

Past and Future Gulags, Part II

[Part I](#)

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (November 2019)



Execution of Partisans, Alberto Sughi, 1955

Writers and Dystopia

Let us turn our attention to the dystopian novel's depiction of social-engineering and communism. *We* is a classic example of the futuristic novel—what is also known as a dystopia or anti-utopia—written by the ingenious Yevgeny Zamyatin. With a striking and visionary clarity best reserved for sages,

Zamyatin was able to anticipate the future of the Soviet Union under Stalin. It is from this novel that the British writers Aldous Huxley and George Orwell received their inspiration to write *Brave New World*, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, respectively. Both men admit having read Zamyatin before beginning to write the novels for which they are best known. Zamyatin's *We* is less known today than other famous dystopias because its author lived behind the Iron Curtain.

Zamyatin's work is interesting because, like other free-thinking writers in communist countries, he had to resort to allegory to tell his tales and not bring onto himself the wrath of communist-party officials. Originally a supporter of the October Revolution, the tone and themes of his writing would increasingly demonstrate greater antipathy for censorship. After the publication of *We* in 1927, he was no longer allowed to publish.

We must keep in mind that thinkers who devote themselves to the service of statism do so by offering their body, mind and soul. Zamyatin was accused of being a bourgeois intellectual. The reason for this accusation was because he would not conform his ideas to the official Soviet government. The charge of bourgeois intellectual is a laughable and hypocritical term, given knowledge of the vast support that communism has received from leftist Western intellectuals. Communism owes a great debt of support to the leisure, "commitment," and capital of leftist Western intellectuals, a bourgeoisie that embraces an egotistic form of self-loathing.

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Of the many Soviet poets who were critical of Soviet communism, we should mention Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrey Voznesensky and Nicolay Klyuyev. Soviet philosophers, most whom embraced Marxism early on, with the notable exception of Ayn Rand, we must mention Nicolas Beryaev, Bulgakov and P.B. Struve. These thinkers were attacked by the Soviet apparatchik and labeled as idealists. Idealism, as Lenin explained, was anti-materialism. These thinkers were also accused of being metaphysicians. This philosophical position, as Friedrich Engels understood it, merely means to be anti-dialectic.

We must also cite the tragic fate of Osip Mandelstam, the poet and essayist who was arrested for writing *Stalin epigram*, and died *en route* to one of the many Soviet gulags. He argued that Russia was the only nation that took poetry seriously enough to murder poets: "Only in Russia poetry is respected—it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" His wife, the writer, Nadezhda Mandelstam, chronicled Osip's odyssey in her book *Hope Against Hope*.

Why Gulags will Never Disappear: The Totalitarian Impulse

To truly understand the ethos and pathos of individuals who embrace tyranny, it is necessary to understand how these individuals foment envy and resentment, thus allowing for the creation of a social-political system that systematically pins people against each other: communism and socialism.

One of the most insightful thinkers to shed light on the plight of individuals in communist countries is the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz. Mr. Milosz's *The Captive Mind* is a book that explains in great detail what communist regimes do to writers who oppose communist realism. This is a work that probes the psychology of the totalitarian impulse, much as is the case with Camus' *The Rebel*.

The Captive Mind is similar in its philosophical analysis of the cunning utility of communist control to the work of the Yugoslav writer, Milovan Djilas. In *Conversations with Stalin*, Djilas offers an astute window into the mindset of Stalin, Molotov, Krushchev and Tito, to name just a few communists leaders. Equally impressive in depth and acumen are his two other classic works *The New Class* and his autobiographical depiction of his youth, *Land without Justice*. Djilas ends this work with an indictment of Stalin that is prophetic of the rise of communism:

The forces that swept him forward and that he led, with their absolute ideals, could have no other kind of leader but him, given that level of Russian and world relations, nor could they have been served by different methods. The creator of a closed social system, he was at the same time its instrument and, in changed circumstances and all too late, he became its victim.

Unsurpassed in violence and crime, Stalin was no less the leader and organizer of a certain social system. Today he rates very low, pilloried for his "errors," through which the leaders of that same system intend to redeem both the system and themselves. [\[1\]](#)

In Poland, we also encounter the genius that was Stanislaw Witkiewicz, painter and author of *Insatiability*, a novel that mocks cure-all totalitarian systems of government that achieve the sinister results of social engineering by administering to its citizens the murti-bing pill.

In *Insatiability*, Witkiewicz like Zamyatin, posits the reality of a world where everyone is coerced into happiness. The great selling point of communism, Witkiewicz realized, is the mass distribution of alleged happiness. What was before seen as the realm of God is now egalitarianism forged with the iron hammer of social-engineering.

