

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Problems of Communism: Gulag Authorities and Gulag Victims

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BARNES, STEVEN A. *Death and Redemption. The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society.* Princeton University Press, Princeton [etc.] 2011. x, 352 pp. \$80.00; £55.00. (Paper: \$35.00; £24.95.)

COHEN, STEPHEN F. *The Victims Return. Survivors of the Gulag after Stalin.* I.B. Tauris, London [etc.] 2011. 216 pp. Ill. £17.99. (Paper: £9.99.)

MOCHULSKY, FYODOR VASILEVICH. *Gulag Boss. A Soviet Memoir.* Transl. and ed. by Deborah Kaple. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011. xxxvii, 229 pp. Ill. £16.99.

Whereas Soviet communism is receding further and further into the past, scholarly interest in it is far from diminishing. Writing the history of the Soviet Union is a flourishing pursuit. Since the opening of many of the archives in the early 1990s, the subject can now, for the first time, be studied in a comparatively “normal” way. Better access to Russia and to other successor states also has widened the scope for oral history. In the past, the quality of scholarly Soviet studies often suffered greatly from lack of sources. The lacunae in knowledge were being filled in by speculation that was not always well founded. Now, the quality of the historical work being produced compares very well with that on the Nazi regime. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick’s *Beyond Totalitarianism*, with separate chapters each of which is written jointly by a Stalinism and a Nazism specialist, highlights this process.<sup>1</sup>

1. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York [etc.], 2009).

All three books being reviewed in this essay deal with what was surely one of the most horrible aspects of the Stalinist system, the Gulag. The books complement each other. Together, they examine Gulag policies and the Gulag authorities, as well as the daily lives and the fate of Gulag inmates. These books, one of which is a memoir – not a scholarly study, all in their own way raise questions concerning communism and repression. Steven Barnes asks himself whether Stalinism was exclusively a repressive system, or whether it preserved certain other dimensions, such as rehabilitation. The reminiscences of Gulag boss Fyodor Mochulsky cast light on the question of why seemingly ordinary people such as he were prepared to act as agents of communist repression. Finally, Stephen Cohen's book examines Gulag inmates who, despite the repression and indignities that they suffered, remained communist believers throughout their lives.

Steven Barnes's *Death and Redemption* studies the history of the Gulag camps, colonies, and special settlements in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan in the period 1930–1957. The region housed Karlag. With its population of 74,000 in 1948, this was the fourth largest camp in the entire Gulag system. As an agricultural camp, Karlag was supposed to contribute to the transformation of the steppe into an area providing livestock and crops. In January 1953 the whole Gulag system housed 5.2 million people, of which 2.4 million lived in camps and colonies (camps for people serving shorter sentences). Most of the rest of the unfortunates were exiles living in so-called special settlements.

Over the past decade, excellent new studies have greatly increased our knowledge and understanding of the Gulag, as well as of the Stalinist terror process in general, and of the police and security establishments of which the camps formed a part.<sup>2</sup> Barnes's splendid study is based on impressive research, and his story is laid out in rich detail. The book covers

2. See, for example, Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner: People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895–1940* (Stanford, CA, 2002); Anne Applebaum, *GULAG: A History* (New York [etc.], 2003); Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (eds), *The Economics of Forced Labour: The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, CA, 2003); Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott (eds), *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (Houndmills [etc.], 2003); Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 2004); Melanie Ilić (ed.), *Stalin's Terror Revisited* (Houndmills [etc.], 2006); Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (Oxford [etc.], 2007); Nicolas Werth, *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag* (Princeton, NJ [etc.], 2007); Paul R. Gregory, *Terror by Quota: State Security from Lenin to Stalin (An Archival Study)* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 2009); Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941* (Washington DC [etc.], 2009); David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 2009); Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton, NJ [etc.], 2010); and Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciations and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge [etc.], 2011).

the history of the Karaganda system in all its major aspects – from the administrative structure to the abominable circumstances in which the inmates lived, worked, and died. In fact, with frequent excursions into the development of the Gulag as a whole, *Death and Redemption* reads almost like a history of the Gulag. This is an original and courageous book. Barnes's main contribution to Gulag history is to make a convincing case for the counter-intuitive thesis that the re-education of inmates remained a concern of the Gulag administration throughout the Stalin era. The Gulag's official status as a "corrective" institution was no mere façade, Barnes argues, but reflected the real ambitions of the authorities, though that did not make such ambitions any less reprehensible and inhumane.

