Chapter Four

Marginals and Former People

Background

The Bolsheviks promised to build a worker's paradise in which a modern industry would produce goods in such abundance that everyone's needs could be satisfied. It would be a privilege and a pleasure for those fortunate enough to live in this worker's El Dorado. But who were these "people" for whom the worker's paradise was being built, with great sacrifice? Who was not to be invited?

According to Bolshevik logic, people were simply the labor needed to build socialism. The use of terms by an alleged proponent of a more humane form of socialism, Nikolai Bukharin is telling. According to him, the task of the socialist revolution is "to create *communist human material* [author's italics] from *capitalist human material.*"[1] In a socialist state with scientific planning, people are not individuals but "material" in the production process. Bukharin's policy prescription was to use "proletarian force ranging from execution to punishment of labor violations" to ensure the proper transformation into communist human material. Those who did not contribute to the building of socialism should not enjoy its benefits.

The Bolsheviks singled out "marginals" and "former people" as those who were not properly transitioning from capitalist to communist human material. This chapter is about these outcasts of Soviet society and how Stalin's Russia dealt with them.

Marginals and Former People: Definitions

In Stalin's Russia, a "marginal" was someone who was not contributing to the building of socialism. Marginals could be slackers, unemployed persons, alcoholics, vandals, petty criminals, rowdies, or even persons without a roof over their heads. In other times and places, most of them would be regarded, probably with sympathy, as the unfortunates of society.

The Bolsheviks viewed marginals as not contributing to society, and, as such, deserving not of society's benefits but of punishment. The concept of "marginals" was broad and included those who came to work late, or not at all, changed jobs without permission, or worse did not hold down a job. They would not show up as volunteers to gather harvests, and they may have been heard to make uncomplimentary comments about the Soviet leadership. The disease of "marginalism," moreover, could spread. In a remarkable lack of faith in the appeal of socialism, Bolshevik leaders believed the adage that "one rotten apple could spoil the bunch." One marginal in a factory might lure honest

Painting by Vladimirov of a former person.

communist "material" to drink, become lazy, or say bad things about Stalin. They would have to be dealt with eventually.

The language of Bolshevism also refers to "former people" (*byvshie liudi*), who, through their offenses against the state, should no longer be regarded as human beings. Among the ranks of "former people" were supporters of the old regime, religious persons, merchants, land owners, members of banned political parties, richer peasants, professors, teachers, and persons who had traveled abroad or who had relatives abroad. The categories of former people were infinitely flexible. When the head of the Leningrad NKVD in 1935 proposed cleansing Leningrad of "former people,"[2] his list included an eclectic mixture: those who "escaped punishment, not leaving the boundaries of Leningrad and living in their former apartments, those who have relations with relatives and acquaintances living abroad, those who organize discussions criticizing Soviet power, those not carrying out any useful activity but living in Leningrad only because they have a passport, and family members of executed spies, diversionists and terrorists, who, as indirect accomplices, escaped punishment."

Punishing Marginals and Former People

Dealing with marginals was far from the minds of the new Bolshevik rulers in 1917. Their immediate concern were the most dangerous former people such as White Guards, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, and intellectuals. By the mid-1930s, they had been dealt with; attention could turn to marginals and former people.[3]

It mattered a great deal to Stalin where his enemies were located. Only some fifteen percent of the population lived in cities and it was important to have the right "human material" to work in industry. The Bolsheviks' own experience showed that control of one city, Petrograd, brought them to power in 1917. Peasants resisting Soviet power in the countryside were less dangerous if located outside the area of "continuous collectivization." The most dangerous peasants were executed, imprisoned, or deported during the dekulakization campaign of 1930–1932. Their removal brought the heartland of agriculture under the control of Soviet power.

The cities were another matter. There were alarming signs that the cities were being overrun by undesirable elements. Following the deportations in the early 1930s, peasants fled to cities along with other undesirables such as religious officials and supporters of the old regime. In less than a decade, the Soviet Union became an urbanized society as people fled the countryside, where work was hard and unrewarding and life was dangerous for anyone harboring anti-Soviet ideas. Moreover, the cities were already full of marginals who were slowing down production and infecting honest workers with their bad habits.

It was the head of the police and deputy head of the OGPU (the predecessor to the NKVD), Genrikh Iagoda, who was charged with the campaign to clear the cities of such undesirables. Under Iagoda's direction, the police had routinely rounded up marginals, maintained card catalogs on them, and kept them under surveillance. After some debate within police circles, it was decided that prostitutes be also kept under surveillance (despite the fact that there were so many of them) because they were valuable informants.

Faced with burgeoning cities, teeming with undesirables, a state decree of December 27, 1932, ordered the OGPU to introduce a "passport system." Henceforth, citizens had to be registered and be issued passports to live in the most important metropolitan and industrial centers. Those not having the right to passports were to leave voluntarily and quickly. If they did not, they were to be arrested for violating the passport regime.

