

TOTALITARIANISM AND FAMILY LIFE

Ninth Mene Tekel Festival — Family In Times of Unfreedom

<http://www.menetekel.cz/en/program/>

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Main Hall, Czech Republic Senate

Notes for Hon. David Kilgour, J.D.

Prague

Permit me to say first that your late President Havel and His Holiness the Dalai Lama are two world leaders, whose causes and values I have long supported. The bringing of the one by the other to Prague is only one of their many acts of courage.

Hannah Arendt's seminal book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), is probably the best source on primary issues, including family life, under Communism, Nazism and Fascism.

She stresses: "Totalitarian government...could not exist without destroying the public realm of life...by isolating men (and women), their political capabilities. But totalitarian domination ...is new in that it...destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man".

Russia

A recently-published work by Yale University Press on family issues in Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain and Turkey during periods of totalitarianism is Paul Ginsborg's *Family Politics-Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival 1900-1950*. Among its conclusions about Russia between the Revolution of 1917 and 1950:

Stalinist Terror came in waves with different targets. The most famous was that of the political show trials in Moscow in 1936, in which Stalin's rivals for power and much of the Bolshevik old guard were brought to trial and executed... This public mask of Terror, however, concealed another wave of repression ...which the work of the French historian Nicolas Werth has only recently fully brought to light...Between August 1937 and November 1938 some 750,000 Soviet citizens were arrested as 'enemies of the people' and killed after summary trials. It was, according to Werth, 'the greatest state massacre ever perpetrated in Europe in times of peace'. Its victims were... (farmers)... and principally foreigners who had sought refuge in the Soviet Union...

Among the five regimes considered in Ginsborg's book, the Soviet Union was the most indiscriminate destroyer of its families. At the height of what Werth terms the "ordinary peoples Terror" in 1937/1938 were about 50,000 executions monthly, as the secret police sought to fill their murder targets. Between 1929 and 1953 as well, about eighteen million Russians passed through the camps and

colonies of the Gulag. No other system of detention and slave labour in the twentieth century comes anywhere near these figures.

A letter from a wife to her husband cited by Ginsborg, both deeply loyal to the party, captures unintentionally the enormity of Stalin's Terror. Sofia Antonov-Ovseyenko, wife of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, a highly-respected party member, who had stormed the Winter Palace and was later Soviet ambassador here in Prague, was arrested in October 1937 and wrote to her husband from a Moscow prison, unaware that he had been arrested three days earlier:

My darling, I do not know if you will receive this, but somehow I sense that I am writing you for the last time...Everything I know you know as well because our lives have been inseparable and harmonious...So please believe me when I say that I did nothing wrong. One more thing: it is time for Valichka (Sofia's daughter from her first marriage) to join the Komsomol (Communist Youth League). My arrest will no doubt stand in her way...I beg forgiveness from everyone I love for bringing them such misfortune...Forgive me, my loved one. If only I knew that you believed me and forgive me. Your Sofia.

Ginsborg continues: "Husband and wife were shot on the same day (8 Feb 1938). Sofia's daughter... aged fifteen, was not only refused entrance to the Komsomol but sent to an orphanage. In spite of everything she survived."

PUTIN

Nearly a quarter century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Europe faces a major new threat from Moscow. Part of the problem is that President Putin appears to operate, as the lead in the current Economist (Feb. 14) asserts, under different rules "...no inviolable rules, nor universal values, not even cast-iron facts...There are only interests. His Russia has graduated from harassing ambassadors and assassinating critics to invasions."

The world should strive to let the Russian people know that that their country will be welcomed back into the responsible community of nations when the Kremlin treats neighbours with respect. In the meantime, we should all heed more than ever the words from 2009 from eminent public figures in central and eastern Europe, including Vaclav Havel, describing Russia as "a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st century tactics and methods."

CHINA

China is its peoples, cultures, and history far more than its unelected government. The criticisms many of us at home and abroad make are of the party-state governance, not long-suffering citizens. The "Free China" film screened at this festival illustrates this especially well.

Most historians today include Mao with Stalin and Hitler as the three worst mass murderers of the 20th century. Chang/Holliday note in their 2005 biography of him that "over 70 million Chinese perished under Mao's rule in peacetime". Many

governance problems today stem from the conflation of Mao's totalitarianism and his successor Deng Xiaoping's reforms after 1978 into a system of "Leninist governance/crony capitalism." Corruption and violence are so widespread that foreigners and socially responsible companies wonder if they can today do legitimate business in China.

Artist Liu Xia, 53, has been under house arrest for more than four years without access to mail, email or phone. Her offence is to be married to still-imprisoned Liu Xiaobo, advocate of the pro-democracy Charter 08 and the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2010. She suffers from a recent heart attack and depression. Beijing asserts preposterously that she is under "no legal restraints". Her situation reminds the world of many others in China, such as lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who is also under house arrest months after his latest release from prison, and poet/prisoner Zhu Yufu, and rights activist Cao Shunli, who died after being denied treatment for tuberculosis.

The 2014 book, *The Slaughter*, by Ethan Gutmann places the persecution of the Falun Gong, Tibetan, Uyghur, and House Christian communities in context. He focuses mostly on Falun Gong, the exercise-meditation group most viciously targeted since 1999. Gutmann explains how he arrives at his "best estimate" that vital organs from 65,000 Falun Gong and "two to four thousand" Uyghurs, Tibetans, or House Christians were seized in the 2000–2008 period alone. No one survives pillaging because all vital organs are removed to be trafficked for high prices to wealthy Chinese and "organ tourists."