The book highlights and contextualizes the significant changes that the camp population underwent over the years. During the 1930s, Gulag camps and colonies were populated by two categories of people: common criminals and politicals. New draconian labour discipline laws introduced in 1940 added a third category: those who were incarcerated for minor offences. Before the war, the exiled population consisted mainly of deported "*kulaks*". During the war, the camp population dropped by half due to mass death and the release of a large number of inmates to the Red Army. The released were mostly people sentenced for insignificant crimes, not politicals, leading to a substantial rise in the latter's proportion in the camps. In a second major change brought about by the war, the special settlements were "nationalized". The population of former *kulaks* had already been sharply decreasing before the war. Now, the settlements were flooded with Germans and the "punished peoples" – Chechens, Ingush, and others.

After the war, the camp population underwent another drastic change. There was an influx of Red Army veterans and people from the newly annexed Baltic and former Polish areas, who had often been members of anti-Soviet partisan movements. They brought military experience into the camps, and people proud of their fighting achievements who were not socialized within the Soviet system. The Gulag authorities found them more difficult to control than the earlier politicals had been. In 1948, "special camps" with a highly strict regime were established. Also, many of the deported national communities were informed that their exile was forever. The unrest in the Gulag following Stalin's death – Barnes discusses the 1954 Kengir uprising in great detail – suggests that the Gulag became unmanageable at an acceptable cost. In the final chapter Barnes records the dismantling of the institution under Stalin's successors.

Barnes does not argue that the Gulag bosses considered all these different categories of inmates redeemable. To be informed that one's exile was forever proves that this was not the case. The Soviet security establishment never provided an unambiguous answer to the question of whether politicals, who were seen as counter-revolutionaries, were

reformable at all. But Barnes insists, convincingly in my view, that the Gulag bosses generally appreciated the usefulness of re-education.

Mortality rates in the camps fluctuated widely over the years. They reached atrocious levels during the famine of 1933 (15 per cent); in 1938, the second year of the Great Terror (9 per cent); and especially during the war, when prisoners were starved of food, shelter, proper clothing, and medical care. In 1942, 25 per cent of camp and colony inmates died, 20 per cent in 1943. Apparently, the Soviet leaders decided to let the inhabitants of the camps die rather than divert scarce funds from the suffering cities and villages. But in most years, mortality rates were in the order of a few per cent, much too low to support the argument that the Gulag was set up to exterminate its prisoners. Furthermore, each year during the period 1934–1953 between 20 and 40 per cent of inmates were released. According to Barnes, at least 1.6 million Gulag inmates died, but that mass crime does not make the Gulag a death factory. Given its multiple purpose as a facility to punish, to isolate, and to produce, and taking into account that many of the inmates would eventually return to “freedom”, it is only reasonable to assume that its directors would be interested in re-forging the prisoners into obedient Soviet citizens.

Re-education is no figment of Barnes’s imagination. The camps had cultural-educational sections responsible for publishing camp newspapers (in Karlag: *Putevka*) and posters/news-sheets, with contributions from prisoner correspondents. There were literacy classes, professional training courses, cultural brigades, and drama groups. Radio Moscow was broadcast over loudspeakers. Prisoners were expected to attend plays, film shows, newspaper readings, and political lectures to discuss world and national affairs, all from a strictly Soviet point of view. Funds were released for such activities.