On January 5, 1933, Iagoda's OGPU issued Decree No. 009 "About Chekist measures for introducing the passport system." As the first step toward cleansing the cities. Iagoda ordered the preparation of lists of anti-Soviet elements for removal from the cities. The announcement of passportization caused some 400,000 to flee the cities in the first half of 1933 alone. They did not wish their pasts to be examined by the OGPU or police. Many had purchased forged papers that would not withstand careful scrutiny. Others remained behind, hoping to blend in. By August of 1934, twenty-seven million passports had been issued in the Russian republic alone. Three to eleven percent of applicants were denied passports; most undesirables probably did not even bother to apply.[4]

Undesirables and Their Punishment

Iagoda's OGPU circular No. 96 "About the procedure for the extra-judicial repression of citizens violating the passport law of August 13, 1933" set the rules for cleansing regime cities. As an extraordinary decree, Iagoda's passportization decree set aside normal court proceedings. Instead, violators were to be punished by special OGPU troikas (called passport troikas) that were manned by OGPU representatives with "oversight" from the prosecutor's office. The troikas were instructed to turn over cases in forty-eight hours to avoid congestion. In addition to their regular registration activities, the OGPU and militia raided housing complexes and made organized sweeps of railway stations and open-air markets to capture unregistered persons and those already denied passports.

Iagoda's decree clearly spelled out the punishment to be meted out by the troika:[5]

> The troikas should select measures of extra-judicial repression according to the following examples, allowing for certain variation according to circumstances.

Category of Persons	Measures of Repression
Non-working persons, drifters, and disorganizers of production.	Prohibition to live in the regime city. In the case of a repeated offense—up to three years in a labor colony.
Those deprived of right to vote, kulaks, and de-kulakized persons.	To be sent to labor colonies for up to three years.
Those serving out temporary imprisonment or banishment.	To be sent to special settlements up to three years; in the case of forcible arrest—up to three years in camps.
Criminals and other anti-Soviet elements.	To be sent to camps up to three years.

Those sentenced for violations of the passport regime were sent either to labor colonies, from which they could not leave, or to the Gulag's "corrective-labor camps" where they were incarcerated. Given

the intense need for Gulag labor at the time, many ended up in corrective labor camps irrespective of the sentence.

Passport laws remained in force until the end of the Soviet Union to protect cities from "hostile anti-Soviet elements." The right to live in "regime" cities was granted by the state as a privilege. Residence in a regime city meant better rations and better jobs; those in other locations lived a drab and dreary life at a lower standard of living and with fewer opportunities. Those excluded could only dream of living in a Moscow, Leningrad, or a Kiev. Yet the lure of cities was strong, and people continued to violate passport laws. Between 1937 and 1955, 435,000 were sentenced for violating passport laws.[6]

The final reckoning with marginals and former persons came with the Great Terror in 1937–1938, which either executed or imprisoned in Gulag camps more than a half million persons classified as marginals or former people. In fact, the catalogs of hostile Soviet elements compiled for the passport campaign proved invaluable for the selection of victims of the Great Terror.

The Terminology of Desensitization

The Bolsheviks and Stalin did not use terms like "marginals" or "former persons" idly; the terms were used to convince the population at large that such persons were deserving of punishment and were, in a way, inhuman or non-humans. The Soviet system was grounded on the principle of repression, and it was vital that the population not have sympathy with its victims. The NKVD officers charged with executing hundreds of thousands of victims between 1937–1938, most of whom appeared quite normal, were taught to speak of their victims as "troika material." A dedicated NKVD executioner declared in 1937 that it would be a shame if he could not process all his arrestees for execution because "we are dealing here exclusively with riffraff."[7] The term "former people" also implies someone who is no longer a person, and, as such, is not deserving of pity. Gulag guards were subjected to a drumbeat of propaganda that inmates were saboteurs, spies, assassins, the worst types of criminals, and posed an imminent danger not only to society but also to the guards.

The following document, written by the second-in-command of

the Gulag, makes the point that the cities were fortunate to be rid of this rabble:

> Those déclassé elements sent from Moscow and Leningrad to the work colonies of the OGPU are primarily evil recidivists who have a number of offenses and convictions. Our experience at transport points and new settlements shows that they cannot adapt to the routine of the free labor regime of worker settlements. They do not cooperate and they demoralize others. According to the OGPU representative in Western Siberia [a Comrade Alekseev], there were a series of escape attempts, attacks on convoys, and thefts of ration materials. They prey on weaker persons.[8]

The ending of the memo, however, casts doubt on its true intent. The Gulag official, it appears, is simply reinforcing a decision made higher up to re-sentence "evil recidivists" to the Gulag camps, where labor is in short supply:

> In connection with these facts and considering your decree to send this contingent to the camps, I request your directive about the transfer of their cases to OGPU troikas to process them for camps.

Were they being transferred to the camps because they were truly regarded as evil, or because their labor was needed? We cannot answer this question from the material we have at hand; it remains one of the major research issues surrounding the Gulag.