

# DISMANTLING TYRANNY



TRANSITIONING  
BEYOND  
TOTALITARIAN  
REGIMES

EDITED BY  
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Dedicated to the memory of  
Galina Staravoi tova and Yuri Shchekochikhin  
who fought for a better future and paid the ultimate price



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## PREFACE

To date, not many compilations have tackled the topic of dismantling totalitarian political police structures. Yet, although it may not exactly be beach-side reading, the subject is of immense importance because it is the main causal factor distinguishing between success and failure in a process that affects the lives and welfare of millions and the destiny of nations.

In lieu of a more detailed “how to” manual, some general ideas can be put forth that capture the essence necessary for a new reformer to grapple with the problem—that is, if he or she has the will.

1. *The aggressive reformers did best—economically, socially, and politically.* This is the most important advice a new reformer can get, a sort of “iron law” of the 28 post-Communist transitions, but one that can also be applied generally to transitions outside the area. Perhaps not coincidentally, the three most aggressive reformers of the vestigial political-police structures in the post-Communist world—East Germany, the Czech Republic, and Estonia—are the only three instances where a Communist successor party has not governed since the collapse of communism and where no serious challenges to constitutionality have occurred.
2. *The perfect is the enemy of the good.* The main ingredient of successful transitions is not some cookie-cutter model or “perfect” approach. Rather, it is *political will* laced with common sense. Even in the most successful cases, political police reform and lustration were late, haphazard, and thoroughly imperfect. But the political will of their leaders ultimately carried the day. By contrast, the price for democratic



forces has been much heavier in those countries that have had no political will to deal with the structures of the past.

3. *Use your revolutionary power, or lose it.* Most transition leaders believe that power is inherently immoral and spend most of their crucial first months trying to get rid of it—or use it against one another. Instead, reformers must understand that power can be positive or negative depending on how it is wielded. The initial “window of opportunity” created by regime change (usually the first year after liberation) must be used to the maximum to reform the country, rid it of the toxic structures of the old regime, and launch it in a new direction.
4. *Place your people at the helm and call in the experts.* In Estonia, the new post-Communist government appointed those dissidents and political allies it knew and trusted. In Prague, the Czechoslovak (later just Czech) reformers of secret police structures were mostly tried-and-true dissidents. Aspiring Latin American, Central Asian, or Middle Eastern Havelers should pick up the phone and enlist such Estonian and Czech experts when they overthrow a regime, if not sooner. They should also waste no time in investigating what money has been stolen by the old guard to create a reservoir of “liquid repression” for their return or for making life complicated for the new regime.
5. *Know the nature of the services.* One common denominator of virtually all political police structures is that the initial recruitment came from hardened criminals. This added a certain personality to these structures, one incompatible with either the rule of law or professionalism. Reformers should keep this truism in mind when considering whether such structures somehow perform a valuable role for a democratic society or can be “reformed” to do so.
6. *Distinguish between institutions of state and of regime.* Reformers must be commonsensical within their revolutionary zeal. In East Germany, the Stasi—the main instrument of Communist rule—was dissolved, its files confiscated, and its agents banned from further government service, creating a clean break with the totalitarian past. The army, by contrast, was respected, with its (nonpoliticized) professional officers even finding positions within the Bundeswehr. This simple lesson seems to have been lost in postwar Iraq. The dissolution of the Iraqi army along with the coercive elements of the Ba’athist regime unleashed serious anticonstitutional elements—a trend that has only recently begun to be reversed. Admittedly, however, this is a fine line; a weak-willed or compromised adviser could

succeed in convincing the new leadership that recidivist elements of the old regime be left intact for reasons of “national security,” “social peace,” or “electoral success.”

7. *Using the previous regime’s secret police weakens your political power.* There is always the temptation to make use of the alluring weapons of the former regime. Yet history shows that leaders who believe they can tame the previous regime’s security services achieve only temporary gains while losing their allies, their reputations, and ultimately, their power. Those leaders that moved against the political police, on the other hand, saw their power increase and their political careers and moral standing blossom.
8. *Ignore your Western critics.* Reform is a tough job, certainly not meant for popularity-seekers. Some of your main critics will be Western “experts,” NGOs, human rights activists, and others that may or may not have been around to protect you during your struggle against the regime. Many hail from other circumstances of state- and democracy-building and cannot appreciate that post-totalitarian circumstances must be seen through a different prism altogether. Others are emotionally or financially close to those you have overthrown. Some will tell you that “the West” will not appreciate radical institutional or personnel reform and will delay your acceptance into the main clubs. But, by and large, democracies have found uncompromised intelligence services to be better, more durable, and more trustworthy partners. Remind these critics that the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is essentially a (very tough) Law on Lustration and that in 1998 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended lustration to the EU candidate countries.