Yet Barnes cautions his readers “not to make too much of the ‘educational’ apparatus of the Gulag”, which remained “at most, a rather marginal activity, pushed on to the few nonworking hours of the day”.<sup>3</sup> The main instrument of re-education, he insists, was labour. Stakhanovism, shock work, and socialist competition were all part of Gulag life. Prisoners with outstanding production records were rewarded with early release, through a system of “accounted working days”. This system was abolished in 1939, but early release for exemplary labour achievements remained possible, though more exceptionally. Also, if targets were not met, rations were reduced to starvation levels to force prisoners to work even harder. In Barnes’s view, this practice represented a murderous “cycle toward death”,<sup>4</sup>

3. Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton, NJ [etc.], p. 59.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

but constituted no falsification of his thesis of redeemability. The Soviet authorities, Barnes argues, never believed that *all* prisoners were redeemable. Those whose persistent shirking showed that they were not, were allowed to die. Other prisoners, though, would be compelled by reduced rations to improve their labour performance, which would thus lead “to their reeducation”.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Barnes’s argument here is too neat. Barnes does not, of course, deny the economic motive in the Gulag. Canals were dug, gold mines were opened up, railway lines were constructed in the most distant regions of the country, oil and coal were produced, and timber was felled. However, in Barnes’s interpretation, all this was done not primarily for economic reasons. The camps were “concerned with differentiating and evaluating their prisoners, with important secondary concerns about the economy”.<sup>6</sup> Barnes emphasizes throughout that, for the camp authorities, labour performance represented “the means but also the measure of rehabilitation”.<sup>7</sup> If that was indeed mainly what prisoner work was all about, Gulag production facilities would have to be seen as a monstrous, vast machine set up to measure inmates in terms of redeemability and to force them to work towards their own rehabilitation. This seems too farfetched to me.

The Gulag authorities were not mainly forcing prisoners to work in order to re-educate them, but to complete the industrial, mining, infrastructural, and agricultural projects that Stalin considered of strategic importance for the country. Re-education, with prisoners rehabilitating themselves and atoning for their guilt by conscientious work, was a secondary consideration. We have it from the horse’s mouth that production and discipline constituted the overriding concerns of efforts aimed at re-education. Barnes quotes the February 1948 report by the Minister of Internal Affairs Sergei Kruglov to Stalin, as follows: “One of the serious tasks, standing before the GULAG [...], is the reeducation of prisoners, for which political-educational work is carried out in camps and colonies, set in the first place towards their enlistment in active participation in socially-useful labor and compliance with the established camp regime.”<sup>8</sup> Barnes’s further argument that the economic motive cannot have been overly important in the Gulag because its economy did not deliver profits is not entirely convincing. Profitability was never the goal of Stalinist economics in the first place.

That re-education was not the Gulag’s main concern is brought into relief when we compare the Stalinist camps with those in Maoist China, where the individual psychology and worldview of prisoners were

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

directly targeted and subjected to “brainwashing” through struggle sessions, with compulsory self-criticism, and so on.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon was unknown in the Gulag.

Barnes’s important conclusion that the Gulag was no Auschwitz and was never set up to kill as many people as possible in the most rapid and efficient way is not new. But his work exemplifies and deepens a consensus that has been growing over recent years, perhaps over decades, to the effect that there was a fundamental difference in the Nazi and Stalinist systems of terror. Not in the number of victims though. According to Timothy Snyder’s estimate, the number of civilian (and prisoner-of-war) deaths that Hitler and Stalin were directly responsible for was in the same order of magnitude – 12 million for Hitler, and 9 million for Stalin.<sup>10</sup> The old estimate, that Stalin was responsible for approximately 20 million deaths, has been generally discarded. In Robert Conquest’s original arithmetic, which he did without the benefit of archival sources, the Gulag mortality figures were vastly exaggerated.<sup>11</sup> The new figure of approximately 10 million deaths directly attributable to the Stalin regime remains, of course, a provisional one.<sup>12</sup>

The difference between Nazi and Stalinist repression may be framed in terms of extermination versus terrorization. The Nazis understood the enemy in terms of subhuman races that were, in Barnes’s terminology, fundamentally unredeemable. Their subhumanity was a matter of biology, allowing the problem to be solved only through extermination. For the Stalinists, the enemy classes had to be destroyed as a social force, not necessarily by destroying the individuals comprising these classes but rather by expropriating them and terrorizing them into submission. The concept of the “liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class” exemplifies this approach. This process of terrorization undeniably encompassed an element of extermination. In many cases, selective killing assumed genocidal proportions, with a very high percentage of some categories of people being murdered, starved, or allowed to die. Then again, it was never Stalin’s intention to kill off a whole category of people, nor did he ever

9. For a classic psychiatric study of this process, see Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (New York, 1961).

10. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2010), pp. 383–384.

11. See Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin’s Purges of the Thirties* (London, 1968), p. 533. The figure of 20 million was maintained by Stéphane Courtois, without substantiation; Stéphane Courtois et al. (eds), *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 4.

12. For the “approximately 10 million” figure, see Nicolas Werth, “The Crimes of the Stalin Regime: Outline for an Inventory and Classification”, in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of Genocide* (Basingstoke [etc.], 2008), pp. 400–419. Michael Ellman, “Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54 (2002), pp. 1151–1172, gives 3–3.5 million deaths, excluding famine victims.

commit that particular crime. He would have seen no point in such an operation, if only because of the unnecessary loss of labour that it would have entailed.<sup>13</sup>

Fyodor Mochulsky's memoirs, *Gulag Boss*, were written during the 1990s but not published until 2011. In the well-chosen words of the editor of the book, Deborah Kaple, they represent "the first account of the Gulag from a 'management' point of view".<sup>14</sup> Personal reminiscences must, of course, be treated with caution, but the book sheds considerable light on the motives and psychology of the Gulag boss.

Mochulsky, born in 1918, was a Communist Party member. His first Gulag assignment was in the camp area of Vorkuta, in the Komi autonomous republic in the Arctic, north of European Russia. The camp, Pechorlag, was situated at the endpoint of a nonexistent 500-kilometre railway line, which it was the task of the inmates to construct. Rail construction was the engineer Mochulsky's main responsibility. Under the Stalinist conditions that prevailed at the time, he would have been held criminally responsible for any failure. Mochulsky's term at the Gulag extended from 1940 to 1946. In 1943 he was transferred to political work in the camp's Komsomol, the organization of communist youth. The next year he was reassigned to Camp No. 3, where the prisoners were engaged in restoring the main road from Moscow to Kharkov. This new assignment receives relatively little attention in the book. After leaving the Gulag, Mochulsky turned to foreign affairs and diplomacy, eventually becoming a high-ranking Soviet representative in China.

If we are to believe him, the reason why Mochulsky signed up at the Gulag was more or less coincidental: after graduating as an engineer, the Gulag asked him to come to work for them. This was the era of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. However, Soviet leaders expected war to break out with Germany in due course, possibly even in the near future. In that case, Vorkuta's rich coking-coal resources would be of strategic significance. The railway line to be constructed from Vorkuta to the Pechora river might even become a lifeline for the country's economic survival, Mochulsky was informed. He needed little persuasion. Mochulsky admits that, as a young man, he greatly respected the NKVD, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, of which the Gulag directorate was a part, as the state's safeguard against its enemies; nor did the appeal to his patriotism fall on deaf ears. How could he refuse when his country needed his services?

There is an odd ambivalence to these memoirs. In the preface and concluding sections Mochulsky admits that Stalinism was an era of mass

13. For a similar argument on Leninism/Stalinism versus Nazism, see James Ryan, *Lenin's Terror: The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence* (London [etc.], 2012).

14. Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir*, Deborah Kaple (transl. and ed.) (Oxford, 2011), p. xv.

murder and state crime. During these “horrifying years”,<sup>15</sup> as he calls them, millions of innocent people died in the Gulag. Before he set out for Pechorlag he had been told that the Gulag served to re-educate and rehabilitate convicts, but, he writes, he had seen with his own eyes that this was a lie. His work, Mochulsky wanted his readers to know, opened him up to Stalinism’s “inhumanity and basic criminal character”.<sup>16</sup> However, in the main section of the memoirs, in which Mochulsky describes in detail his own work as Gulag boss, he seems to forget about all this. It is as if he had no personal responsibility for the crimes of the Gulag whatsoever. Whereas the negative assessment of the Gulag contained in the preface and concluding section directly reflects the context of the Boris Yeltsin era in which the memoirs were written, the main section of the work appears to reflect more honestly the way Mochulsky experienced his work in the 1940s.

