an entire landing force of "freedom fighters" used a time machine to return to the Soviet Union under Stalin, it would probably have been unable to mount significant resistance to the regime. That is why even today the Russians are a collection of individuals rather than a society united by a common identity.

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