In the end, there is no tried-and-true solution to ridding a regime of the vestiges of its totalitarian past. The key is to do *something*.

Fredo Arias-King, founder,  
*Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In many ways, this book has been a labor of love. The original idea for a blueprint of sorts for dismantling totalitarian secret police systems emerged in the late 1980s. It developed as a logical supplement to the considerable work on transparency and democratization that was being done in Russia by a number of courageous activists and dissidents, for which some of them have paid with their lives.

The resulting compilation was made possible through the generosity of the Smith Richardson Foundation and the Earhart Foundation, both of which saw the importance of understanding the dynamics of successful post-Communist transitions—and the lessons that could be gleaned for the future.

Along the way, we benefited greatly from the insights of numerous experts, professionals, and scholars. Among them, Angelo Codevilla, the pre-eminent strategist, provided historical context and strategic forecasting for the trends we saw taking shape in the “post-Soviet space,” while Sergei Gri-goriyants of the Glasnost Foundation in Moscow both inspired us and helped us immeasurably in our research. Scores of other scholars, thinkers, and democracy activists have similarly left their marks on this work. We owe a great debt to them all.

Special thanks also go to Herman Pirchner, president of the American Foreign Policy Council, under whose auspices this project was conducted. His patience, recommendations, and guidance were instrumental to our success.

Throughout this process, we were grateful for the assistance of several dedicated researchers—Chris Oliviero, Taryn Nida, Steve Ramsey, Michael Marette, Dan Keister, and Tim AgoulNIK—who provided us with vital help on everything from fact-checking to unearthing arcane foreign laws.

Finally, our friend Fredo Arias-King, a longtime practitioner in post-Soviet transitions, generously provided an early forum for this work in the pages of the journal *Demokratizatsiya*—and helped to relaunch the public debate over a topic that has enormous ramifications for the Global War on Terror and American foreign policy in the Middle East. For that, he deserves our sincere gratitude.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE CENTRALITY OF THE SECRET POLICE

*Ilan Berman and J. Michael Waller*

When a totalitarian group seizes power, whether by parliamentary maneuver or by force, one of the first institutions it creates is a secret political police. Since the birth of modern totalitarianism, in country after country, these organs became one of the predominant instruments of one-party rule. In every totalitarian government, secret police were an indispensable device for the consolidation of power, neutralization of the opposition, and construction of a single-party state. More recent history shows that when totalitarian regimes liberalize or collapse, the secret political police nonetheless tend to survive. This collection deals with this survival tendency, and it explores how former Communist countries have dealt with the issue in building new democratic societies in the post-Cold War era.

Our concern here is only with the political police, commonly known as the “secret police,” in a former totalitarian system. In most Communist governing structures, the secret police was part of a much larger security and intelligence apparatus. The Soviet KGB, for example, was primarily responsible for the perpetuation of the Communist Party elite—hence its large informant and dissident-hunting networks. But it also performed legitimate roles essential to any country’s security; in addition to enforcing one-party rule, the KGB conducted foreign intelligence and both civilian and military counterintelligence, fulfilled border security functions, engaged in communications and electronic intelligence, and ensured the physical security of government officials and buildings. Therefore, when we speak of dismantling and uprooting a secret police network, we are referring not to stripping a country of its legitimate ability to fight crime and ensure national security, but to removing the institutional impediments to democracy, transparency, and accountability left by the country’s totalitarian past.



It is important to note, however, that even most of the legitimate functions performed by security services have historically been prone to manipulation by both the ruling party and an elite bureaucratic mindset inconsistent with democratic values. In many totalitarian states, the legitimate security functions were taken over by the secret political police, which then imbued the legitimate services with secret police cachet—a carefully cultivated mentality of elitism and impunity that must be rooted out if the organization is to work in the service of a new, democratic order. Yet, even though they might hold a monopoly on the personnel capable of doing such work, the ability of the old organs to fight corruption, terrorism, weapons proliferation, or organized crime might be compromised, perhaps irreparably, because of their lack of accountability under the old regime. In many cases as well, the totalitarian security and intelligence organs were not servants of the national government or even the ruling elites, but of a previous totalitarian colonial power. Uprooting the old political police may also require a parallel uprooting of a foreign intelligence service that acted as a tool of a foreign imperial power, agent of organized crime, or sponsor of international terrorism.

