

Survivors' History

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**The Victims Return:
Survivors of the Gulag After Stalin**
by Stephen Cohen
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We all have a few moments of culture shock when we first get to college, and I had mine the day university president Larry Summers, who under Bill Clinton had overseen American economic policy in the former Soviet Union, addressed the incoming class. The unrepentant privatizer who nearly destroyed my country was mobbed like a rock star by students. Other champions of Russia's neoliberal economic reforms had also become campus heroes. How many undergraduate fans of the development crusader Jeffrey Sachs, for example, knew of his far more significant contribution—as the father of Russian shock therapy—to the poverty he was now famously fighting? They certainly wouldn't have learned about it from economics professor Andrei Shleifer, Summers's former shock therapy lieutenant. Later, when Shleifer and Harvard were sued by the U.S. government for insider trading on the very Russian stock market that they had been helping set up, a settlement worth \$26.5 million of university funds was negotiated by Shleifer's boss, Larry Summers.

Shleifer not only kept his job, but made it onto our syllabus. Stephen Cohen was not on the list of required reading. The victors' history, which stressed Russia's tough but necessary, unavoidable, and generally successful transition to capitalist democracy had nothing to do with the experiences of my own family and our friends.

The transition, to me, was associated with very specific memories. Around the age of eleven I went to wash my hands in a friend's bathroom and was shocked to see his tub filled to the brim with chicken legs. My friend's dad worked at our local poultry farm, and he hadn't been paid in months until the management handed him his "shares." And

they were the lucky ones. A study by the *Lancet* linked the post-Soviet privatization to a 43 percent increase in male death rates. The trauma of witnessing the things they had worked for their whole lives stolen, broken up, and left to rot; of being told, on top of it all, by the architects of privatization and their Western advisers "Good riddance! Your Soviet dream was useless to begin with, the whole project was a lie, and you were fools to believe it" continues to devastate an entire generation.

My father's defining interaction with privatization consisted of seeing the overnight plunder of the firm he had worked at his whole life: the Murmansk Trawl Fleet. When I was growing up, he would describe bitterly how privatization actually took place at the shop floor level: one day, workers were asked to form a queue, and managers handed everyone a pack of strange vouchers worth a few rubles: Congratulations, you are now shareholders! Immediately afterward, the same managers would announce the formation of another queue, for those wishing to exchange their useless pieces of paper for a real bottle of vodka or some other deficit item that had long disappeared from the empty shops. And that's how billion-dollar enterprises were acquired with some good connections and a few crates of Stolichnaya: fair and square. Running battles later took place over who owned which ships, but in the end, most of the new owners did the same thing: strip the assets, run the ships into the ground, leave the crews stranded in various foreign ports, and make off with the cash.

While searching the library stacks for ammunition to challenge the campus version of history, I found Cohen's book *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia*. Published in 2001, it was a losers' history. Apart from starkly depicting the human costs of the new postcommunist dawn, Cohen unraveled the dominant narrative of the transition as a Manichean battle between free market capitalist progress and communist reaction, suggesting that Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a social-democratic USSR could have

offered another path.

For Cohen, alternatives—more democratic and just—always existed, a conviction he developed during his childhood in the American South. “Because I grew up in a segregated society,” he once told fellow historian Nick Hayes, “I was driven to study the alternatives. There had to have been other alternatives to slavery and segregation.” This belief animated Cohen’s first book, a biography of the Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin. It was a serious history of the revolutionary epoch, but one underpinned by the desire to see if there might not have been a better path after 1917. Whether you believed that Bukharin, specifically, would have had the answers had he not been ground down by Stalin, the project embodied Cohen’s search for a kind of third—or, really, fourth or fifth or sixth—way for the socialist experiment to have taken.

The Victims Return is a short, highly personal book about the people who returned from Stalin’s camps in the 1950s and then, somehow, maintained their faith in a more humane communist future. Cohen came to them through Bukharin’s widow, Anna Larina, who had returned to Moscow in 1959 after serving a twenty-year sentence in Siberian exile and prison. The British poet and historian Robert Conquest had told Cohen that she was living anonymously on the outskirts of Moscow. The biographer of Bukharin came to Moscow and sought her out.

