

## EPISODE 4

### DMITRY

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz, and this Episode number 4 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Before we begin today, let me remind you that the point of this podcast is not to rant and rail against America or American values. Rather it is to point out, as ZI did in Episode 2, that our ad hoc, and probably misnamed, American system of 'democracy' of fifty or a hundred years ago is both substantively and qualitatively different from the specific, well defined, and alien ideology of liberal democracy which has taken hold of our elites in the past several decades.

Now, as I went over in Episode 3, one of the hardest things for our minds to do is to understand just how captive we are to the foundational assumptions upon which our world view is based. Which is why it is so convenient that the Soviet Union existed. Because History has handed us a parallel Universe, as it were. One in which a different set of foundational assumptions led it off into a totally different reality.

Now I know what many of you are no doubt thinking. Compare the West with the Soviet Bloc? Why, that's crazy. We have always been the land of freedom, of free markets, free speech and a free press. They were a totalitarian system locked up behind an iron curtain. What could be more different?

But consider these similarities. Historians link both Communism and Liberal Democracy directly to the thoughts and ideas of the Age of Enlightenment. Both systems were primarily the creation of a single human creator around the year 1850. Both systems saw themselves as the inevitable result of scientific logic and insight. Both systems thought that their universal adoption would signal the End of History. Both systems saw themselves as totally acultural. That is, they each saw themselves as the cure for every single society and culture in the world. Both systems are atheistic. Both systems mostly recognize only 'economic man', that part of us which accumulates goods and services. Both systems saw the End of History as a time when each and every individual would gain happiness by satisfying their worldly desires exactly as they saw fit.

And here's the kicker. Although this one might be so hard for you to get your head around that I

will put off a fuller discussion for a later day. But both systems are totalitarian, in that, once they are adopted, they become the totality of the political playing field. You couldn't vote the Communists out of power. But at this point you also can't vote liberal democracy out of power. And if you don't believe me, then try and name me one present day denier of liberal democracy who is given any legitimacy by either the popular media or by the entire political class.

Now did the two systems differ on the means on how they were going to get to their utopias? Absolutely. And, for the record, I am not remotely in favor of violent revolution. But my point here is not to find places to contrast the two. Rather it is to use the parallel world of Communism to show how so many people, including the best and the brightest, can come to fervently believe in what most objective outside observers would see as utterly ridiculous beliefs.

And still have their country, more or less, kind of function.

So let me start with a story from back in 1989. I was at a street fair in Mountain View, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley. And I found myself quickly getting to know a young Russian computer programmer named Dmitry.

This was during the first large wave of Russian immigration, when it was still relatively rare to meet a former Soviet citizen. And usually most of these people reeked of Eastern European sensibilities. None of them wanted to discuss politics. As the saying went, the nail that sticks up the furthest gets itself nailed the hardest.

But Dmitry was different. He was obviously talented, energetic, and extremely smart. He wasn't the type to be passive or to keep his head down, and he had already told me how shocked he was at the amount of money he was making. But he wasn't interested in talking about his success. No, he wanted to tell me just how wonderful America was, and just how awful, awful, awful the Soviet Union had been.

Especially Marxism. It positively infuriated him. It was the most evil philosophy that had ever existed. It was a system without any redeeming features. It made people stupid and corrupt. None of it made any sense whatsoever.

But back in 1989 this was the era of Gorbachev and perestroika. So a few minutes further along into the conversation I brought up the positive changes that many of us—at least in the West—were perceiving as happening. And I asked him if he ever thought that maybe someone as energetic and as talented as himself should go back home and help create that new, progressive Russia that we were all

hoping for.

He got almost livid. 'You don't understand,' he said, addressing me as if I were a stupid child. 'Marxism is completely empty. Useless. There is not one true or good thing about it. And as I've already told you, it has already totally destroyed everyone's power to think clearly. The people still living there have been completely corrupted. Their minds cannot be changed. And my very being would be sucked out if I ever returned.'

Then he went back to praising America's virtues with almost a puppy dog's enthusiasm. In fact, it all got so over the top that after a while I was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. So I asked him if there might be anything, *anything*, that was even slightly wrong with the United States.

'No,' he said, as decisively and emphatically as perhaps only a Russian can. 'No, there isn't.'