But secret police are not unique to totalitarian regimes. They have existed in various forms for centuries, even in some Western European countries. Secret police are indispensable to autocrats and dictators around the world or anywhere that ruling special interests are troubled by trade unions, peasant movements, religious believers, cultural minorities, or other challenges to the established order. We have heard much about uprooting such systems and holding human rights abusers accountable in places like Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and apartheid South Africa. Almost no one, however, has discussed doing the same in former Communist countries. Indeed, while the uprooting of totalitarian structures in former Latin American dictatorships and South Africa's apartheid regime has been considered essential for national reconciliation and democratic renewal, the same has not held true for the former Communist countries, including Nicaragua.

This compendium will not attempt to explore why this has been the case. Rather, it is intended to provoke discussion about the need to address the problem. A collection of case studies of seven formerly Communist-ruled states—Russia, the Czech Republic, East Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Nicaragua, and Poland—and how they approached the problem of their respective totalitarian secret police, it is inspired in part by Thomas T. Hammond's extensive comparative study, *The Anatomy of Communist Takeovers*<sup>1</sup>—a work that confirms the primacy of a secret police system in the creation of a totalitarian dictatorship.

Some countries, like Russia, addressed the problem by instituting little more than cosmetic changes. Many of the Central European states went much further, to the point of cleansing their societies of the control structures of the old order. The process, begun by the Czechs, is a background screening and political clearance/banning process called lustration. For a true political and social break with their dark past, the controversy was never whether or not "to lustrate" but rather in what style, at what pace, and to what degree.

Two models emerged. The Czech model of *de jure* lustration produced bitter opposition, both within the country and abroad, leaving a trail of political scandals but ultimately being upheld by the nation's Constitutional Court in an elegantly argued document on the necessity, legal soundness, and democratic imperative of lustration. A *de facto* model of lustration, characterized by the process in Estonia, was more absolute. Former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar told our colleague Fredo Arias-King that when he decided to dissolve the vestiges of the Estonian Soviet KGB, "I simply fired them" and refused to hire ex-KGB officers in the new security services.

As was the case after the Soviet collapse of 1991, the world is confronted anew by what to do about the secret police networks of a former one-party regime. This collection is designed to provide an idea of what to expect of a secret police when a totalitarian system starts to disintegrate. It attempts to show that, with visionary and courageous leadership, unity of purpose, support from democratic countries, and perseverance, it is indeed possible for an emerging democracy to dissolve, uproot, and neutralize a national political police network.

## THE AUSTRIAN MODEL

After World War II, there was never any question about a total de-Nazification effort to root out every last vestige of Hitler's regime, ban the Nazi party, criminalize the display of Nazi symbols, and totally discredit every aspect of the Third Reich by exposing Nazi crimes. The mantra became "Never again." Yet even with de-Nazification, problems soon arose for the victorious Allies. Many lessons can be learned today from studying postwar Austria—which became a geopolitical battleground pitting democratic France, Great Britain, and the United States against Stalin's Soviet Union.

In his study of the subject, William B. Bader describes the battle between the Communists and the democrats for control of the police and how it took a stubborn man of strong character, with Western support, to



prevail. At first, democratic forces gave in too easily to Communist demands for control of the instruments of internal control:

In the formation of coalition governments after the war, the Communists in Eastern Europe deferred to other parties in the selection of premier—but the Minister of the Interior was something else again. Once the Communists had this position, they used it with the greatest effect. Consequently, the democratic elements within the country were soon buffeted by a police force indifferent to the personal safety of the non-Communists and quick to use power of arrest as a political weapon.

The Austrian Communists were as aware as their compatriots throughout Eastern Europe of the importance of seizing control of this most important lever of power. During the negotiations between the three parties in April 1945, the Communists had pressed for and eventually won the post of Minister of the Interior. Chancellor Renner was keenly aware that the Minister of the Interior directs a highly centralized police and gendarmerie system with authority throughout all Austria. But Renner, like his counterparts in Eastern Europe, also knew that he had no choice—without this post the Communists would not participate in the government and without them there would be no government. Thus, in April 1945, the Communist Franz Honner was given full control of the most potentially powerful civil force in Austria. But to be really useful to Honner and his party, the internal security system had first to be rebuilt to Communist specifications.<sup>2</sup>

