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BY STANLEY L. COHEN

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Imperialism and the Struggle Against It Begins at Home



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Down with all colonial policy, down with the whole policy of intervention and capitalist struggle for the conquest of foreign lands and foreign populations, for new privileges, new markets, control of the Straits!

With these words, Vladimir Lenin spoke life-times ago to a paradigm of a brave new world built of promise and justice, of hope and confidence in the certain collapse of imperial privilege and capital corruption. Some listened and readily surrendered their liberty and lives to a new revolutionary call that knew no bounds of border, of oath or anthem... many did not. Still others, today, long after their utter, claim inspiration and inheritance to the cadence of Lenin's preach but never quite got the nuance of his tongue. A century later, some of the self-professed inheritors of his vision and voice have conveniently converted all colonial policy to some; non-intervention to selective march;

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the bar on any conquest to convenient ambiguity. Nowhere is that historical rewrite more pronounced or profound than today where the ghost of Lenin looks beyond cheap label and superficial chant, perhaps horrified, to see the invasion of Ukraine for what it is... a colonial intervention and conquest of a foreign land and population by the Romanovs of today. [i]

Imperialism is born not in some abstract off-shore political vacuum. At first blush, it speaks to domestic expansion and repression... to the theft of lands in a voracious rush to swell and secure one's base and the target of those who present a different look, a different history, a different aspiration. After-all, no imperial trek can hope to accomplish anything but failure while domestic dissent screams NOT. It was a costly lesson, one belatedly understood by the Romanovs as they took their well-deserved final royal stroll to the walls of rebellion where they were met with a fuselage of bullets and the bite of bayonets as their three-hundred-year imperial dynasty faded into the pathway of revolutionary history. For historical purposes, it matters less who the Romanovs were than what it is they represented... for those who fail to recall the lessons of history are doomed indeed to repeat its mistakes although, to some today, these same "missteps" are easily white-washed away as so much the unavoidable linchpin of political necessity and group chant. For centuries, Czarist Russia was ruled with absolute tyrannical power...an autocratic command that targeted all who questioned the supreme authority of the Czar and his all-obedient ministry which controlled every aspect, every aspiration, every dream of every Russian subject. Those perceived as dissident, in any way, were reduced to revolutionary threats and quickly subjected to the most severe of sanctions. For the fortunate, their thirst for self-dignity was controlled "merely" by strict censorship laws employed by the state to defend its security in the "public interest" which dictated what could or could not be written or published including private letters.

Those who spoke a language other than Russian or who did not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church were viewed as dangerous to the Czarist sculpted and imposed system of uniformity. With Russian the sole acceptable state language and cultural identity or diversity banished, the secret police monitored every aspect of the lives of dissenting voices, including social and family gatherings, with their activity at secondary and university settings a prime, routine target for state surveillance. Each student was subjected to detailed reports to the government about their beliefs and activity by their teachers. For the less fortunate, and more dangerous and public of voice, coatless exile to political gulags in Siberia became very much the norm. The total of those dispatched to

that political freeze, murdered or simply disappeared by imperial edict, today remains not a subject of reasoned debate over its fact but rather simply a crunch of their ultimate number.

Fast forward one hundred years or so, another Vladimir sits enthroned, but this one a Putin who wears not the robes of royalty but the reign of singular dutiful fidelity... a despot demanding blind obedience to his call no less chilling or telling than those of an earlier day. For twenty years, comrade Putin has accrued all and absolute power over some one hundred and fifty million Russians and more than one-eighth of the earth's inhabitable land mass. But for the willfully ignorant, over these decades, we have all been witness to an overt, palpable and, to date, successful attack upon, and suppression of, individual thought, speech and association in Russia. Be it by legislated fiat, or imposed by brute force, once again, a tyrannical throne of Moscow has parented a new generation of political victims... those forced to flee their homeland, those exiled to the gulag silence of Siberia, and those disappeared or murdered.

Right about now, some, perhaps many, are shouting "Cohen you are an American apologist, a NATO parrot, a fascist in leftist dress," as if after 50 years of fighting in and out-of-courts for the liberty of the oppressed and occupied world-wide; after losing family and friends to Western imperialist violence; after indictments in two nations including for seditious conspiracy; after being banned in at least four states and a stint in prison, I have suddenly sold my soul to political expedience and cheap talismanic convenience. Blah blah blah. I've heard it all, these past few weeks, where some in the so-called anti-imperialist crowd... mostly those who have never left their keyboard of resistance... have embraced a virtual primer on rationale to avoid, if not deny, what stares them directly in the face... facts, not fancy; truth, not troll; evidence, not cerebral escape.