Okay, I said, warming up to my devil's advocate role. What about the traffic and congestion all around us? How about the outrageous real estate prices (even then) here in Silicon Valley? Had he ever been over to West Oakland, where you could get yourself killed for just getting out of your car?

He didn't even stop to consider. Addressing me as an idiot child once again, he said, 'You just don't understand. These problems are just temporary. Because you Americans believe in Scientific Progress. And Scientific Progress will always solve those and all other problems.'

***Whaaat???***

Right, left, or center, in 1989 I didn't know of a single American who believed in Scientific Progress, let alone that it was going to somehow solve any of our problems. The last time I could remember anyone even suggesting something like this was back in 1963, when Ronald Reagan was shilling for the TV program 'General Electric Theater', and GE's slogan was, 'Progress Is Our Most Important Product.' Ever since around 1967 such a concept was as nonsensical and outmoded a vision as Disneyland's futuristic presentation of Tomorrowland.

But being somewhat familiar with Marxism, I also understood where Dmitry was coming from. Because 'Scientific Progress' was indeed a central belief for Communists. In their minds 'Scientific Progress' not only explained the formulation and rise of Marxism, but it was also the mechanism through which the Marxist paradise would be achieved.

Now Dmitry was extremely intelligent, as smart as or smarter than you or I. And he was young, not nearly as indoctrinated as most older Russians, and at least to his mind he was thoroughly acclimated to the West. What's more, he absolutely hated Marxist thinking and anything that was remotely associated with it.

Yet here he was spouting out (to my Western ears) patently absurd Communist propaganda. Just goes to show just how hard it is to cut loose of those foundational assumptions.

Now, as you're mulling that one over, let me share with you some, as they say, personal disclosures. First of all, even in my youngest days I never liked Marxism one bit. If nothing else, I always assumed that in any totalitarian system I would be one of the first people who they came for.

On the other hand, I own a shelf of books about Russia and the Soviet Union, and I've actually read them all. I was in the Soviet Union for a few days in 1982, when it was still going strong. I was there for three weeks in 1992, when it was totally falling apart. And then in 2006 I took the Transsiberian railway all the way to Moscow, and then spent time there and in the Ukraine. This past summer me and the missus went over, rented a car, and drove all around. I'm also probably one of the few people in the world who doesn't speak any Russian who has also been to all 15 former Soviet Republics.

So I may not qualify as an expert on Russia. But I have paid close attention on all those trips, and as you might imagine, the real Russians and the real Communism were and are somewhat different than the cartoon images which we have been fed.

Because, yes, the Russian people can be really weird and really paranoid. But a lot of that was going on before the Bolsheviks ever appeared. And if you think that any of the present day people who we label pro-Democracy are any less autocratic in their temperament than is Putin, well, dream on.

For our purposes here, though, it's more important to point out how highly intelligent and highly educated so many Russians are. Any of the pursuits in life which require extreme intelligence and/or extreme focus, such as mathematics, chess, ice skating or classical music, are also pursuits where Russians have always excelled. On the surface you certainly wouldn't think of them as potato eating peasants who would be easily taken in by economic or social nonsense.

But they were. And here is how it happened. In other words, for those of you who aren't even remotely experts in the field, I'm now going to give you an extremely abbreviated history of the Soviet Union.

Now if you had grown up in the Soviet Union, you would have been presented with a glorious version of the events of 1917 and the October Revolution. How the workers had risen up and cast off

the chains of the capitalists and the bourgeoisie. How the kind and brave Lenin had instituted a new world of justice and equality. How the prophecies of Marx had been fulfilled by the inexorable currents of History.

But the reality is that there weren't any currents of History. No Hegelian thesis and antithesis and whatever. The truth is that the only reason that such an ideology was in place was due to pure happenstance.

And here is how the happenstance happened.

By the beginning of 1917 the Russian Empire was losing its part of World War I with Germany. Disastrously. Czar Nicholas, who was undoubtedly sincere, but who was also in way over his head, was forced to resign. Now he did have relatives who were competent, and who could have replaced him. But instead the aristocracy basically folded. In its place the small educated Westernized minority who had long believed in the promise of liberal democracy finally had a chance to do things their way, with elections and legislatures and debates.