Mochulsky worked in Pechorlag in the war years, when mortality peaked. People must have been dying around him every day. But although he mentions the dramatic food situation of the prisoners, mass death is almost absent from this book. The exception is when Mochulsky describes the lethal conditions he found when he arrived in Pechorlag. The prisoners had no barracks but slept outside in the snow, without any shelter and without proper clothing. They were literally dying. Mochulsky was shocked, and, if we may believe him, he energetically set out to improve conditions. He ordered the prisoners to begin constructing barracks, and covered for them by tricking the higher authorities into believing that they were working on the railway line. As a good boss, Mochulsky suggests, he put his own neck on the line to create more humane conditions.

However, although he found the initial situation outrageous, in Mochulsky’s understanding it represented stupidity and mismanagement rather than a mass crime. For Mochulsky, Pechorlag was in the first place a productive enterprise, representing a strategic branch of the Soviet economy. He understood that successfully achieving the plan goals depended on a minimum of decency in the treatment of the inmates. Also, Mochulsky gives many interesting examples of how the camp leadership could not simply impose its rule on the prisoners, but had to come to some kind of arrangement with them, mostly with groups of common criminals. Decades later, Mochulsky was still proud of the ingenious ways in which he got the job done, through compromises rather than by outright repression. But clearly, it never entered his mind to doubt the legitimacy of the Gulag operation as such.

If Mochulsky’s work at the time did not burden his conscience, why did it not? According to Kaple, the book brings us back to “the age-old

15. *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 169.



question of how apparently ‘ordinary men’ can participate in extraordinarily evil actions”.<sup>17</sup> In Mochulsky’s case, on the one hand, this was a matter of personal self-interest and career. For him, the Gulag represented just another job, which he performed as honourably and successfully as he could. Mochulsky saw his work in terms of a professional challenge. He relished the opportunities it offered him to organize people, to overcome bottlenecks, and to solve seemingly insoluble technical problems. He was proud of his work and left the Gulag in 1946 with a sense of accomplishment. Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” comes to mind.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Mochulsky was under the impression that his work served a larger, inspiring purpose: constructing and safeguarding the socialist fatherland. In his mind, it was this that gave his work a wider meaning and justified the sacrifices imposed on the prisoners.

In *The Victims Return*, Stephen Cohen discusses the fate of the other category of the people of the Gulag – not the bosses but the prisoners. The subject of this remarkable book is the return of Gulag survivors to Soviet society during the 1950s, at the time of the post-Stalin amnesties and mass releases. The first person to have released about 1 million Gulag prisoners, in March 1953, was an unlikely proponent of de-Stalinization: Lavrentii Beria, People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs from 1938 to 1945, and later Minister of Internal Affairs for a few short months in 1953. Most people were released in the following years under Nikita Khrushchev, a process basically complete in 1959. Cohen relates many moving stories of how individual people were allowed to leave the camps and return to their former places of residence – if they chose to do so. Many stayed on in the area where they had been confined. The Khrushchev regime provided most of the released prisoners with living space and a job. But dramatic individual cases presented by Cohen highlight the problems many former Gulag inmates experienced in restoring their mental balance and a measure of normality to their lives.

What makes this book especially important is Cohen’s almost exclusive focus on a particular group of former inmates. We meet the children (in a few cases a cousin or a wife) of Bolshevik activists and leaders who had been killed on Stalin’s orders. In the Stalin era, close relatives of “enemies of the people” were often themselves punished too, to be locked up in the Gulag. Even children could suffer this fate, if they were not confined to orphanages, where circumstances were sometimes hardly any better. In the majority of the cases discussed here, these particular Gulag survivors remained committed to communism after their release.

17. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

18. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1963).

In 1973 Cohen published his celebrated biography of Nikolai Bukharin, leader of the so-called Right Opposition, who lost the struggle for power against Stalin in 1929.<sup>19</sup> In 1938, Bukharin was condemned to death, together with former Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Rykov. Cohen portrayed Bukharinism as a credible communist alternative to Stalin, something many students of communism, including the author of this review, would not easily agree with.

