Beyond Goodness

By Theodore Dalrymple

Recently, I read a small masterpiece of Soviet literature (or at least a masterpiece of literature written in the Soviet Period, which is perhaps not quite the same thing). It was *Sofia Petrovna* by Lydia Chukovskaya, written from 1937 to 1940, its survival a little miracle in itself.

Chukovskaya was born in St. Petersburg and lived in Leningrad but was evacuated just before the siege by the invading Germans. She had written *Sofia Petrovna* by hand in a school exercise book, but it would obviously have been dangerous to take so anti-Soviet a manuscript with her into exile, so she entrusted it to a friend who remained in Leningrad. He, however, died of starvation, but the day before he died, he entrusted it to someone else who survived along with the manuscript, who returned it to Chukovskaya when she returned.

That was not the end of the book's adventures. Clearly, it could not be published in Stalin's time. The slow thaw after 1956 made its publication almost possible, and in 1963 everything was ready, including the design of the book, but at the last minute, permission was withdrawn. All regimes need a degree of legitimacy, and Chukovskaya's book, in less than 200 pages, demonstrates beyond all possible argument that the Soviet regime was *institutionally* (to use a word much in vogue), and irredeemably, criminal.

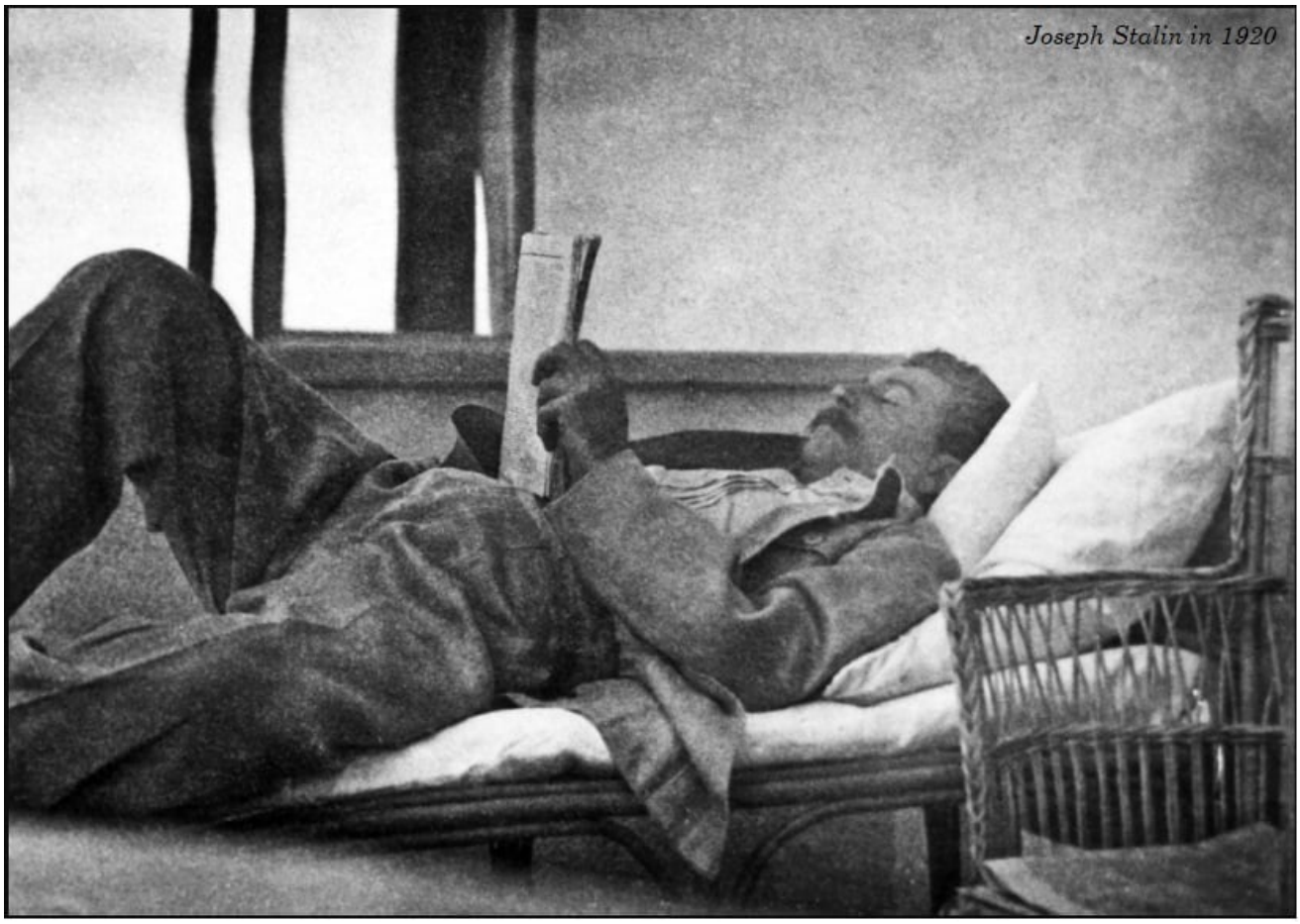
Finally, the text was smuggled out and published in the Russian émigré press in 1966, appearing in English translation a year later. It was not published in Russia until 1988, during the Gorbachev years.