Under Putin we've seen a clear return to a Czarist-like attack on fundamental aspects of individual Russian freedom and aspiration. Beginning, not long after the onset of his personal chase of Peter the Great, he imposed a new law that moved government subsidies, for relatively independent regional newspapers overseen by local officials, to the centralized press ministry thus consolidating government control over what was said about his domestic and international policies. During the second invasion of Chechnya, government dollars ensured that virtually all Russian media demonized Chechens while tamping down on reports of the destruction of villages and cities, the terror of refugees, and the sheer brutality by Russian troops.

In the years since, a cornerstone of Vladimir Putin's methodical crackdown on all aspects of Russian civil society has been his targeted attack on diversity of thought, speech, faith and information in all their iterations. Under his command, the Russian Parliament has adopted numerous laws intended to circumscribe any and all discourse critical of the government and, in so doing, empowered prosecutors to use these controls to intimidate and imprison those who dare to speak up and out. Under these laws, Russian Internet service providers are required to link their computers to the FSB (the successor to the KGB) and seven other law-enforcement bodies tasked to monitor e-mail and other electronic traffic. A 2015 law which applies to email services, social media networks, and search engines prohibits storage of Russian citizens' personal data on servers located outside Russia. A 2016 law requires telecommunications and internet companies to retain the contents of all communications for six months and data about those communications for three years. That same year, government censors blocked access to LinkedIn for noncompliance with the 2015 legislation. In 2020, Russia expanded its control over internet infrastructure and online content increasing the power of authorities to filter and block its virtual material. This legislation was an amendment to the 2019 law which required manufacturers to pre-install Russian apps, including browsers, messengers and maps on smartphones, computers, and Smart TVs sold in Russia. Another internet monitoring law in 2020 created a national digital repository of personal data, such as employment and foreign residency information of Russians now routinely accessible to law enforcement and other government agencies.

From this legislation and older laws, dozens have been criminally prosecuted and jailed due to social media posts, on-line videos, print articles and in-person interviews which have conflated criticism of the government with prohibited extremist activity. In particular, the government has targeted those who have been critical of the occupation of Crimea, published satire regarding the Russian Orthodox Church, or questioned Russia's armed intervention in Syria. According to SOVA, a respected Russian think-tank, the number of criminal cases arising from "extremism" charges connected to prohibited on-line and social media exchanges has exploded moving from single digit convictions to more than 200 with punishments ranging from fines to prison. As of several years ago, more than one hundred, largely young women and men, were imprisoned for "extremist" speech such as that described above.

In Putin's Russia, examples of so-called extremist prosecutions abound and are very much a veritable primer on the nature and extent of the government's desperation to silence

nothing more than thoughts and exchanges that challenge the official state narrative of domestic and international affairs. In 2015, a blogger from the Siberian city of Tomsk was sentenced to five years in prison for “extremism” after he posted videos on YouTube and social media which, among other things, criticized Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, made critical comments about people arriving in Russia from eastern Ukraine, and alleged corruption by local officials. The following year another blogger from Tyumen, Siberia received a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for the extremist crime of “public justification of terrorism,” after writing a blog post simply criticizing Russia’s military involvement in Syria.

In the years following Russia’s invasion of Crimea, authorities have silenced dissent in the name of “combating extremism.” Targets of repression include Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority native to the peninsula and openly opposed to Russia’s occupation, along with their lawyers and others who have peacefully protested Russia’s actions in what was, and to many remains, a part of Ukraine. As an essential part of that state-imposed silence, all independent media outlets in Crimea have been forcibly closed by the Russian government.

In 2013, the Putin government unleashed a full-on attack on the LGBTQ community by passing a law banning the distribution of information about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender` relationships to children. The law, which legalized discrimination based on sexual orientation, coincided with a dramatic uptick of homophobic rhetoric in state media and a predictable increase in homophobic violence throughout Russia. The law, which Putin promoted as a safeguard to strengthen “traditional values”, was used to shut down websites that provided valuable information and services to teens across Russia and to bar LGBTQ support groups from working with youth and, essentially, stopped mental health workers from offering honest, scientifically accurate, and open counseling services to members of the LGBTQ community and their families... leading some to self-censor or set out explicit disclaimers at the start of sessions to avoid exposing themselves to criminal prosecution. Some 5 years later, a list was circulated on Russian websites and in social media featuring the names of dozens of members or supporters of the LGBTQ community, including journalists. Readers were encouraged to hunt them down. Not long thereafter Yelena Grigoryeva, an outspoken activist in St. Petersburg, whose name was on the list, disappeared and her body was ultimately found in her St. Petersburg apartment, stabbed multiple times.