His sympathetic account of Bukharin helped Cohen in 1976 to establish contact with Anna Larina, Bukharin's widow, with whom Cohen entertained, in his own words, an "adopted-son' relationship".<sup>20</sup> It was through the Bukharin family that Cohen befriended some twenty to thirty of the relatives of Bolshevik dignitaries killed on Stalin's orders. These relatives included Bukharin's daughter, Svetlana Gurvich; Roy Medvedev, author of the seminal study of Stalinist terror, *Let History Judge*, and whose father, a communist philosopher, was killed under Stalin; Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, son of Vladimir, a famous revolutionary of the 1917 generation; Rykov's daughter Natalia and his cousin, playwright Mikhail Shatrov; Igor, son of the Comintern underground expert Osip Piatnitskii; Lev Kopelev, locked up in the Gulag in 1945; the former Foreign Ministry official arrested under Stalin, Evgenii Gnedin, who was the son of the revolutionary socialist Alexander Parvus. *The Victims Return* rests on materials drawn from Cohen's interviews with these people in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The book gives us an extraordinary, intimate portrait of this very special group of people who welcomed Cohen in their midst during the Brezhnev era. This access provided him with an unrivalled knowledge and understanding of their circumstances. Perhaps the most interesting conclusion to draw from *The Victims Return* is that these like-minded people, with so many famous names among them, made up no "imagined community" in the sense of Benedict Anderson,<sup>21</sup> but a real face-to-face community of personal acquaintances, with a clear sense of identity and mission.

Cohen's study highlights the atmosphere of renewed communist optimism under Khrushchev. There was a hope that, after the dark years of Stalinism, communism could be revitalized. Partly, this was a question of economic and technological progress. The 1957 Sputnik triumph, as well as Yuri Gagarin's 1961 space flight, contributed to naïve hopes that the USSR was on the eve of the transition to full communism. Khrushchev expected this to occur within twenty years. This curious episode of

19. Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography 1888–1938* (New York, 1973).

20. *Idem*, *The Victims Return: Survivors of the Gulag after Stalin* (London [etc.], 2011), p. 9.

21. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

communist utopianism is wonderfully depicted in Francis Spufford's novel *Red Plenty*.<sup>22</sup>

Cohen's book concerns itself with the political rather than the economic side of the matter. It was hoped that Khrushchev, who was assisted by the other main proponent of de-Stalinization Anastas Mikoian, would breathe new life into communism through democratization. The "children" returned to a society where communism seemed to experience a second youth. They hoped to be allowed to contribute to the process, which would vindicate them after years of living under a deep shadow. For some time, this did not seem impossible. In a fascinating chapter, Cohen discusses the role of Gulag returnees Aleksei Snegov and Ol'ga Shatunovskaia, who were personal acquaintances of Khrushchev and Mikoian and who were placed in important positions: Snegov in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Shatunovskaia in the party commission overseeing rehabilitations. Snegov and Shatunovskaia suggested the establishment of commissions to be sent to the camps in order to arrange quick mass releases. In adopting their suggestion, Khrushchev saved the lives of numerous people.

The hopes of the communist returnees, however, came to an abrupt end with Khrushchev's fall in 1964. During the Brezhnev era they came under a cloud once again. The final sections of Cohen's book can be read as a portrait of the communist branch of the dissident movement under Brezhnev, to be followed by a second rebirth under Gorbachev. None of these ups-and-downs could break the communist spirit of these idealists. As Cohen concludes in a comment on the demise of the USSR in December 1991: "Almost all of the Gulag survivors I knew regretted its passing."<sup>23</sup>

Remarkably, the perpetrators of Stalinist mass crimes and their victims often shared a common assumption of loyalty to the communist order. That did not, of course, go for all perpetrators, but without doubt a considerable section of the Gulag administration shared Fyodor Mochulsky's self-understanding as a person engaged in the safeguarding and construction of the socialist state. Similarly, even though many Gulag inmates did not feel any affinity with the order that was responsible for locking them up and ruining their lives on a daily basis, there were many like those figuring in Cohen's work who, for all their fierce anti-Stalinism, stubbornly remained communists. The Mochulskys and the Larinas would not easily have admitted it, but they had something in common: in very different ways they were working towards the same long-term goal.