She turned out to be at the center of a small group of people who had for two decades—since the amnesty for political prisoners in the wake of Stalin’s death—sought to clear both their names and the name of communism from the stain of Stalin. Through them, Cohen became privy to a subterranean fraternity. Constantly fearing re-imprisonment despite always having remained faithful to the USSR’s socialist ideals, they met in smoky kitchens to circulate forbidden manuscripts and discuss their own suppressed history, keeping the romantic idealism of the Thaw alive.

As much as the book follows the survivors of the Gulag, it also charts the author’s own transformation into his Russianized alter-ego,

“Stiven Koen”: a man so involved in the cause of the people he was chronicling, and then in Perestroika itself, that he was eventually invited to make a live address on Soviet national television from Red Square. And while Cohen now admits that his scholarly objectivity was tested in those years, he remains unapologetic about his sympathies for the book’s subjects. Asked recently why it took him thirty years to write a 180-page book, he replied, “I didn’t think I had the voice to write this book, it was so personal.”

The stories of the survivors began in 1936 or 1937, during the time of Stalin’s great purges. Rounded up because of their associations with the old Bolsheviks, they escaped execution but were exiled to Siberia and confined in terrible conditions in the Gulag’s network of labor camps. Finally, on March 5, 1953, Stalin died. The moment has been described in much of the literature of the camps as one of pure elation. Cohen quotes Vassily Grossman’s declaration that for most inmates, there was “no higher happiness than to leave the camp . . . and die—even only ten yards from that accursed barbed wire.” For some of the people in the Larina circle, however, it felt like a mixed blessing. Stalin, they thought, was the only one who knew they were innocent. And now he was gone.

In the wake of the tyrant’s death his successors, in order to curry favor with the populace, declared a general amnesty—but only for one million common criminals serving short terms. Political prisoners, sentenced under Article 58 as “counterrevolutionaries,” had to wait for their sentences to be individually revoked through a tortuous legal process. There were some notable exceptions: Vyacheslav Molotov’s wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, was released on his birthday, a mere day after Stalin’s funeral. A hand-picked group of celebrities and well-connected party members followed, but although the system was later streamlined by Nikita Khrushchev in the wake of the 1956 Party Congress, many less fortunate detainees were not freed until 1959.

When skeletal figures began to shuttle out of trains, clutching the trademark suitcases

that they held on to through the years in the camps (Anna Larina kept hers in a closet until she died), it didn't feel much like liberation. "For many freed victims, home no longer existed," Cohen writes. "Years of imprisonment had deprived them of their families, careers, possessions and sense of belonging. Some even preferred the routines of the Gulag . . . to the uncertainties of freedom."

Marriages crumbled under the weight of unshared memories. Varlam Shalamov's wife left him "to escape the shadow of the Gulag," he wrote in his memoirs, and added, "I wouldn't want to go back to my family now. They wouldn't understand me, they couldn't. No man should see or know the things I have seen and known." Sometimes, children were just as traumatized by their parents' exoneration as by their original arrests: having convinced themselves of their parents' culpability, they faced unbearable guilt upon hearing Khrushchev's revelations, in his address to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, of their innocence.

If Anna Akhmatova spoke of two countries—the Russia that put people in the camps and the Russia that got put into them—perhaps an even stronger division was what Cohen termed "the stark contrast between a life lost and one lived." Returnees questioned what their old friends had done to avoid arrest, and sometimes suspected them of betrayal. Some wondered if they had done enough to help, while others, guilt-ridden by the return of those they had once ratted out, tortured, or arrested, took their own lives.

The Gulag continued to haunt its victims in other ways, too. Decades after her release, one survivor rose from her deathbed and screamed "I must go, the guards are waiting for me."

With grim humor, another explained to Cohen why she decided to remarry at an old age following the death of her husband: she had seen enough *zeks* drop dead and lie in the snow for days to think of marriage as at least a guarantee of having someone bury you right away.

Eventually, some fellow survivors began to fall out with one another. *The Victims Return* makes clear how many former *zeks* had very mixed feelings about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Anna Larina tells Cohen that she regretted

meeting Solzhenitsyn during his research for *The Gulag Archipelago* because he praised Bukharin to her face while denigrating him in the book. Solzhenitsyn's perceived hypocrisy similarly irritated Varlam Shalamov, who accused the man he once hailed as the "true son of the Gulag" of political manipulation and polishing reality. Shalamov, who refused to derive moral or political lessons from the Gulag, felt that Solzhenitsyn had distorted the experience into an almost socialist-realist parable about human redemption, a vehicle for his personal and political dogmatism.

