

# Stalin

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Official fear, the foundation of the secular power and the legitimation of its disciplinary requirements is, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, formed after the pattern of cosmic fear that plays a similar role in relation to ecclesiastic powers. Powers-that-be present themselves as the shield and insurance against the dangers arising from uncertain future and existential insecurity. Having retreated from protection against uncertainty and insecurity generated by the markets, state powers refocus currently their claim to the subjects' obedience on issues of personal safety.

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One of the patients in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* is a local party dignitary who starts every day reading attentively the editorial of *Pravda*. He awaits an operation, and his chance of survival is in the balance—and yet each day and until the next issue of *Pravda* with a new editorial is delivered to the ward he has no reason to worry; he knows exactly what to do, what to say and how to say it, and on what topics to keep silent. In matters most important, in choices that truly count, he has the comfort of certainty: He cannot err.

*Pravda* editorials may change their tune from one day to another. Names and tasks only yesterday on everybody's lips may have become unmentionable overnight. Deeds right and proper a day before may be wrong and abominable today, whereas acts yesterday unthinkable may be obligatory now. But there is no moment when the difference between right and wrong, the obligatory and the prohibited, is unclear. If only you listen and follow what you've heard, you cannot make a mistake. Because, as Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out, "to understand" means to know how to go on—you are safe, protected against misunderstanding. And your security is in the Party and Stalin, its leader (it is in his name, surely, that *Pravda* editorials speak). Telling you each day what to do, Stalin takes responsibility off your shoulders by settling for you the worrisome task of understanding. He is, indeed, *omniscient*; not that he knows everything that there is to know but that he tells you everything that you need and should know. And he has the power of drawing the boundary between truth and error.

In Tchiaureli's film *The Oath*, the central character—Russian Mother, the epitome of the whole gallantly fighting, hard-working, and always Stalin-loving and loved-by-Stalin Russian nation, visits Stalin one day and asks him to end the war: Russian people suffered so much, she says, they bore such horrible sacrifices, so many wives lost their husbands, so many children lost their fathers—there must be an end to all that pain . . . Stalin answers, yes, Mother, the time has arrived to end the war. And he ends the war.

Stalin is not just omniscient—he is also *omnipotent*. If he wants to end the war, he does. If he does not do what you would wish him or even asked him to do, it is not for the lack of power or the know-how to oblige but because there must have been some important reason to postpone the action or refrain from it altogether (he sets the boundary between right and wrong, remember!). You could be sure that were doing it a good idea, it would be done. Yourself, you may be inept to spot, list, and calculate all the pros and cons of the matter, but Stalin protects you against the terrible consequences of your ignorance. And so it does not matter in the end that the meaning of what is going on and its logic escapes you. What may look to you as a heap of uncoordinated events, accidents, random happenings—has logic, a design, a plan, a consistency. The fact that you cannot see that consistency with your own eyes is one more proof (perhaps the sole proof you need) just how crucial to your security is the perspicacity of Stalin and how much you owe to his wisdom and his willingness to share its fruits with you.

Between themselves, the two stories go a long way toward revealing the secret of Stalin's power over minds and hearts of his subjects. But not far enough . . .

The big question not only unanswered but unasked is why the subjects' need of reassurance was so overwhelming as to prompt them to sacrifice their minds for its sake and fill their hearts with gratitude for their sacrifice to have been accepted? For certainty to become the supreme need, desire, and dream, it must first have been *missing*. Lost or stolen.

Unravelling the mystery of the earthly human power, Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the greatest Russian philosophers of the past century, began from the description of “cosmic fear”—the human, all-too-human, emotion aroused by unearthly, inhuman magnificence of the universe; the kind of fear that precedes man-made power and serves it as the foundation, prototype, and inspiration<sup>1</sup>. Cosmic fear is, in Bakhtin's words, the trepidation felt

In the face of the immeasurably great and immeasurably powerful: in the face of the starry heavens, the material mass of the mountains, the sea, and the fear of cosmic upheavals and elemental disasters. . . . The cosmic fear [is] fundamentally not mystical in the strict sense (being a fear in the face of the materially great and the materially indefinable power).

At the core of the cosmic fear lies, let us note, the nonentity of the frightened, wan, and transient being faced with the enormity of the everlasting universe; the sheer weakness, incapacity to resist, *vulnerability* of the frail and soft human body that the sight of the “starry heavens” or “the material mass of the mountains” reveals; but also the realization that it is not in human power to grasp, comprehend, mentally assimilate that awesome might that manifests itself in the sheer grandiosity of the universe. That universe escapes all understanding. Its intentions are unknown, its next steps are unpredictable. If there is a preconceived plan or logic in its action, it certainly escapes human ability to comprehend. And so the cosmic fear is also the horror of the unknown: the terror of *uncertainty*.