At the same time, government prosecutors moved to enforce laws that make a criminal offense of “offending the feelings of religious believers.” This law was enacted following the “unauthorized” musical performance by Pussy Riot, in a Russian Orthodox cathedral in Moscow, which resulted in their imprisonment for some two years. Subsequently, others have been convicted under this faith based law and received sentences ranging from fines to three years’ imprisonment. In one such prosecution a 22-year-old video blogger, Ruslan Sokolovsky, who made several satirical or critical videos or blog posts about the Orthodox Church, including a prank video in which he played Pokémon GO on his iPhone in a Russian Orthodox Church in Ekaterinburg, was convicted of incitement of hatred and insult to the religious feelings of believers.

Not satisfied with using the law to simply protect the feelings of members of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Putin government has used extremism laws to harass, if not criminalize, membership in the Jehovah’s Witnesses... a Christian group known for door-to-door preaching, close Bible study, rejection of military service, and not celebrating national and religious holidays or birthdays. Beginning in 2017 authorities carried out some 780 house raids in more than 70 towns and cities across Russia, resulting in at least 313 people facing charges, on trial, or who have been convicted of criminal “extremism” for engaging in Jehovah’s Witnesses activities, or are suspects in such cases. Of the original defendants, many received prison sentences ranging from two to six years for activities such as leading or participating in prayer meetings. As of today, there are some 46 new cases of members of Jehovah’s Witnesses either being placed under house arrest or put behind bars. Very much political prisoners in every sense of the word, they are not alone.

This past year, the Memorial Human Rights Center reported that the number of political prisoners in Russia had increased to at least 410. In its final updated accounting of political prisoners of this past August, Russia’s leading human rights group said its list is “only a minimum estimate of the number of political prisoners” languishing in jail or under house arrest. “In reality, there are undoubtedly significantly more political prisoners and other persons imprisoned for political reasons,” it said. Before the most recent spate of arrests of thousands of anti-war demonstrators across Russia, documented political prisoners included 329 sentenced for the practice of their religion and 81 others for pure non-violent political activity. Ukrainian Parliament’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Liudmyla Denisova, adds to the list with her identifying some additional 115 Ukrainians being held in Russian prisons on political grounds, of whom more than 80 are

Crimean Tatars. The Crimean Tatar Resource Center also lists 86 Crimean political prisoners. The Crimean Human Rights Protection Group offers the same number of political prisoners persecuted on the basis of political, national, or religious grounds.

Most prominent of all Russian political prisoners today is opposition politician and attorney Aleksei Navalny whose effort to run against Putin for the office of President was banned by the government. Though jailed in January after returning from life-saving treatment in Germany for a nerve-agent poisoning that he and others say was ordered by Putin, he has continued to challenge him and the invasion of Ukraine from behind bars. Previously, he and his inner circle were added to the state's "terrorist" federal registry with his political movement's network of regional offices shuttered and his anti-corruption foundation banned as an "extremist" group. Currently serving a sentence of two and a half years for "breaking bail conditions" while in hospital, several days ago an additional nine years was added to his sentence following conviction in a trial described by Amnesty International as a "sham" intended to silence one of Putin's most prominent critics. According to *Memorial*, other supporters of Navalny are political prisoners, along with journalists from the student magazine *Doxa* who reported on protests against his imprisonment. Among them are 24-year-old Pavel Grin-Romanov who was sentenced to three years for pepper-spraying the air at a demonstration in Navalny's support and Konstantin Lakeyev who was sentenced to three years for throwing a snowball at an FSB car and kicking its tires at another demonstration. Also imprisoned with Navalny are potential opposition candidates for parliamentary elections who were, according to Memorial, "prosecuted on a variety of illegal and unfounded charges."

Rich are the storied tales that take the reader to frigid Siberian winters with political prisoners struggling to maintain not just their health but their sanity. Though typically cast on the eve of the Russian revolution, these narratives leave the reader frozen with sympathy, yet flush with hope, as the Bolshevik drumbeat of freedom always seems to be an echo that grows with the passage of each page. After generations of political prisoners have come and gone, one hundred years later, Russian gulags may have moved from ice to penal colonies not far from Moscow, but their isolation and the suffer of their prisoners remains no less true or damning. In the words of a former inmate at the jail now home to Navalny, inmates are "subjected to beatings, medical neglect and severe psychological pressure." According to a former prison's inspector "They are crushing the prisoner as an individual." Others detail sexual assaults and confiscation of personal medical supplies and a reorientation in which "they are destroying the prisoner as the enemy... [where]

