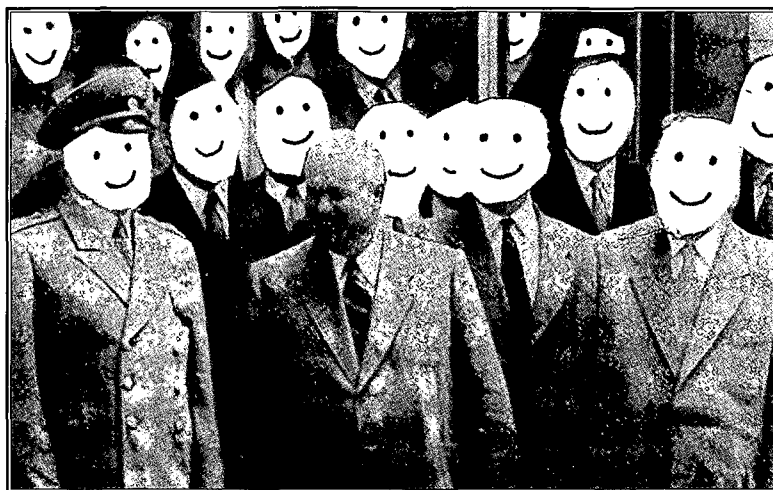


# The Avenging Deity as a Rational Projection of the Wounded Ego

by Andrei Navrozov

*"So spake the Fiend, and with necessity,  
The tyrant's plea, excus'd his devilish deeds."*

—Milton, *Paradise Lost*



The *locus classicus* of all informed discussion on the subject of the political essence of totalitarianism is the following passage from Plato's *Republic*:

If you are caught committing any of these crimes on a small scale, you are punished and disgraced; they call it sacrilege, kidnapping, burglary, theft and brigandage. But if, besides taking their property, you turn all your countrymen into slaves, you will hear no more of those ugly names; your countrymen themselves will call you the happiest of men and bless your name.

Anyone who has studied the history of the 20th century will surely hear them talk of mass hysteria. Zoom in on a giant poster of Mussolini, and their commentary will reverberate with words like "hypnosis." Move on to Red Square in November, and as sure as there are tanks on parade, they will prattle about the cult of personality. They accept the political axiom because they must, because it is incontrovertible; yet, equally, they must find an out, a back door, a loophole at any logical cost, because if all

men are cowards and they are men, then they are cowards; and they wish to be brave. If all men are fools, they too are fools; and they cannot be fools, because they are screenwriters for the BBC, professors at Oxford, and fellows of the Hoover Institution. If all men would fall over themselves to salute a tyrant, then they themselves are pathetic, dishonorable clowns; and, to make a long story short, this is simply not how they see themselves.

They find the loophole, and with it personal absolution, by stressing—nay, inventing, with hardly a shred of historical evidence—an irrational component of that happy compact, foreshadowed in the *Republic*, between the absolute oppressor and the absolutely oppressed. The oppressor is therefore a "maniac," a "psychopath," and a "monster." The oppressed are "hypnotized," "mesmerized," "robotic." This way, they tie down to a particular people, time, and place what would otherwise hang overhead as a universally menacing truth. "It cannot happen *again*," runs the panicky undercurrent of their defensive psychologizing. "It will not happen *here*. It would not happen to *us*."

Arithmetic is anything but irrational, and I commend to you the following exercise, whose outcome is a dead certainty: On the left side of a blank page, write out the names of the people in your life whom you wish well—your friends, relatives, colleagues, writers or artists whose work you follow with interest, politicians you admire and want to succeed. On the right side of the page, write the names of everyone you even mildly despise—your former friends who have long betrayed you, colleagues who have hindered your success, unscrupulous and corrupt politicians . . . Then, of course, there are the people

Andrei Navrozov is *Chronicles'* European correspondent.

who are simply ridiculous, the people who are too big for their boots, and the vast number of people who, if push came to shove, would not lift a finger. Finally, do not forget the neighbor who always borrows your gardening tools.