Vulnerability and uncertainty are the two qualities of human condition out of which the “official fear” is molded: fear of *human* power, of man-made and man-held power. Such “official fear” is construed after the pattern of the inhuman power reflected by (or, rather, emanating from) the cosmic fear.

Bakhtin suggested that cosmic fear is used by all religious systems. The image of God, the supreme ruler of the universe and its inhabitants, is molded out of the familiar emotion of fear of vulnerability and trembling in the face of impenetrable and irreparable uncertainty. But let us note that when remolded by a religious doctrine, the pristine, primeval cosmic fear undergoes a fateful transformation.

In its original, spontaneously born form it is a fear of an *anonymous* and *numb* force. The universe frightens, but does not speak. It demands nothing. It gives no instructions how to proceed. It could not care less what the frightened, vulnerable humans would do or would refrain from doing. There is no point in talking to the starry heaven, mountains, or sea. They would not hear, and they would not listen if they heard, let alone answer. There is no point in asking their forgiveness or favors. They would not care. Besides, despite all their tremendous might, they could not abide by the penitents’ wishes even if they cared; they lack not just eyes, ears, minds, and hearts, but also the ability to choose and the power of discretion and so, also, the ability to act on their will and to accelerate or slow down, arrest, or reverse what would have happened anyway. Their moves are inscrutable to human weaklings, but also to themselves. They are, as the biblical God at the beginning of his conversation with Moses, “what they are”—full stop.

“I am that I am” were the first words uttered by the superhuman source of the cosmic fear in that memorable encounter on the top of Mount Sinai. Once the words had been spoken, just *because* there were words spoken, that superhuman source ceased to be anonymous, even if it stayed beyond human control and comprehension. Nothing changed in the vulnerability and uncertainty of terrified humans—but something terribly important happened to the source of the cosmic fear. It acquired control over its own conduct. It could be benign or cruel, could reward or punish. It could now make demands and render its con-

duct dependent on whether the demands were obeyed or not. Not only could it speak, but it could be spoken to, humored, or angered.

And so, curiously, that wondrous transformation of the Universe into God reforged frightened beings into slaves of Divine commands but was also the act of an oblique human empowerment. From now on, humans had to be docile, submissive, and compliant—but they could also, at least in principle, do something to make sure that awesome catastrophes they feared would pass them by. . . . Now they could gain nights free of nightmares in exchange for days filled with acquiescence.

“There were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount . . . and the whole mount quaked greatly” “so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.” But among all that bloodcurdling and mind-boggling turmoil and racket, the voice of God had been heard: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, than ye shall be a particular treasure to me above all people.” “And all the people answered together, and said, all that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exod. 19: 8). Obviously pleased with their oath of unswerving obedience, God promised the people to lead them “onto a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 33: 3).

One can see that if it is meant to be, as Bakhtin suggested, a story of the cosmic fear recycled into the “official” one, the story so far is either unsatisfactory or incomplete. It tells us that people came to be restrained in whatever they did from now on by the code of law (it has been spelled out in meticulous detail once they signed a blank check promising to obey God’s wishes whatever those wishes might be). But it tells us as well that God—now the source of the official fear—would be from now on similarly bound by his people’s obedience. God had acquired will and discretion only to surrender them again! By the simple expedient of being docile, people could oblige God to be benevolent. People acquired thereby a patented medicine against vulnerability and got rid of the spectre of uncertainty. Providing they observed the Law to the letter, they would be neither vulnerable nor tormented by uncertainty. But without vulnerability and uncertainty, there would be no fear; and without fear, no power. . . .

And so to account for the origins of an official power that matches the awesome might of the cosmic pattern, the Exodus story must be complemented. And it was—by the Book of Job. The book that made the signing of the Mount Sinai covenant a one-sided affair, amenable to a unilateral cancellation.

For the denizens of a modern state conceived as a *Rechtstaat*, the story of Job is all but incomprehensible; it went against the grain of what they had been trained to believe the harmony and the logic of life was about. To philosophers, the story of Job was a continuous and incurable headache; it dashed their hopes to discover, or to instill, logic and harmony in the chaotic flow of events called “history.” Generations of theologians broke their teeth trying in vain to bite at its mystery: Like the rest of modern men and women (and everyone who memorized the message of the Book of Exodus) they have been taught to seek a rule

and a norm, but the message of the book was that there is no rule and no norm; more exactly, no rule or norm that the supreme power is bound by. The Book of Job anticipates the later Carl Schmitt's blunt verdict that "the sovereign is who has the power of exemption."

