

To the Editor:

I was intrigued by the “revisionist exchange” in the *Slavic Review* (vol. 67, no. 3). It brought to mind Vladimir Lenin’s view of the Russian empire as a “prison-house of nations” (*tiur'ma narodov*) and, by analogy, the people’s prison house that was the Soviet Union. In part, this was how I experienced it, living there in my childhood and youth (1946–1971). Like all analogies, this one is limited, but it helps to clarify the issues at stake as well as provide a perspective from one who studies Soviet Russia through the prism of its literary and cultural history.

Every prison guard knows that to maintain order and to avoid a prison riot, he has to take into account some of the prisoners’ human needs: allow them to cohere as a community in which inmates establish their own hierarchies, negotiate their interests without the jailer’s intervention, and, among other things, advance themselves by sometimes resisting and sometimes cooperating with the prison authorities. But nobody would argue that a prison is not *really* a prison because the inmate population has a community of its own, has rules and regulations of its own, dishes out its own punishments and rewards, instills loyalties, and has members who enjoy all kinds of entertainment.

According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, the advocates of the “totalitarian” paradigm saw nothing but the prison walls and the shenanigans of the jailor and his minions (who *these simplicateurs terribles* were — she never says; surely, not the author of *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*). By contrast, the advocates of “history from below,” including herself, saw nothing but the society of inmates busy maximizing their life’s chances by a variety of means, including promotions (*vydvizhenie*) by the jailors upstairs. And those, in turn, were constrained in their *governance* practices by the preferences, goals, and habits of the prison population (cf. Merle Fainsod’s original *How Russia Is Ruled* [1953] with *How the Soviet Union Is Governed* [1979], revised and updated by Jerry F. Hough after Fainsod’s death in 1972).

The problem with the practitioners of the “totalitarian” paradigm was that they tended to ignore the social dynamic aspect of prison governance. But of course, the “revisionists” had a bigger problem: they left the prison out of the picture and concentrated on the inmate community, ignoring why these people were where they were in the first place.

It would be easy to dismiss my analogy qua analogy, especially coming as it does from a literary, not a social or political, historian. But facts are, as Lenin said somewhere, stubborn things. The Soviet regime did restrict foreign travel and access to information essentially from its very inception; since the Stalin revolution, the country was in a lockdown (only a tiny segment of the party-state elite could travel abroad), a free flow of information ceased, censorship eviscerated everything that did not conform to the party line, and the repressive apparatus of the state, along with mass executions and penal servitude, ballooned on a historically unprecedented scale. Without invoking Hannah Arendt, these policies alone make the analogy between the Soviet Union and prison legitimate (another, more familiar, analogy is barracks socialism).

Could life be fun under those conditions? Yes, I say, recalling with gusto the good times I had growing up in the Soviet Union. Could some of the former inmates who spent their youth in this prison (*pace* Osokina’s parents) feel nostalgic for it? Yes, apparently. Many others, of course, did not (Varlam Shalamov, Lidiia Ginzburg, Primo Levi), but a historian of Osokina’s generation, whether she studies Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany, can have her pick—she can write a history of the wholesomeness of her loving parents, who she believes have not been scarred by their “prison” experience, or a history of those who had their life’s chances severely diminished or crushed.

Why not try to do both? Mikhail Zoshchenko did. Writing in 1930, he unwittingly anticipated the problems of American historiography of the Soviet Union. In one of the introductory chapters of his *Mishel Siniagin* he imagines the man of the future, “some Andreus or Theodorus or other,” who finds the life of “ordinary people” circa 1930, with its privations and brutality, utterly incomprehensible. But “life went on,” Zoshchenko pleads with his distant reader, “as life does. There was love, and jealousy, and childbearing, and all kinds of grand maternal emotions, and all kinds of comparable emotional experiences. We, too, went with our girls to the movies. We, too, rowed with them in a rowboat. And sang to the guitar. And ate waffles with whipped cream. And wore trendy striped socks. And danced the foxtrot to the piano at home” (Translation is mine).

“Every epoch has its own psychology,” Zoshchenko the narrator, concludes philosophically. “And in every epoch, it was equally easy or, rather, equally hard to live.” But just when you thought he was speaking for the revisionist side, Zoshchenko reversed gears. Still tongue-in-cheek and using Aesopian language, he turned to the other side of the story: the bloodletting that was then going on in the countryside. “Take, for example, some truly troubled century,” he began by first covering his tracks, “say, the sixteenth. When we look at it from afar, it just seems unthinkable. In those days, people fought duels almost on a daily basis. Guests were thrown off battlements. And there was nothing to it. All was in the nature of things . . .”

The sixteenth century, huh? Historians of the Soviet Union, past and future, take it from Zoshchenko: it is possible to walk and chew gum at the same time.

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Professors Fitzpatrick, Daniels, Getty, Osokina, and Hellbeck choose not to respond, apart from the following:

Professor Fitzpatrick responds to Professor Freidin:

It is a good idea of Freidin's to write a social history of the Stalin period combining the awful and the ordinary. Lynne Viola's *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (2007) is perhaps too much focused on the awful to meet his requirements exactly, but my *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (1999) should fit the bill. That is in the unlikely event that he ever gets around to reading the work he criticizes.

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