No book more concisely recounts the destruction of the human personality and character by a system of ideological conformity, denunciation both public and private, dismissal

from work on grounds of social origins or opinion, and arbitrary arrest.

You might ask, why read about a time and a political system that is in the past, in a country that is very alien to us?

I think it is less past and less alien than we might like to think. Of course, we are far from the worst manifestations of what Chukovskaya so skillfully portrayed (from her own direct experience), and one must not exaggerate: No one is being hauled off to the gulag. But still the tendency to intellectual conformity with its concomitant—fear—exists, at least in university circles and wherever intellectuals gather. There is no inevitability about the progression to full dictatorship, and I do not think it will happen; but we should remember that Bolshevism was, after all, the work of intellectuals.


Joseph Stalin in 1920

Even Stalin was an intellectual, at least by the standards of modern politicians. He was a poet in Georgian, and his poems were anthologized before

he was notable for anything else. He read far more widely, and with much closer attention, than does any politician today, and he was also interested in music.

It so happens that among my records is one of Maria Yudina, the great Soviet pianist (born in 1899), playing a couple of Mozart piano concertos, including number 23, the concerto that Stalin supposedly demanded that Yudina perform for him at three in the morning, together with an orchestra, having heard her perform it over the radio. The story is an excellent one and could hardly be bettered as illustrating the utter whimsicality of absolute power, but unfortunately it seems not to be true, having been invented and put about by Shostakovich. But Stalin did like Mozart.

The recording of Yudina dates from 1947, at the height of another period of repression (victory in the war did nothing to reduce Stalin's thirst for absolute power, the alternative for him presumably being death). The orchestra was the USSR Radio Symphony Orchestra. One tends to forget that even in the worst of periods, or perhaps especially in them, cultivated people try to keep civilization alive, as an act of faith that, in spite of everything, life is worth living and man is not irredeemably a swine. To play and to listen to Mozart while there are hundreds of thousands of one's fellow citizens languishing, starving, suffering, and dying in the most abominable conditions might seem like self-indulgence but actually is an act of resistance against barbarism.

Oddly enough, it was Mozart in particular that Myra Hess played in the National Gallery in London during the war, in concerts designed to reassure the population that civilization would triumph over barbarism in the end. Perhaps it was particularly significant that the music played was composed by a supreme artist of a then-enemy nation.

However, I once heard a recording of a superb live performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* in Berlin in 1943. This was the year

of Stalingrad and the Final Solution. One hears in the recording the occasional stifled cough of the audience, a slight shuffling sound. No doubt the audience was deeply moved by the music, was subject to the finest, most exquisite feelings. But what did it know of what was going on at the same time? Surely quite a lot. It is quite likely, too, that some of the worst of the regime were present, and that they had all the exquisitely tender feelings that Schubert can inspire.

This has long been an argument against the value of high culture, and I confess that I find it troubling. If listening to Schubert doesn't make us better people, if it is perfectly compatible, in fact, with the greatest brutality, what use is Schubert by comparison with, say, a penny whistle?

This is to assume that the value of high culture depends on its capacity to make us better people. But goodness is only one of the three traditional aims of life: truth, beauty, and goodness. To reject Schubert on the grounds that some very wicked people thrilled to him is to deny that beauty is also an end in itself. It is true that a life lived only for beauty might be a bad one, perfectly selfish, but a life lived only for goodness would be a meager one, lacking at least one essential element.

When the young Savonarolas of our universities pull down statues because—surprise, surprise—those to whom they were erected turn out not to have been saints according to our current notions of sanctity, they forget, if they ever knew or had been taught, that life has more than one end.

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