Carl Schmitt, arguably the most clear-headed, illusion-free anatomist of the modern state, avers, "He who determines a value, *eo ipso* always fixes a nonvalue. The sense of this determination of a nonvalue is the annihilation of the nonvalue."<sup>2</sup> Determining the value draws the limits of the normal, the ordinary, the orderly. Nonvalue is an exception that marks this boundary.

*The exception is that which cannot be subsumed; it defies general codification, but it simultaneously reveals a specifically juridical formal element: the decision in absolute purity. . . . There is no rule that is applicable to chaos. Order must be established for juridical order to make sense. A regular situation must be created, and sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective. . . . The exception does not only confirm the rule; the rule as such lives off the exception alone.*<sup>3</sup> (italics added)

Giorgio Agamben, brilliant Italian philosopher, comments,

*The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it* [italics added]. The state of exception is thus not the chaos that preceded order but rather the situation that results from its suspension. . . . In this sense, the exception is truly, according to its etymological root, *taken outside (ex-capere)*, and not simply excluded.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, there is no contradiction between establishing a rule and making an exception. Without power to exempt from the rule, there would be no power to make rules. . . .

All this is admittedly confusing, this defies commonsensical logic, yet this is the truth of power indispensable to reckon with in any attempt to comprehend its works. *Without the Book of Job, the Book of Exodus would fail to lay foundations for God's omnipotence and Israel's obedience.*

What the Book of Job proclaims is that God owes its worshippers nothing—certainly not the account of His actions. God's omnipotence includes the power of caprice and whim, power to make miracles, and to ignore the logic of necessity the lesser beings have no choice but to obey. God may strike at will, and if He refrains from striking it is only because this is His (good, benign, benevolent, loving) will. The idea that humans may control God's action by whatever means, including the meek and faithful following of His commands sticking to the letter of the Divine Law, is a blasphemy.

*Unlike* the numb universe that He replaced, God speaks and gives commands. He also finds out whether the commands have been obeyed and punishes the obstreperous. He is *not indifferent* to what human weaklings think and do. But *like* the numb universe He replaced, he is *not bound* by what humans

think or do. He can *make exceptions*—and the logics of consistency or universality are not exempt from such Divine prerogative. Power to exempt founds simultaneously God's absolute power and the human's continuing, incurable fear. Thanks to that power of exemption, humans are, as they were in the pre-Law times, vulnerable and uncertain.

If this is what human power is about (and it is), and if this is how power extracts the lodes of discipline on which it relies (and it does), then the *production of official fear* is the key to the power's effectiveness. Cosmic fear may need no human mediators; official fear, like all other artifices, cannot do without them. Official fear can be only *contrived*. Earthly powers do not come to the rescue of humans already gripped by fear—though they try everything possible, and more, to convince their subjects that this indeed is the case. Earthly powers, much like the novelties of consumer markets, must create their own demand. For their grip to hold, their objects must be *made*, and *kept*, vulnerable and insecure.

Stalin was the master supreme of the mass production of vulnerability and insecurity and so, in consequence, of the official fear. This is why the most terrifying trait of Stalin's terror, its *randomness*, was also its most seminal.

Long before he lent his ear to Mother's petition and ended the war, Stalin demonstrated repeatedly his power to launch purges and witch hunts and to stop or suspend them as abruptly and inexplicably as they had been started. There was no telling which activity will be next to be declared a witchcraft, and because blows fell at random and the material proof of connection with the currently hunted variety of witchcraft was a frowned-upon luxury, there was no telling either whether there was any intelligible link between human deeds and their consequences (as expressed by the Soviet popular wit in the story of a hare running for shelter when hearing that camels are being arrested: They'd arrest you first and then try to prove that you are not a camel). Indeed, nowhere else and at no other time was the credibility of the Calvinist image of a Supreme Being, who distributes grace and condemnation by his own inscrutable choice regardless of his targets' conduct and suffers no appeal nor petitioning against His verdicts, so profusely and convincingly demonstrated.