Witkiewicz wrote two manifestos of aesthetics and writing entitled *New Forms in Painting* and *Introduction to the Theory of Pure Form in the Theatre*. Witkiewicz committed suicide in 1939 due to the encroaching Soviet invasion of Poland, which he foresaw.

In the former Czechoslovakia, after the Soviet invasion of 1968, we witness more of the same with the arrest of Milan Kundera and other writers. Kundera depicted the tragedy of the communist system in his 1967 novel, *The Joke*. He eventually immigrated to France in 1975.

Also, in Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel was a dramatist and philosopher who was frequently arrested, including in 1977, when he formed the dissident group Charter 77, and in 1979, after the Velvet Revolution, when he was incarcerated for four and half years for being a subversive. Mr. Havel was elected

President of the new republic through popular vote—from 1989 to 1992—after the overthrow of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party in 1989. Havel was concerned that postmodern man knows increasingly less and less about the meaning of his own life, and cares even less about it.

In China, the central committee has victimized its citizens, especially writers, since the Communist take-over of 1949. Given that the central preoccupation of the totalitarian impulse is quantification as production, rather than respect for persons, writers, thinkers and artist who do not tow the communist line are ostracized as *persona non grata*: people who block the progress of the state machinery. If these entities cooperate in becoming useful to the communist party, they are rewarded handsomely with material goods and prestige by the ruling elites. This is still the case today.

Gao Xingjian, the 2000 Nobel Prize winner in literature, is a perfect case in point. Mr. Xingjian was awarded the Nobel Prize by the Swedish academy for “the bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity in his writing about the struggle for individuality in mass culture.”[\[2\]](#)

Xingjian, like so many other faceless, nameless writers had to burn his writings during Mao Tse-Tung’s 1966-76 Cultural Revolution in order to remain alive due to their content, which was critical of the regime. About his books, which have not been available in China after his being expelled from the country of his birth, Mr. Xingjian writes,

In China, I could not trust anyone, not even my family. The

atmosphere was so poisoned, people were so brainwashed that even someone from your own family could turn you in.[\[3\]](#)

Communist Cuba has been of particular interest to communist and Western leftist intellectuals because of the lure of what leftist intellectuals consider its exotic dimension. The third world continues to exist as a feel-good source of excitement for bourgeois radical ideologues of all stripes.

Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Western academics have found Cuba's proximity to the United States their rallying point to cheer on Cuban communism. The main interest that Cuba has possessed for writers and bourgeois radicalized academics has been its opposition to the United States. Thus, proving the adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Leftist intellectual hypocrisy has exploited the Cuban people in a manner consistent with the same old-world bigotry that postmodern progressives today deride as racism.

While Cuba was a satellite of the Soviet Union, it was a de facto colony of the new colonization that was Soviet imperialism. These are fine details that radical intellectuals manage to occlude. It is also an undying testament to the religious fervor that is a fundamental aspect of the psyche of radical ideologues.[\[4\]](#)

In Cuba, the role of the intellectual is often played out in secrecy through sheer survival instinct, much the same as in eastern bloc and other Soviet satellite regimes. It is a well-known fact that the Cuban *Dirección General de Inteligencia* (DGI) was set-up and controlled by the Soviets under the

direction of General Viktor Simenov. In Cuba, the Bulgarian *Darjavna Sugurnost* (DS), one of the most ruthless terror organizations in the world, as well as the East German secret police, the infamous *Stasi*, played an instrumental role in training the Cuban secret police. Intellectuals in Cuba are mere puppets of the central committee for the defense of the revolution. In other words, whoever opposes the official communist government line is committed to a life of endless suffering in the form of harassment, unemployment, imprisonment or firing squad.

Reinaldo Arenas, the exiled emerging Cuban writer, came to the United States in 1980 and testified to the international community about human rights violations in Cuba. Arenas (1943-1990) is the writer of *Celestino antes del alba*, (*Celestino Before Dawn*), a novel written in 1967 that is critical of the Castro regime, as well as *El mundo alucinante* (*Hallucinations*) and *El color del verano* (*The Color of Summer*) among other books. Arenas was placed in a re-education camp, later imprisoned and had his works banned on the island. Arenas' novel *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*) was turned into a motion picture.

Another well-publicized case of a Cuban writer who has been victimized by communist tyranny is that of Maria Elena Cruz Varela, a woman who spent many years in prison for her work. Mrs. Varela is the writer of the novel *Dios en las cárceles de Cuba* (*God in Cuban Prisons*). She currently lives in exile.

It is also important to recognize that Cuba has thousands of political dissidents, many who have attempted to practice independent journalism, others who are imprisoned for their desire to establish what is called the Free Library Movement

that enables neighbors to exchange books with each other. These grotesque offenses against humanity are taking place in the twentieth first century—in the age of the Internet.