Austria was in a security vacuum in April 1945. The Nazi *anschluss* of 1938 had integrated the Austrian police into the German security system, and many pre-1938 police officials were purged or imprisoned. When the Nazis retreated in early 1945, they withdrew the police and fire-fighting forces from the Austrian capital. “Therefore,” according to Bader, “when Soviet troops entered the city, they were able, in the complete absence of local police authority, to rebuild the internal security system from the ground up. . . . By the beginning of May, the great attention the Communists had given to the reestablishment of the police was paying dividends—a great majority of the police districts were in Communist hands: the provisional Chief of Police of Vienna was a Communist as was the Minister of the Interior of the Provisional Government.”<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet and Austrian Communists made no attempt to recruit leaders from the experienced pool of pre-1938 police, even though those same police were reorganizing and offering their services. But Austria was under occupation by all four Allied powers, and even though the Soviets controlled

the eastern part of the county, Vienna itself was partitioned. In a compromise with the coalition government designed to ensure their control over the Ministry of the Interior, the Soviets and their Austrian surrogates did allow the pre-1938 police to hold posts and agreed to a compromise candidate, a 78-year-old police veteran who was viewed as malleable, to head the Vienna police. For their main police cadres, the Soviets and the Austrian Communist Party recruited party operatives and an entire Austrian Communist guerrilla unit, which had served under Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia, as the nucleus of the new Austrian police. With Soviet approval, a temporary police force was set up which, “with few exceptions,” according to Bader, “was a rag-tag mob of undisciplined, unqualified men who very often had criminal records. Moreover, since these men were appointed with the advice and consent of the Russians by a Communist police chief or by police commissioners who were mainly Communists, the group soon became a refuge for many of the party faithful.”<sup>4</sup>

From Russia’s Bolshevik Cheka secret police of 1917 to Nicaragua’s Sandinista Ministry of Interior in 1979, the process and composition have been remarkably similar: the complete liquidation of the old police order and the construction of a new force politically loyal to the totalitarian party by any means necessary. As in most totalitarian takeovers, the Soviets and their Austrian surrogates exploited residual resentment and suspicion of the old police, especially among the socialists. One Communist police leader told a crowd: “we come with clean hands; we will be a police force that thinks and feels as the people do, a police that is with and not against the people.”

Concerned, the French and British planned a special committee to set up and supervise a new Austrian police force under Allied control, but they abandoned the plan when the Soviets suggested that such a scheme would show “mistrust” of the Austrians. National elections in November 1945 weighed heavily against the Communists, who struggled to keep control of the police.<sup>5</sup> It took a strong and determined personality as stubborn as the Communists to prevent them from succeeding. That personality was Oskar Helmer, the new socialist, anti-Communist interior minister. According to Bader:

There may have been one or two Austrian politicians who were more astute and perceptive in their dealings with the Russians, but there was none more fearless. Short of stature, almost massive in bulk, Helmer was a man remarkably articulated though uneducated, single-minded to the point of stubbornness, personally courageous to the point of bravado; all relieved by an unfailing cheerfulness and sense of humor. The very characteristic that earned him many critics—the tendency to see Austria’s



liberation in 1955 as a victory of the Austrian workers and the Socialist Party—served him well in dealing with the Communists. To Helmer the issues of the occupation period were remarkably simple—communism in all its forms and manifestations was a cancer that had to be cut out of Austria, and the working class, as led by the Socialist Party, was to be the surgeon. Communism in Austria never had a more implacable enemy.<sup>6</sup>

As a concrete step, Helmer required that all police have a clean record. In any other situation, such a requirement would not have been controversial, but “this amounted to a stiff blow to Communist hopes of packing the police with their supporters.” Helmer cleaned out three-fourths of the Viennese police and reestablished a police academy under democratic control to provide trained replacements for those ousted. Unqualified police who could not be removed because of permanent civil status protections were transferred, mostly to the traffic bureau, the vice squad, and the prison system. (The downside of placing Communists as prison guards was illustrated by the murder of at least one defector in protective custody in Hungary.) Helmer followed with a process of centralization and reorganization that worked to the definite disadvantage of the Communists. With Western backing, Helmer pursued a steady process of cleansing Communists from the police.<sup>7</sup>

The Soviets responded by arresting key people loyal to Helmer<sup>8</sup> and sponsoring the creation of a parallel police power, the new national State Police, whose director, Heinrich Duermayer, recruited Communists as “the only really reliable and implacable foes of fascism in Austria.” In the end, Duermayer wanted the police to be at least ninety percent Communist.<sup>9</sup> With the State Police as the only Communist refuge outside the Soviet-controlled zone in late 1946, Moscow worked to split the country’s security establishment. To undermine Helmer, the Soviets accused him of hindering State Police work against the Nazis and threatened to intervene.