Forced labour is used to manufacture export products in 350 or more camps. David Matas and I visited about a dozen countries to interview Falun Gong practitioners who managed to leave both the camps and China. They told of working in appalling conditions for up to 16 hours daily with no pay and little food, crowded sleeping conditions, and torture. Inmates make a range of export products as subcontractors to multinational companies. This constitutes a violation of WTO rules and calls for an effective response, including placing an onus on importers to prove their products are not made in effect by slaves.

A report on state capitalism in a 2012 issue of the Economist quoted a central bank of China estimate that, between the mid-1990s and 2008, 16,000–18,000 Chinese officials and executives of state-owned companies "made off with a total of \$123 billion (about \$6 million each)" and concluded, "By turning companies into organs of the government, state capitalism simultaneously concentrates power and corrupts it." In a real sense, corruption is the system.

Governments and business around the world should ponder why they are condoning the violation of universal values in order to increase trade and investment with China. The result is usually more jobs being outsourced and growing bilateral trade deficits. As consumers, should we overlook the human, social and natural environment costs paid by Chinese nationals to produce goods?

A World Bank study in 2007 concluded that pollution in China causes about 750,000 preventable deaths a year. Greenhouse gases from industrial coal burned across the country wreak environmental havoc well beyond its borders. Nearly half a billion citizens cannot access safe drinking water.

The world's democrats should continue to work to bring universal values to the Chinese people, including equal dignity for all, the rule of law, multiparty democracy, transparency, and accountability. The Chinese people want the same things as all of us: respect, education, safety and security, good jobs, the rule of law, democratic governance, and a sustainable natural environment.

Czech experience

In four decades of totalitarian rule in Czechoslovakia after the 1948 coup, ideology permeated all spheres of life, including the family. All political decisions were dictated from Moscow.

As you know, those who did not comply were intimidated and placed under surveillance. Bribes abounded; the presence of listening devices in homes prevented people from speaking openly; there were long lines at the shops; people were imprisoned for filing complaints or signing petitions. If a citizen defected, family left behind were severely punished. People socializing with dissidents were interrogated and accused of subversion.

During the 1950s, Stalin had Czech Communists carry out purges. The victims included Catholics, Jews, democratic politicians, military leaders, as well as high-ranking Communists. Almost 180 people were executed. There was no such thing as a fair trial. During the repression after the crushing of the Prague Spring, more purges occurred. High-ranking government personnel, artists, writers, leaders of social organizations and reformers who had supported the Prague Spring became new targets.

Memories

Erika Patzer, now of Canada, remembers challenges faced by her family: "My grandparents had to go through very troubling times when the system ... changed from ... postwar democracy to Soviet style communism. They owned farmland in southern Slovakia, but under a policy of collectivization had to give it up... My grandpa was taken to jail for over three months in 1951. After he was released from prison, my grandparents realized that it was useless to fight the system. They felt defeated."

During the late 1950s, recalls a Canadian friend, who lived at the time in Prague, an American diplomat living in Prague noticed a man sweeping the street outside his home. He appeared on a regular basis, which piqued the curiosity of the American. So, speaking some Czech, he went out to chat with the street cleaner.

In the conversation, he discovered that he came from old aristocracy and was well educated. When the Communists came to power, he vowed that whatever he did to earn a living it would not support the political system. Sweeping streets was his silent protest.

Faith Issues

One of the Communist party's enemies after 1948 was religion. It took over church property, closing down all 216 monasteries during 1950 and most of the 339 convents. Clergy were murdered, imprisoned, sent to labour camps or placed in the army.

Jitka M. asks, "[The Czech Republic is] the only Eastern European country where 80% of the population (say they) don't believe (in God). Compare it to Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Russia...Czechs love to hear [that] the Communist party caused it all, but ...why [did] they give up faith? Maybe ..[finding] the answer to this question could solve the rest of the problems."

Milan Babiak, also now of Canada, observes, "people with a strong faith and value system did not allow Communists to break them. They continued to go to church, confess their faith, and act fairly in all circumstances... Those tough situations built very strong characters and people, who stood for good moral values and proved leaders in the long term. They raised children who knew to stand for truth and character. Those strong people know that fairness and truth will pay off".

Havel and Velvet Revolution

The Canadian diplomat Rob McRae wrote from Prague about the Velvet Revolution in 1989: "Thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people would rush forward...so all would see the regime for what it was, without equivocation. And this had come about because the need to live in truth, experienced by a growing number of people, was converted into the courage to do so."

For McRae, it was as though a whole nation of people were thinking as Havel thought when he said, "I base my actions on a fairly simple human philosophy: namely, that I have to say what I think. I have to speak the truth. I have to fight for the things I know to be right."

By bringing forth transformative, sudden, and life-affirming change through the power of popular will alone, Czechoslovakia helped to show a cynical and sometimes weary world that dreams are still possible. That message still resonates for you today.

In today's world, where violence is increasingly used as a means to create political change, we are desperately in need of examples of the effective use of non-violence to achieve great changes. Your own victory, and its continuing influence, is certainly worth celebrating.

The late President Havel continues to be one of the world's most universally admired leaders. He was important to bringing this country and its neighbours into NATO and the European Union without violence. Like so many around the world, I agree with Lech Walesa of Poland: "(He was a) great fighter for the freedom of nations and for democracy... His outstanding voice of wisdom will be missed in Europe."

Thank you.

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