Unfortunately, once they formed their legislature, they just got bogged down in endless debates. No bills were passed. No decisions were made. No one was in charge. And still the war dragged on, draining the country of its wealth and manpower.

But there was one group which did have a distinct vision and focus: The Bolsheviks. Indeed, the very existence of the party was based upon the belief that the only path to power was through subordinating the entire group to the vision and focus of one individual. That individual was Vladimir Lenin, not so coincidentally the founder of said group. And he wouldn't have even been in Russia if Germany hadn't given him safe transport from Switzerland a few months earlier. Anyway, now he saw his opportunity.

On that fateful night in October he and his party just walked in to where the 'leaders' of the 'democracy' were meeting, and told them that from now on the Bolsheviks were taking over. The legislators meekly gave up. There were no pitched battles, no stirring defenses of liberty, from either the working masses or anyone else. The next morning the Russian citizens were simply told that there was a new government. The dominant reaction was one of relief. At least now *somebody* would be in charge.

It didn't take long for them to find out who that somebody was and what he had in mind. Vladimir Lenin was a cold, ruthless, humorless man, and within no time thousands of people were being shot and the Russian Empire had descended into a brutal civil war. But with their Great War finally

over, the liberal democracies of the West didn't really do all that much to interfere. After all, to support the so-called 'White' Russians was to support an aristocracy, and everyone knew that aristocracies were Medieval and corrupt.

So Lenin ended up becoming master of all. Personally modest and self-effacing, he was hardly the image of the power mad dictator. But he definitely was an ideologue, a true believer in the Materialism of Marxism. So of course he had to set about converting the world to his master's ideas.

And this devotion to an ideological cause as the primary motivational force was also the case for most of the other Bolsheviks. It's true that historians generally consider Stalin, who consolidated power after Lenin's death in 1924, to have been far more of a thug than a theorist. But it's also plausible to see Stalin as an unsophisticated man from a primitive background who simply used thuggish means to apply the theory that he so thoroughly believed in.

The early years of the Soviet Union, most notably under Stalin, were not pretty. But they were also years which saw spectacular economic growth, especially when you consider the backwardness and low educational achievements of tsarist Russia. And in the eyes of the Bolsheviks the human costs and the violence were entirely justified. After all, to the Marxists their foundational assumption was that 'happiness' had to do with social justice and class equality, not with personal enjoyment. And in practice 'social justice' meant the removal of entire classes of people. And if those people refused to be re-educated, well then... Marxist 'happiness' demanded that they be liquidated. For the good of all.

And here is something which is very relevant for our purposes. Namely, that even as soon as the 1930s most of the population was completely taken in by Communist orthodoxy. Yes, millions of people died in famines and in prison camps. But if you were one of the 97% of Russians who that did not happen to, then life was actually pretty patriotic and peachy. Seriously. They were really into it. For the vast majority Stalin had become their legitimate, fearless leader.

Anyway, everyone who is a World War II buff knows that most of the war's action and most of the war's deaths took place on Russian soil. Over half of their industrial base was destroyed. So that all of the effort that Soviet citizens had put out in the Thirties was now followed by even more desperate effort in the Forties and the early Fifties. So it's not surprising that by around 1954 everyone in the country, including the dyed in the wool Marxists who ran it, was thoroughly exhausted.

And at this point, right after the death of Stalin, the rulers had a sort of semi-awakening. Maybe killing millions of 'class enemies' in prison camps wasn't all that constructive an idea. Maybe allowances should be made for human foibles and feelings.

Not that the Soviet leaders took this new humane approach all that far. Nor did they abandon their commitment to their founding ideology. They still accepted all the basic assumptions of Marxism.

Because, first and foremost, they really believed in it.

Now our propaganda for the next thirty years tried to present a story wherein the Russian leaders cynically knew that their system was stupid and wrong, but nonetheless kept milking it for their own personal power. And supposedly the population either knew that they were oppressed by evil tyranny yet were powerless to stop it. Or else they were somehow of subnormal intelligence and had been hoodwinked into believing all that idiocy.

But it is critical for you to know that for the vast majority of leaders and followers, this was not the case. Because after forty years or so of the elites all being Marxist, by now Communism was seen as entirely legitimate. Marxism was Reality.