But Western allies unfailingly backed Helmer, who ultimately trumped the Communist state police chief by transferring him to run a prison in the American sector, isolated from his pro-Soviet loyalists. Unprepared to use force, the Soviets backed off and “allowed the dismantling of the state police and the transfer of Duermayer.” That move broke Communist control of power positions in the Austrian police and security organs. All the Soviets retained was the traffic police.<sup>10</sup>

Though the Soviets tried to keep the Austrian police as weak as possible, in the years that followed, until the Allied occupation ended in 1955, Western Allies secretly created a well-armed, mobile fighting force from the Western Austrian gendarmerie, which would be used to put down a Com-

munist uprising and become a cadre for a new Austrian army. Helmer was the right person for the job at the right time, and he relied on strong U.S., French, and British support. The West did not try to sacrifice him in the name of reconciliation, fairness, or unity.

## BUILDING ON THE MODEL

Our concern here is with the secret police systems of the former Soviet Union and its European and Third World satellites. The purpose is practical: to learn how—and how not—to uproot a totalitarian political police system. The contributors bring together not only academic expertise, but also practical experience—as firsthand journalistic or academic observers, as actual participants in the processes, or both.

Nevertheless, their work is bound together by a common theme—that secret police do not exist in a vacuum. In general, they are instruments of a political elite, though one can credibly argue cases where the secret police have co-opted or cowed the political leadership and in turn become the political elites themselves. Even so, they cannot exist without an array of other levers of intimidation, co-optation, and coercion. Secret police in a totalitarian system require, at least at certain stages, a mass political party and a host of economic, cultural, and social pressures and levers of domination and control. Therefore, the political elites bear as much moral responsibility for totalitarian crimes as the secret police themselves.

Czech President Václav Havel went even further. He saw the old system as so corrosive that everyone, including dissidents, had become co-opted—what he called a “contaminated moral environment.” In his January 1990 address as president of what was still Czechoslovakia, Havel captured the essence of totalitarianism:

We fell morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only about ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, or forgiveness lost their depth and dimensions. . . .

I am talking about all of us. We had become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unchangeable fact and thus helped to perpetuate it. In other words, we are all—though naturally to differing extents—responsible for the operation of the totalitarian machinery; none of us is just its victim: we are also its co-creators.



We have to accept this legacy as a sin we committed against ourselves. If we accept it as such, we will understand that it is up to us all, and up to us only, to do something about it. We cannot blame the previous rulers for everything, not only because it would be untrue but also because it could blunt the duty that each of us faces today, namely, the obligation to act independently, freely, reasonably, and quickly.<sup>11</sup>

This collection is intended to serve as a touchstone for people from countries still ruled by totalitarian regimes and for Western policymakers who want to design, fund, and implement political and economic programs for those countries that have yet to make the transition to democracy. The Czechs, East Germans, Estonians, Lithuanians, Nicaraguans, Poles, and Russians who tried to dismantle their respective secret police systems had few guideposts and no precedents to follow. The Western governments that provided them with political and economic aid, and even security assistance, likewise lacked the experience, imagination, and initiative—as well as courage—that could have made a difference. The contributors to this compendium believe that they can help a future democratic revolution avoid the mistakes, and replicate the successes, of those that have come before.

## NOTES

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## 1

# RUSSIA: DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE KGB

*J. Michael Waller*

We represent in ourselves organized terror—this must be said very clearly.

—Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka

The roots of all of the most efficient political police systems in modern history can be traced to December 20, 1917. On that day, the new Bolshevik regime in Russia created a political police system so ruthless, skillful, and comprehensive that it became the standard for totalitarian movements around the world. The system was so effective that even the Soviets' fellow totalitarian archenemies carefully studied it, emulated it, and refined it to help them seize power, consolidate their control once in power, and ultimately remain in power. By whatever name—Cheka, NKVD, KGB, or the dozen other acronyms used over the years—the Soviet and Russian secret police are the most infamous and enduring of any political enforcement system ever devised. They became the matrix for Communist regimes from Poland to Mongolia, Ethiopia to Cuba; for pro-Soviet revolutionary governments in Africa and Nicaragua; for non-Communist, one-party states in Libya, Syria, and Iraq; and for the anti-Communist government of the Republic of China, as well as the antithetical People's Republic of China.

All of this would be history, except that despite remarkable economic and political reforms, post-Soviet Russia has preserved and rehabilitated—not repudiated—the entire legacy of the Bolshevik secret police. There was little serious attempt, and no strategy, to expose excesses and crimes or to prevent such a system from emerging again. The KGB survived as a continuum of the Soviet past. By the 2000 presidential election, being an unrepentant career KGB officer had become a political asset, instead of a liability.