The question remains of why so many people who had been incarcerated for so long and had become acquainted with the system in its worst aspects refused to give up on communism. Cohen does not systematically pursue

22. Francis Spufford, *Red Plenty* (London, 2010).

23. Cohen, *The Victims Return*, p. 154.

this question. It is the achievement of Nanci Adler to have provided a number of convincing answers in her recent book which, like Cohen's, deals with the Gulag victims who remained committed to communism. Adler suggests four mechanisms responsible for the continued communist loyalty of Gulag victims: the nature of communism as a secular religion with a concomitant charismatic bond; functionalism: for obvious reasons it was in the social and economic self-interest of Soviet citizens to remain loyal to the communist state; cognitive dissonance; and the traumatic bond between guards and their captives.<sup>24</sup> As Adler points out, the communist ideology tended to become a defining element of the personal identity of the communist. It provided his or her life with meaning, in ways comparable to what religions have to offer. To break with that ideology would then make nonsense of one's own life and risk falling into a disorienting identity crisis.<sup>25</sup>

Weber's concept of charisma helps us understand the problems communists would experience should they exit the movement. In Weber, charisma refers to the extraordinary dimension of our existence, interventions beyond everyday routines and capabilities. It is an ascribed trait, but need not necessarily be ascribed to a single leader. The power to perform in extraordinary and miraculous ways may also be ascribed to an institution or to a group of people. Strictly speaking, charismatic communities need not even have a leader at all.<sup>26</sup> It may be very hard to exit a community nurturing a charismatic self-understanding. Membership may simply be too attractive to give up. Individual members share in the collective glory the group believes it to be endowed with.

Communism represents a prime example of this mechanism. In its inflated self-understanding, the communist movement is the instrument of history destined to set all wrongs right and to put an end to all exploitation and oppression once and for all. Being a member of this movement makes one directly part of the most extraordinary process of redemption human history has ever witnessed. In their own experience, communists live on an epic scale. To disembark from this train means to land on the platform where the common people find themselves engaged in their petty affairs, in ignorance, and without the knowledge, will, and energy to change the world. The group of post-Stalin, idealistic, reform-minded communists described by Cohen and Adler was never an organization – but can all the same be conceptualized as a charismatic community. It represented a rather closely knit group, held together by

24. Nanci Adler, *Keeping Faith with the Party: Communist Believers Return from the Gulag* (Bloomington, IN, 2012), p. xiii.

25. *Ibid.*, especially ch. 1.

26. See Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Verstehende Soziologie. Fünfte, Revidierte Auflage* (Tübingen, 1985), pp. 124, 140–141, 327–329, 658, 660–663.

powerful bonds of history, shared fate, and belief in the redeeming future. It would not have been easy to give up all that and become a person like the rest of us.

Finally, the enigma of the stubborn communist, the loyal victim, cannot be understood without taking the historical context of Leninism into account. For Soviet communists of the reformist inclination, who returned under Khrushchev and became dissidents under Brezhnev, the medicine to cure the Stalinist disease was Leninism. Given that the people treated in Cohen's and Adler's books were largely children of Bolshevik leaders and activists killed by Stalin, it is hard not to interpret their persistent Leninism in Freudian terms as loyalty to the father. The communist reformists were calling on the country to pick up the thread that their fathers had been forced to drop.

This identification with fathers goes a long way towards explaining why the crimes committed by the communist state were not enough to convince the sons and daughters to give up on communism. The point is that their admired fathers had been agents of a regime based on terror and dictatorship too. As high-ranking officials of the Leninist state, Bukharin, Rykov, and the others had been perfectly comfortable with locking up people in concentration camps and shooting hostages. They had never doubted that the communist utopia required dictatorship and terror. From this angle, the answer to the question of how people could not lose faith in a betrayed ideal is that the ideal was in fact not betrayed. Terror could not shake their faith because it had been included in that faith all along.