

Introduction

When a totalitarian group seizes power, whether by parliamentary maneuver or by force, one of the first institutions created is a secret political police. Since the birth of modern totalitarianism, in country after country, these secret political police organizations 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 issue of *Demokratizatsiya* contains articles that discuss this survival tendency, exploring how former Communist countries have dealt with the secret political police agencies when 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 organization 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. It also performed legitimate roles essential to any country’s security; in addition to enforcing one-party rule, the KGB also 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 impediments to democracy, transparency, and accountability left by the country’s totalitarian past.

It is important to note 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

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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. The old organs' ability to fight corruption, terrorism, weapons proliferation, or organized crime—though they might hold a monopoly on the personnel capable of such work—might be compromised, perhaps irreparably, because of the impunity with which they had been vested under the old order. In many cases, 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.

Secret police are not unique to totalitarian regimes. They have existed in various forms for centuries, and 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 such as Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and apartheid South Africa. Almost nowhere, however, has there been a discussion about doing the same in former Communist countries. Although the uprooting of totalitarian structures in former Latin American dictatorships and South Africa's apartheid regime have 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*¹—a work that confirms the primacy of a secret police system in the creation of a totalitarian dictatorship.

Some countries, such as 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 and banning process called *lustration*. For a true political and social break with their dark past, the controversy was never “not to lustrate,” but consisted mainly of style, degree, and pace.

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 *Demokratizatsiya* founder 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. Coalition partners in Iraq, as of this writing, are working with Iraqis to cleanse society of the Ba’ath party of Saddam Hussein and to ensure through “de-baathification” that the party and its ideology will never rise again. They are not alone; democracy activists today are drawing up similar transition plans for other candidates for transformation—among them Belarus, Cuba, Iran, and North Korea.

This collection also is designed to provide an idea of what to expect of a secret police organization 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 possible in 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. Like many of today’s post-Soviet democracies, postwar Austria was governed by sometimes-fragile coalition governments.

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.²

Austria was in a security vacuum in April 1945. The Nazi angeschluss 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 firefighting 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 that the Communists had given to the reestablishment of the police was paying dividends—a 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.³

The Soviet and Austrian Communists made no attempt to recruit leaders from the experienced pool of pre-1938 police members, even though those same police officers were reorganizing and offering their services. But Austria was under occupation by all four Allied powers, and although the Soviets controlled the eastern part of the country, Vienna itself was partitioned. Moscow could have its way completely. 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 seventy-eight-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.”⁴

From Russia’s Bolshevik Cheka secret police of 1917 to Nicaragua’s Sandinista ministry of interior in 1979, the process and composition of these secret police agencies 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷

The Soviets responded by arresting key people loyal to Helmer⁸ 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 90 percent Communist.⁹ 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.¹⁰

Although 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 Communist 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 support from the United States, France, and England. The democracies 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 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, although 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 Vaclav 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.¹¹

This collection, compiled under the auspices of the American Foreign Policy Council, is intended to serve as a touchstone from which to develop a practical guide, a sort of manual or handbook, for people from countries still ruled by totalitarian regimes, and for Western policymakers who are likely to design, fund, and implement the 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 imagination and initiative—and courage—that could have made a difference. The contributors to this issue believe that they can help a future democratic revolution avoid the mistakes, and replicate the successes, of those that have come before.

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NOTES

1. Thomas T. Hammon, ed., *The Anatomy of Communist Takeovers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975).
2. William B. Bader, *Austria Between East and West, 1945–1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 77–78.
3. Ibid., 78–79.
4. Ibid., 80–81.
5. Ibid., 83–84.
6. Ibid., 85.
7. Ibid., 85–87.
8. Ibid., 108–9.
9. Ibid., 88–89.
10. Bader, 97–98.
11. Vaclav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, trans. and ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 391–92.