We ought also to be reminded of the murder of Bulgarian novelist and playwright, Georgi Ivanov Markov, in London in 1978. Markov was a marked man by communist secret agents since his defection in 1969. He was sentenced in absentia for six and a half years for this act, which communist authorities considered an act of treason. Markov was guilty of slandering comrade Zhivkov, the then Bulgarian dictator.

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- [Sentenced to Death](#)
- [My Evolution as a Mammal](#)
- [There's Magic in the Air](#)

As a journalist for the BBC World Service and Radio Free Europe, Markov criticized Bulgarian communism. Unfortunately, his death has passed on to resemble a novel of espionage in its method and technique of intrigue. While waiting for a bus near the edge of the river Thames, Markov was bumped from behind by a man who dropped his umbrella in the process. He then felt a stinging pain on his leg throughout the day. Later that evening the pain became intense and coupled with fever. That night Markov was admitted into a hospital, where he died three days later. Markov had been poisoned. The man carrying the umbrella jabbed him with a tiny pellet of platinum and iridium. [5]

A similar case is that of Ioan Culianu, a professor of History

at the University of Chicago, who was murdered in a restroom stall of that same department in 1991. Culianu's case reminds us of the contempt that communist ideology holds for thought and free thinkers. Culianu, as well as his compatriot, the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, who encouraged Culianu to come to the University of Chicago were proponents of the values fostered by an open society. Culianu, an exiled Romanian was a strong critic of the Ceausescu regime, until a member of that governments' secret police—the Securitate—silenced him with a single shot from a .25 revolver. The murder took place after the official fall of communism.[\[6\]](#)

I conclude by suggesting that conscientious thinkers must be guided by sincere respect for truth and rational discipline. The open society can guide the existence of its most receptive citizens into lives of freedom, dignity and the ability to cultivate their moral worth as persons. The exercise of virtue serves to set a good example for citizens of the open society. Virtue empowers people into leading meaningful lives. The suppression of the aforementioned values makes the reality of future gulags an ever-present threat. It is concern for the welfare of the individual that makes the best leaders, not radical ideology. Let us keep in mind that politics, as Aristotle believed, is the art of governing well.[\[7\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Milovan Djilas, *Conversation with Stalin*. Translated by Michael B. Petrovich. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1963), 191.

[\[2\]](#) See: M. August. *Associated Press*. October 13, 2000.

[\[3\]](#) *Associated Press*.

[\[4\]](#) James Monahan and Kenneth O. Gilmore, *The Great Deception: The Inside Story of How the*

Kremlin Took Over Cuba. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1963).

[5] *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin. (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Andrew explains: "The KGB eventually became embroiled in DS special political actions. Early in 1978 General Dimitar Stoyanov, Bulgarian interior minister and head of the DS, appealed to the Centre for help in liquidating Georgi Markov, then living in London and accused of 'slandering Comrade Zhivko' in his many radio broadcasts. The request was considered at a meeting chaired by Andropov and attended by Kryuchkov, Vice Admiral Mikhail Usatov (Kryuchkov's deputy Oleg Kalugin, head of FCD counterintelligence). Though reluctant to take the risks involved in helping the Bulgarians, Andropov eventually accepted Kryuchkov's argument that to refuse would be an unacceptable slight of Zhivkov. "But," he insisted, "there is to be no direct participation on our part. Give the Bulgarians whatever they need, show them how to use it and send someone to Sofia to train their people. But that's all. The Centre made available to the DS the resources of its top-secret poisons laboratory, the successor to the Kamera of the Stalinist era, attached to the OUT (Operational Technical) Directorate and under the direct control of the KGB chairman. Sergei Mikhailovich Golubev, head of FCD security and a poison specialist, was put in charge of liaison with the Bulgarians. The murder weapon eventually chosen was concealed in an American umbrella, one of a number purchased at Golubev's request by the Washington residency in order to disguise the KGB connection if the weapon was ever discovered. The tip was converted by OUT technicians into a silenced gun capable of firing a tiny pellet containing a lethal dose of ricin, a highly toxic poison made from castor-oil seeds. On September 7, 1978, while Markov was waiting at a bus stop on Waterloo Bridge, he felt a sudden sting in his right thigh. Turning instinctively, he saw a man behind him who had dropped his umbrella. The stranger apologized, picked up his umbrella and got into a taxi waiting nearby. Though Markov felt no immediate ill effects, he became seriously ill next day and died in hospital on September 11. During the autopsy a tiny pellet was recovered from Markov's thigh, but the ricin, as Golubev had calculated, had decomposed." 388-389.

[6] Ted Anton, *Eros, Magic, and the Murder of Professor Culianu*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

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