Ideological differences loomed large: if the horrors of the Gulag turned Solzhenitsyn into a famous anticommunist, among Cohen's circle of survivors, at least, that was the exception rather than the rule. In fact, the first thing many returnees did was apply for new Communist Party cards. When one *zek* arrived at the Party headquarters in Moscow still wearing his prison garb, he recalls the person working there, also a former prisoner, putting him at ease with the words "It's nothing. Many people are walking around Moscow today in such clothes." In Cohen's telling, this return to the fold was not capitulation but vindication. Far from renouncing the ideals of communism in the Gulag, many recalled that their communist faith was what had kept them going; rejoining the newly de-Stalinized party legitimated their original Leninist convictions.

As a result of the mass re-admissions to the party, chilling encounters began to take place all over the country as returning *zeks* confronted those who had helped to put them in the camps. One old Bolshevik, A.V. Snegov, was pulled out of the Gulag to testify against Lavrentiy Beria at his trial in 1953. "You're still alive!" exclaimed Beria upon seeing the ex-comrade for the first time since he had him arrested in the thirties. Shortly thereafter, Beria was executed, but the scene would repeat itself, less dramatically, many times over the subsequent years. One known informant came home to find a sign attached to his dacha by someone he had once denounced: "Beware—an evil dog."

Toward the end of the 1950s, the old victims seemed to be getting the upper hand over their former victimizers. Travelling

committees of liberation, known by the *zeks* as “unloading parties,” crossed the expanse of the country. The committees, which included Party officials but also at least one newly liberated prisoner, examined individual cases in far-flung tentacles of the Gulag, frequently delivering the fateful lines: “The Commission authorized by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to re-examine prisoners’ cases frees you and overturns your conviction in the firm belief you will enter the ranks of people building a bright future.”

None of it would have been possible without Olga Shatunovskaya and Alexei Snegov, who came to be known by admirers and adversaries alike as “Khrushchev’s *zeks*.” It was they who pressed him to deliver his landmark anti-Stalin speech at the Twentieth Party Congress. Cohen concludes that “politics cannot explain the personal risks Khrushchev took by exposing official crimes or his extraordinary initiatives in freeing and helping the survivors,” noting that the Soviet leader simply had a “movement of the heart” after his interactions with the *zeks*. It was Shatunovskaya and Snegov who persuaded Khrushchev to release Solzhenitsyn’s book. “‘At last,’ [the former prisoners] thought, ‘the truth is out, and it can never again be denied.’” But, notes Cohen, “They were only half right.”

By the time he arrived in Moscow in 1976, the pendulum had quietly swung again. Stalin’s bust had crept back onto Red Square, and Gulag literature was re-suppressed. As a sign of the times, while Boris Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn were banished, two notorious former secret police interrogators had traded in their leather overcoats for acclaimed careers as detective fiction writers. In the words of one former *zek*, it all felt like a “psychological execution.”

Neither still imprisoned nor formally rehabilitated, former prisoners once again became targets for surveillance and harassment. The tragedy of such double jeopardy was starkly evident in the life of Pyotr Yakir, the son of a purged Red Army commander. Sent to the Gulag at fourteen, upon his release he vigorously embraced Khrushchev’s thaw and joined

various dissident groups devoted to anti-Stalinism. Eventually, he was arrested by the KGB for a second time. Buckling under interrogation and psychological pressure, he revealed the names of his dissident friends to the authorities. Ostracized by dissidents too young to recall the Terror, he found understanding only among fellow *zeks*, who refused to judge.

Living with these survivors put Cohen at risk from the Soviet authorities (he eventually had his visa revoked for smuggling manuscripts out for publication abroad), but he was also subjected to fierce attacks from the West. His contention that the Soviet Union was capable of reform was ridiculed by mainstream American Kremlinologists who preferred to treat the country as an exotic, totalitarian aberration. For conservative commentators like Richard Pipes and Anne Applebaum, Leonid Brezhnev’s Thermidor exposed Russia’s primordial pull toward authoritarianism. But Cohen rejects this and argues that every successive Stalinist revival—whether under Brezhnev or Vladimir Putin—was driven not by totalitarian ideology but by the mundane and universal phenomena of political conservatism and bureaucratic self-preservation. “Like conservatives everywhere, the Brezhnev leadership needed a glorious past that sanctified the existing order,” writes Cohen, emphasizing that “the new regime’s watchwords were those of conservatives everywhere: deference to authority, stability, reverence for the past, and as little change as possible.”