My question is simply this: What is irrational about cheering on an omnipotence that, while turning all of one's countrymen into slaves, is likely to mete out its superior, inscrutable, and deadly justice to an incomparably greater number of those one loathes than of those one contentedly tolerates? The colleague who pipped you to the post? Off with his head. The politician who put the animal shelter in front of your house? Into the slammer. The neighbor who used to borrow your gardening tools? Fertilizing a frozen plain. Truly this is a paradise on earth, where all your innermost prayers have been suddenly answered, and all at the extremely reasonable price of a couple of people at work who were kind of nice but got themselves arrested anyway, plus an old family friend who turned out to be a spy for some foreign power and obliged by jumping out the window when the police rang the doorbell.

But our own lives are boring and poorly documented. For the Russian intelligentsia inhabiting Stalin's paradise, the deli-

cious moment of reckoning, which I am trying to conjure up here, had arrived in the spring of 1932, and thanks to the archival scrupulousness of the secret police, there is no shortage of documentation describing the deeply rational behavior of those concerned.

Imagine. It is early April in Moscow. You are a budding writer, like Mikhail Bulgakov. Or a recognized poet of genius, like Boris Pasternak. Or an internationally famous theater director, like Vsevolod Meyerhold. For the 15 years following the cataclysm of 1917—when, as the poet said, “our land was all smudged by the glare”—you have been at the mercy of your natural enemies, Bolsheviks who gloatingly called themselves social engineers and artistic innovators while boasting that they had set the beloved world of your youth on its ear. They have mocked your native culture, threatening to abolish everything from marriage to museums, and merely mentioning Tolstoy or Pushkin in their ruling circle is like flying the Confederate Battle Flag in Greenwich Village. Their publishing houses have been printing pretentious, puerile, politically suitable *avant garde* rubbish, penned by every loudmouth you knew at university. Their theaters shut their doors in your face. Even if you managed to make some of your work public, their critics, writing in their newspapers, slandered you, and you could not answer back. You are destitute, without hope, without love, and often without butter to put on your daily bread.

In all, you are the collective Hamlet of your epoch, and all those courtiers with direct access to the Kremlin are your collective oppressor:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes . . .

*Who will avenge us?* For the generation of Pasternak, a generation that bore the world no less beauty than its Elizabethan predecessor, that was the question.

*And then He came.* You all think Lev Tolstoy was a count, and hence unsuitable reading for a good Bolshevik? Oh, worms! Comrade Poskrebyshev, take a memo: “. . . that the complete works of Lev Tolstoy are to be published in the Academy Edition of ninety-eight quarto volumes . . .” You all think the White Movement should be a taboo subject? Oh, deviationists! Comrade Poskrebyshev, put me through to the Moscow Arts Theater: “. . . Hello? This is Stalin. May I speak to the director? . . . Yes, I want to authorize the production of *The White Guard*. Hello? You say he died? A heart attack? What, just now? . . .” You all think Boris Pasternak is too obscure, and should write more like Mayakovsky? Oh, innocence without a strategy! Oh, formulaic mediocrity! Comrade Poskrebyshev, put me through to Lubyanka: “. . . that Mayakovsky's passport for foreign travel be withdrawn for an indefinite period . . .”

*Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord.* The telephone of the Russian intelligentsia was ringing off the hook. Feverishly, Bulgakov started a play about Molière, in which the playwright wins an audience with Louis XIV: “You are persecuted?” asks the king. Then, to the courtiers:

Are there devotees of the author de Molière among you?

## Deer on Rose's Hill

by Brendan Galvin

Their white long scuts flicking their pleasure  
these evenings, their heads deep  
in the grass, driven from the cover of  
serious woods where coyotes  
are denning now, they feed like cattle  
on the far side of the marsh.

Early one morning a fawn so new  
it couldn't manage any two legs  
at once trailed a doe down from  
Rose's Hill to drink there. Sixty years  
among the wind-driven around here,  
and I've logged a few snowy owls,  
one varied thrush, a ruff and its reeve  
blown down off the taiga,

and seen two wolf-sized curs scouting  
Rose's Hill before skulking back  
into the trees, even heard  
what I thought was folklore: the rabbit's  
scream as my dog stood over it, uncertain,

but have nothing to compare with  
that May evening when two yearlings  
like rangy colts faked around each other  
over there, bucking, for a quarter of an hour  
putting one-on-one moves on each other,  
deer in a time of coyotes, at play  
in the teeth of their mortality  
before they drifted back into those trees.