They are crushing the prisoner as an individual and calling it the betterment of a person.” *Sitting Russian*, an organization that provides help to prisoners and their families, says “Russia’s prison system dehumanizes people to a terrifying degree.” Navalny, himself, reports a “new form of punishment in Russian prisons... mandatory viewing of state TV propaganda for hours at a time... in which he is forced to spend at least 8 hours in front of the TV every day [and where] guards shout don’t sleep, watch ” if an inmate starts to fall asleep. Another prisoner has said upon his arrival at the jail he was asked by the administration about his opinion of Putin. Responding “negative”, administrators told him he would have a bad experience in prison. As it turned out their prediction came to pass. He reported he was tortured with sleep deprivation... guards woke him up 8 times per night and he had only 15 minutes per week to write letters to his family, with each letter taking one month to complete.

Today, the Russian constitution prohibits “propaganda or campaigning” intended “to incite social, racial, national, or religious hatred and strife.” Ambiguous by design and codified in the Russian criminal code, legislation, on its face, proposed to combat extremism, is used to prosecute political opposition or to silence uncomfortable speech. Examples of this glaring, unabashed legislative pretext abound.

For example, Article 282 prohibits the incitement of hatred or enmity “if these acts have been committed in public or with the use of mass media.” Under this law Stanislav Dmitrievsky, was prosecuted for extremism for writing an article critical of Russia’s involvement in the Chechen war. His crime... not capitalizing the “p” in a critique of “Putin’s regime.” To make their case, state prosecutors called on experts in philology who testified that this non-capitalization was an intended act of extremism. Likewise, in August of 2020, a court sentenced Alexander Shabarchin to two years’ imprisonment on hooliganism charges for placing, in a public square, a life-sized doll with Putin’s face and signs reading “Liar” and “War Criminal.” At the same time Karim Yamadayev was on trial on charges of insulting authorities and “justification of terrorism” over a web video of a mock trial against Putin and other officials.

In another prosecution, Article 280 which prohibits “Public Appeals to the Performance of an Extremist Activity and Public Justification of Extremist Activity,” including through mass media, was invoked against Darya Polyudova, an anti-Putin activist. Her multiple prosecutions speak volumes about the risks attendant to public opposition to the Russian state. Beginning in 2011 she “staged solitary pickets, holding home-made posters and voicing her criticism of Putin’s regime.” Among other peaceful protests, Polyudova joined

demonstrations opposing the national elections, the prosecution of Pussy Riot, the invasion of Crimea and those in support of Crimean Tatars and other Ukrainian political prisoners. Prosecuted in 2014 for inciting “separatism and extremism”, she was ultimately imprisoned for two years. Returning to the street after her release from prison, Polyudova was again prosecuted for “public incitement of separatism” as a result of picketing and on-line activity. This time she was sent to prison for 6 years. Article 280 was also applied against Memorial International, Russia’s most prominent human rights organization which had spent more than 30 years narrating some of the darkest chapters of Russian history, in particular the “infamous Stalin-era labor camps in an effort to preserve the memory of its victims.” In this prosecution, the government targeted *Memorial* for publishing a paper written by a Muslim religious leader about a political group designated as “terrorist” by the government but never charged with any acts of violence or actual offenses. According to prosecutors, *Memorial* was guilty of “deliberate use of religious authority to achieve a political goal,” and thus its public dissemination constituted justification of extremist activity.

In its prosecution of *Memorial*, the state claimed that the NGO’s records contain “elements of the justification of extremism and terrorism”. The material in question, which was generated in the years since Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea, was Memorial’s list of political prisoners and reports on individual cases, where Russians, Crimean Tatars and other Ukrainians are imprisoned as Jehovah’s Witnesses, or for alleged involvement with Artpodgotovka, a left-wing organization, identified as extremist, or with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a legal Muslim group known for advocating change through non-violence.

This past December the Russian Supreme Court ordered the group founded by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov and other dissidents to close. Ilya Miklashevsky, 65, whose father and grandfather were both imprisoned in the gulag, described Memorial’s closure as “a new step downward [with] the country sleepily moving downhill.” Sergei Mitrokhin, a Russian opposition politician, said “Memorial was the last barrier on the way to complete Stalinization of the society and state... It is a tragedy for our country.”

Even before Russia’s most recent effort to sanitize news reporting about its invasion of Ukraine, the government’s systematic attack upon independent journalists and news outlets has been pervasive. Thus, Andrei Piontkovsky, a political journalist was charged under Federal Law No. 114-FZ which defines extremist materials as documents or information intended to call for or justify extremist activity “aimed at the full or partial

destruction of any ethnical, social, national, or religious groups.” Accused of violating this law for two books that he wrote, prosecutors introduced “expert” testimony that concluded his books were “forming a perverted and wrong understanding of the Russian people, religious groups, and its representatives, and is agitated hate on this basis.”