Like the Putin government, the Soviet bureaucracy that rolled back Khrushchev’s original reforms was not interested in restoring Stalinist totalitarianism. Indeed, “the yearning of Soviet officials to be free of a terroristic personal dictatorship above them was the primary reason they initially supported Khrushchev” in the early years of the thaw. But once the Terror ended, the bureaucracy feared the continued revelations not out of latent Stalinism but rather to protect its newly won security and stability. Further focus on Stalin’s crimes, it was believed, could discredit and undermine the entire Soviet system at home at a time of increasing unrest among the satellite states.

Then the pendulum swung once more. By the mid 1980s, the generation forged by the Terror was succeeded by one that came of age in the Thaw. Gorbachev's Perestroika ushered in a "second great return": the victims' ultimate rehabilitation, as well as a vindication of Cohen's belief that the USSR was capable of democratization. After decades of humiliation and abuse, some of the *zeks* had survived to witness the time in which their innocence and righteousness were at last acknowledged. Anna Larina published her executed husband's final book, Bukharin's *Last Testament*, written on the eve of his arrest, which she had committed entirely to memory and recited every day of her imprisonment so that it could not be confiscated and destroyed. As their purged relatives were rehabilitated, long-censored books flew off shelves, and old banned plays began to be staged in official theaters, the surviving *zeks* began to appear on billboards and be surrounded by international TV cameras, prompted to tell their stories: for a brief moment, they became improbable Soviet superstars.

And so did Cohen: with the newly rehabilitated Bukharin's popular transformation into a symbol of democratic possibility and national rebirth, his formerly censored biography became an overnight best-seller. "A Bukharinist boom," he recalls, "exploded in Soviet politics and culture." In 1989, Gorbachev invited Cohen to make a televised May Day address to the nation. "Steve," Larina tells him when he hesitates about making his Red Square speech, "you say you are merely an accidental person in everything that is happening today, but you are wrong. It is our common fate." Though he was nervous about his command of Russian grammar, Stiv Koen's address about alternatives in Russian history was so well received that a parliamentary candidate promptly asked him to headline an upcoming rally. This time, Cohen politely declined.

It didn't take long for the euphoria to end. At the very moment that it was finding its democratic spirit and moral voice, the country

that "raised, arrested, and then liberated Stalin's victims" suddenly collapsed. Plunged into poverty with the rest of their fellow citizens, the remaining Gulag survivors saw their dreams dashed by the ensuing mixture of oligarchic capitalism and resurgent Stalinist nostalgia. However, while he is critical of Russia's current government, Cohen is determined to disprove the notion that Putin is entirely to blame. He argues that the popular longing for the idealized days of Stalin began under Boris Yeltsin, when economic shock therapy plunged the country into extreme poverty. The deprivation, crime, chaos, and humiliation of the 1990s drove people to seek refuge in a rose-tinted past of military victory, economic growth, national pride, and law and order. "Stalin is back," writes Cohen, "not due to the design of a Kremlin leader but to the social pain and discontent that affected the nation after 1991."

The twenty years of social upheaval since the Soviet collapse have added a bitter post-script to Cohen's story. Most of the survivors, including Anna Larina, are now dead, and with them the dream of a humane communist future that had kept them alive though their long detention. Poverty, ideological exhaustion, and the double-edged promise of consumer capitalism have shattered the fragile, idealistic unity of the Perestroika era. In many ways, including the subtle (albeit half-hearted) rehabilitation of Stalin, the pendulum has again swung back toward a Brezhnev-style authoritarian conservatism. Yet this situation is exactly what makes *The Victims Return* relevant and necessary. Cohen's account of the survivors' struggle for truth and dignity is his testament that while every story may not have what his Russian friends would call a "kheppy end," every system of oppression always produces its eventual gravediggers.

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