When everyone and at all times is vulnerable and uncertain what the next morning may bring, *it is the survival and safety, not a sudden catastrophe, that appears to be an exception*, indeed, a miracle that defies the ordinary human's comprehension and requires a superhuman foresight, wisdom, and acting powers to be performed. On a scale seldom matched elsewhere, Stalin practiced the sovereign power of exemption from treatment owed by right to legal subjects or, indeed, owed to humans for being human. But he managed as well to reverse the appearances: It was the *avoidance* of the randomly distributed blows that appeared to be an exemption, an exceptional gift, a show of grace. For the favors one receives, one should be grateful. And one was.

Human vulnerability and uncertainty is the foundation of all political power. In the Stalinist variety of totalitarian power, that in the absence of market-produced randomness of human condition such vulnerability and uncertainty had to be produced and reproduced by the political power itself. That random terror was unleashed on a massive scale at a time when the last residues of New Economic Policy were folded up might have been more than a sheer coincidence.

In an average modern society vulnerability and insecurity of existence and the need to pursue life purposes under conditions of acute and unredeemable uncertainty are assured by the exposure of life pursuit to the market forces. Except for creating and protecting legal conditions of market freedoms, political power has no need to interfere. In demanding the subjects' discipline and law observance, it may rest its legitimacy on the promise to mitigate the extent of the already existing vulnerability and uncertainty of its citizens: to limit harms and damages perpetrated by the free play of market forces, to shield the vulnerable against excessively painful blows, and to insure the uncertain against the risks a free competition necessarily entails. Such legitimation found its ultimate expression in the self-definition of the modern form of government as a "welfare state."

That formula of political power is presently receding into the past. Welfare state institutions are progressively dismantled and phased out, whereas restraints imposed previously on business activities and free play of market competition and on its consequences are removed. The protective functions of the state are tapered to embrace a small minority of unemployable and invalid, though even that minority tends to be reclassified from the issue of social care into the issue of law and order; incapacity to participate in the market game tends to be increasingly criminalized. The state washes its hands of the vulnerability and uncertainty arising from the logic (or illogicality) of free market, now redefined as a private affair, a matter for the individuals to deal and cope with by the resources in their private possession. As Ulrich Beck put it—individuals are now expected to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions.<sup>5</sup>

These new trends have a side effect: They sap the foundations on which the state power, claiming a crucial role in fighting vulnerability and uncertainty haunting its subjects, increasingly rested in modern times. The widely noted growth of political apathy, loss of political interests and commitments ("No more salvation by society," as Peter Drucker famously put it) and massive retreat of population from the participation in the institutionalized politics all testify to the crumbling of the established foundations of state power.

Having rescinded its previous programmatic interference with market-produced insecurity and having on the contrary proclaimed the perpetuation and intensification of that insecurity to be the mission of all political power caring for the well-being of its subjects, contemporary state may seek other, noneconomic varieties of vulnerability and uncertainty on which to rest its

legitimacy. That alternative seems to be located, most spectacularly by the U.S. administration, in the issue of personal safety: threats and fears to human bodies, possessions, and habitats arising from criminal activities, antisocial conduct of the “underclass,” and, most recently, global terrorism. Unlike the insecurity born of the market, which is if anything all too visible and obvious for comfort, that alternative insecurity that is hoped to restore the state’s lost monopoly of redemption must be artificially beefed up, or at least highly dramatized, to inspire sufficient official fear and at the same time overshadow and relegate to a secondary position the economically generated insecurity about which the state administration can do nothing and nothing wishes to do. Unlike in the case of the market-generated threats to livelihood and welfare, the extent of dangers to personal safety must be presented in the darkest of colors so that (much like in the Stalinist political regime) the nonmaterialization of threats could be applauded as an extraordinary event, a result of vigilance, care, and goodwill of state organs. This is the task with which the CIA and FBI are mostly occupied in recent months: warning the Americans of the imminent attempts on their safety, putting them in a state of constant alert, and so building up tension—so that there is tension to be relieved when the attempts do not occur and so that all credits for the relief may be by popular consent ascribed to the organs of law and order to which the state administration is progressively reduced.

Stalin’s resolution of the official fear issue as the grounding of state power is, we may hope, a matter of the past. This cannot be said, though, of the issue itself. Fifty years after Stalin’s death, it is still very much on the contemporary powers’ agenda seeking desperately new and improved resolutions.

## Notes

1. See Bakhtin (1965/1968); also Hirschkop’s (1997) apt summary.
2. Schmitt (1963, p. 80); see the discussion in Agamben (1998, p. 137).
3. Schmitt (1922, pp.19-21); see discussion in Agamben (1998, pp. 15ff).
4. Agamben (1998, p. 18)
5. See Beck (1986/1992, p. 137).

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