Under Article 319, which prohibits “public insult of a representative of authority during the discharge by him of his official duties” *Kursiv*, an internet newspaper, was prosecuted for writing critically of Russian pro-natalist policies and because of comparing Putin to a phallus. Other amendments to the laws expand the limits on distribution of what are considered “extremist materials” or the publication of “public and deliberate false accusations of the authority during the discharge by him of his official duties in criminal activities listed in the Law against extremism activity.”

Under this law, in July of 2020 a Russian court sentenced journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva, who worked for the Echo of Moscow and Radio Free Europe, to a fine of 500,000 rubles (approx. USD\$ 7000) on terrorism charges related to her broadcast in 2018 that argued Russia’s repressive policies, including the lack of free and fair elections and the crackdown on free assembly served to radicalize the youth. Subsequently convicted of “public justification or propaganda of terrorism”, she was placed on the list of “terrorists and extremists, and barred from foreign travel. This past year, the government refused to investigate an incident in which the FSB broke the arm of journalist David Frenkel while reporting from a voting precinct during the constitutional plebiscite. Instead, he was fined by the government on three different counts related to his reporting.

Years before, *Voice of Beslan*, a grassroots organization established to pressure the government to investigate the conduct of authorities during the Beslan hostage crisis, was charged under earlier amendments for accusing the government and various agencies of failing to investigate the attacks properly and lying in court. The laws on the “disrespect” of government agencies or officers were again expanded in 2019 when Putin signed into law new rules that criminalize any disrespect for Russian society, the government, official symbols, the constitution, or any state body, as well as what the authorities deem to be “fake news.” Most recently in response to critical reporting of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin imposed a censorship bill which calls for prison sentences of up to 15 years for “fake” information about it.

Given these attacks on journalists and news outlets is it any wonder that in the most recent Press Freedom Index, issued yearly by Reporters without Borders, Russia ranked 150th

out of the 180 rated states. Yet, for the murdered and disappeared journalists over the past 20 years of the Putin reign, censorship alone would surely be a welcome reprieve.

To be sure, more than a decade ago there were a number of high-profile attacks on journalists including the murder of five of Novaya Gazeta's reporters and contributors. The European court of human rights later ruled that Russia had failed to investigate the abduction and assassination of one of them, Natalya Estemirova, in Chechnya in 2009. Another, Anna Politkovskaya, was gunned down as she got into her lift in 2006. Several years later, the International Federation of Journalists issued a damning investigative report into the deaths of journalists in Russia and launched an online database which documents over three hundred such deaths and disappearances since 1993. The database was built of information gathered in Russia over 16 years by its own media monitors: the Glasnost Defense Foundation and the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations. Not long thereafter in its report, *Justice*, the Committee to Protect Journalists reaffirmed its conclusion that Russia was one of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists and added that it remains among the worst at solving their murders. Indeed, between March 2000 and July 2007, Reporters Without Borders documented twenty-one journalists who were murdered in Russia because of their work. In total during Putin's 20 years of presidency some 119 print and television journalists have reportedly been murdered or disappeared.

Conclusion

Based upon the anticipated eruption of keyboard clash over the course of Putin's most recent invasion and apparent land-grab, I suspect there are more than a few self-identified anti-imperialists who will dispatch this essay with relative ease and speed as little more than naïve or positioned propaganda for the very forces I have battled against with purpose and pride for decades. Some may agree with this indefensible indictment of Vladimir Putin, but yet see his most recent attack on forty million citizens of another state as an unfortunate but necessary pushback against the forces of Western imperialism. Others will view the last several weeks as an essential effort to protect Russian freedom and to liberate millions of the stubborn or ill informed Ukrainians as so much an earnest invitation for them to share in Putin's egalitarian reach. After-all destroying the village to save it is not new, but rather a doctrinal quarrel that has raged within Marxist-Leninist circles, and others, since well before and well after the Czar and his family were put to rest. Ultimately this contest of political faith and will comes down to a very simple question: "Can a nation

be free if it oppresses other nations”? Though Vladimir Lenin said, “It cannot,” he also penned: “a lie told often enough becomes the truth.”

Note.

[i] Historically, Ukraine was to Lenin a quagmire of political inconsistency with him at first agreeing to its independence, along with Georgia and Finland, by virtue of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which ended Russia’s involvement in World War I. However, after Germany’s surrender, Lenin ordered the absorption of Ukraine.

Stanley L. Cohen is lawyer and activist in New York City.

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