

The Failure of the Communist God

by Michael Curtis



In a recent friendly telephone conversation, Russian President Vladimir Putin may well have exclaimed to U.S. President Donald Trump, "Darn that dream I dream each night, but it haunts me and it won't come true." It would be a timely commentary on present day Russia. On this 100th anniversary of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, it is useful to assess the existence and the failure of the dreams of 20th century Russian Bolsheviks with their aspirations for a new society and a world Communist revolution, and the consequent disillusionment of the faithful, and their sad fate, resulting from the disastrous reality of the Soviet regime led by Josef Stalin.

Compelling narratives have been related concerning the drama and tragedy of the Old Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union in

powerful and compelling works by Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Victor Kravchenko, among others. Now, the narrative is recounted in a massive 1,100 page, brilliant and extraordinary new book *The House of Government*, recently published by Princeton University Press, written by Yuri Slezkine, a Russian born American professor of history at Berkeley.

The House of Government (H o G) was the home for a decade, 1931-1941, of some members of the Russian Bolshevik elite whose chronicle of their life and interactions is told, partly in their own words, from their youth through their conversion to Communist radicalism to their sad fate. Residents in H o G experienced painful sacrifices, actions of loyalty and betrayal, the turmoil as people were arrested and executed, carefully scripted fake confessions of guilt, erasing of photos, documents, and letters of those declared to be "enemies," communication in countless shades of grey, inner torments, ritual silence at times, the apostasy of the children of the Revolution, and the end of Bolshevism as a millenarian faith.

The author had written a previous book, *The Jewish Century*, making striking comparisons of different cultures by using Greek mythology. Calling Jews a Mercurian people who created concepts and artifacts, as opposed to an Apollonian people, he sees Jews as the embodiment of modernity. They adhere to law and have a penchant for abstract thought.

Slezkine asked an interesting question: how to explain the puzzle that Jews, people of ideas, trade, and movement, who were prominent in the development of capitalism were also prominent in anti-capitalist movements, especially the Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917?

Part of the explanation appears in the new book, which indicates that Jewish poets, prophets, and propagandists dominated the cultural contingent in the House of Government,

and that Jews were disproportionally prominent in delegates to the First All-Russian Congress, in members of the Bolshevik Central Committee, and in officials in the Red Army.

The new book, subtitled a *Saga of the Russian Revolution*, a historical epic with hundreds of characters, emerges from diaries, letters, books read, memoirs of the hopes, fears and confessions of the inhabitants of the House of Government, a unique apartment house built in a low-lying area, what was a reclaimed swamp, in the center of Moscow on the banks of the Moskva river and opposite to the Kremlin.

It housed some of the chief builders of the "new world," powerful members of the Soviet Union elite, people eminent in politics, military, intelligentsia, and even officials of Gulags and the executioner Lyova Fedotov. It tells the sad poignant story of the personal life of residents, often one of pathos, and provides detailed information on the inhabitants and on the shifting personal relations among them.

But the story of the House also epitomizes the rise, decline, and fall of optimistic expectations of a new ideal society, a better life, and paradise on earth, and depicts the venomous Stalinist terror in the decade from 1931 through the Great Purge beginning in 1936-7 until 1941 during which 680,000 were murdered by the regime. About a third of the residents of the House disappeared or were killed by the rulers, during the ongoing purges. The House in its original form virtually came to the end with the German invasion of Moscow in October 1941. The House was no longer a home for Old Bolsheviks.

The 2,700 residents of the House lived in a privileged place, which differed from the normal Russian life in which families lived in one room apartments and shared bathroom, toilet, and kitchen. In contrast, in the H o G, a family got a whole furnished apartment to itself. The House, since renamed the House on the Embankment, contained 505 furnished apartments with facilities for the privileged families in what was then

the largest residential building in Europe.

Highly luxurious for its time, indeed the complex is compared by Slezkine to the Dakota in New York City, it had its own public spaces including a library, tennis court, bank, laundry, gyms, department store, clinic, shooting range, and theaters. It was a fortress and a dormitory. It was a place where revolutionaries came home and the revolution came to die.

Among the diverse group of inhabitants in the House were members of the government, Red Army military leaders, writers, business executives, Stakhanovites, film producers, and foreign communists. Among the more well known personalities were Nikolai Bukharin, Nikita Khrushchev, Yuri Trifonov, Karl Radek, and Mikhail Koltsov who became a prototype for a character in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Among the intellectuals there, by far the largest group were Jews. Many residents became victims of the terror, but some such as Andrei Sverdlov and members of the secret police, NKVD, were among the perpetrators of that terror.

Slezkine is an erudite intellectual historian and points out that for the Bolsheviks, reading the treasures of world literature was a crucial part of their experience, and that of their children. Themes from that literature, which he discusses, are part of the story of the House. In particular, one work, Goethe's *Faust* was repeatedly invoked. Slezkine therefore draws on literature, especially that used by the Bolsheviks themselves, to understand the behavior and thoughts of the residents of the House.

The crux of the book is Slezkine's evaluation of the Bolshevik faith in the context of a discussion of the nature of religion and the religious groups and millenarian movements associated with them. Slezkine asserts that Karl Marx, like Jesus, succeeded in translating a tribal prophecy (meaning Judaism) into a language of universalism, one of anti-capitalism and

aspiration for the resurrection of humankind.

Slezkine sees Bolshevism as a religion which, like other religions, experienced failed prophecies, disappointment, postponements, and at the end sacrifices. In spite of the anticipated "reign of the saints," Bolsheviks could not transform the country but rather their belief was transformed by the rulers into a regime conspicuous by the great purges and high profile victims of Stalin as shown by the unhappy experience of many of the residents of the House of Government.

It is interesting to compare Slezkine's view of Bolshevism and the Soviet regime with that of President Putin, expressed in speeches and an interview in April 2016. In June 2012 Putin said that Bolshevism in 1917 betrayed Russian national interest and wished to see Russia defeated in World War I, the war with Germany. In the interview Putin confesses he is fond of Communist ideas but is critical of Lenin, and admits the Soviet Union began with repression. Putin is more a Russian nationalist, celebrating patriotism not ideology.

For Putin, once a believer, the official story of the Soviet Union is little more than a beautiful and harmful fairy tale, the implementation of which or the attempt to put it in practice caused great damage to his country. Like Slezkine, Putin appears to believe that the basic views of Communist ideology were taken from major religious groups. Building the communism codex is "the same as looking into the Bible or Quran."

Why did Bolshevism die? The House of Government never became a Russian national home and Soviet Communism became homeless, eventually becoming a ghost. Ideological single mindedness could not compete with the humanism of post war culture. The Bolshevik Reformation, confessions, denunciations, excommunications, self-criticism was not popular.

Moreover, it could not reproduce itself at home. Slezkine argues that revolutions, like all millenarian experiments, are devoured by the children. Bolshevism is no different. It failed to transform the family or transmit the true faith. Russian children, venerated the memory of their dead parents. Yet, though loyal to the country they had no millenarian faith as had their parents.

Like other millenarian movements, Christianity and Islam, Bolshevism started out as a men's movement. Women represented a very small proportion of the original sect members and of the House. But unlike those other movements Bolshevism was a one generation phenomenon. Children venerated the memory of their fathers, but no longer shared their faith.

The prophets vanished, the desired revolution never came, and life in the Swamp resumed.