So if you had grown up in the Soviet Union in the Fifties or Sixties, you would have been well aware of the outside world. But you would have also 'known' that the people in the outside world had been hoodwinked into believing the crazy ideas of liberal democracy. Which of course had been created and adopted by the ruling Capitalist class solely in order to control all of the masses below them. And you would have also known that it would only be a matter of time before everyone else in the world saw the light of the true ideology. After all, hadn't all of Marx's ideas been proven over and over again to be scientifically correct?

And you would have been extremely grateful that what we called the Iron Curtain kept out all all the degenerate consumerist ideas and all the ugly glitz and the immorality of the West. And you would have been extremely grateful to be a citizen of this most progressive and scientific of societies.

There was so much to be proud about. With just a fraction of the West's resources, the Soviet Union had beaten the Americans into space. The Moscow subway system was the most beautiful and most efficient one in the world. Even after the privation of the war, with a huge landmass, and with the harshest climate in the world, your country had built giant steel mills and giant hydroelectric dams. Farms had gone from being poor, small, peasant run things to becoming mechanized, modern collective wonderlands. Huge new areas in formerly backward Republics like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had been opened up to settlement.

In fact, when Khrushchev famously said 'We will bury you', he was speaking about economics, not warfare. And the reason he was so confident was that in the 1950's Soviet GDP growth was higher than ours. Let me repeat: Those are real statistics. It was actually higher than ours. So that to them it

really looked like they would succeed in doing just that.

And if a visitor had come and pointed out to you the Soviet citizen the depressing industrial landscape, the shoddy goods, the instantly decrepit apartment buildings that surrounded you, and the general drabness of your entire world, you would have not quite gotten what they were getting at. Because following through from Marxism's foundational assumptions, it was the quantity of steel which was produced, not whether or not it actually held up. Under Marxist thought the only 'value' that was in a product was the actual physical labor that went into manufacturing it. So that making it look attractive afterward, in other words like something that you would actually want to buy, was by definition valueless. And you would have looked at those apartment buildings with pride, because it showed that you lived in a worker's paradise, where every laborer was given an equal (and modern) place to live.

Always having to wait in lines? But that's how you distribute things when everyone shares. Drabness? But haven't you ever experienced the beauty or culture of the Bolshoi Ballet or the Pushkin Museum or the Moscow Circus? Where tickets are virtually free?

We like to think of the Soviet Union as a colossal failure, since they obviously didn't keep up with us in material progress. And from our frame of reference it was. But from their frame of reference, from their set of underlying beliefs about human nature and truth, they actually did pretty well. Basic food and shelter were virtually free. So were education and medical care. Every worker got a free vacation every year at a state-run resort. Science and culture were actively promoted, and to a large extent positions were filled in a meritocratic way irrespective of background or class. Women had far greater equality and sons of peasants really could make it to the top. The joke was, 'We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us', but the flip side of that was that most of the economic hassle and uncertainty of the West, that gun constantly pointed at the head of so many working people, was genuinely gone.

And, given that their system was so centralized that a bureaucrat in Moscow literally figured out how many paper clips were to be sent to Vladivostok each year, it's actually pretty amazing that they made it as far as they did.

As for living in a 'police state', that depends on whether or not you consider your high school to have been a police state. After the death of Stalin the Soviet Union developed a system not unlike other authoritarian regimes which are not run by power mad dictators. The people on top pretty much didn't want to be bothered. So various political red lines were drawn. And so long as you the citizen didn't

cross these lines, then you were pretty much left to yourself.

I agree that having to spend all of one's life in high school is kind of a depressing thought. But think back to those days. Yes, writing that controversial article for the school paper might get you in trouble with the vice principal. But how many other kids in your school cared about writing controversial articles? Maybe five out of a thousand? And how many more cared about being on the football team or being the most popular girl or—and this was no doubt the largest number—could have cared less about what went on at said school?

Or think about living in the Soviet Union as if our entire economy were run like the post office. Yes, it would be incredibly annoying to be waiting in line all the time. But it wouldn't be scary or threatening. Especially because all the others in line would be your polite, law abiding neighbors.

And our side might have given great publicity to the few dissidents and refuseniks who existed. But they were no more representative of their society than Gus Hall of the American Communist Party was of ours. For if you hated the whole system and figured out how to make a living by creating some little off the books side 'business', for their part the authorities couldn't have cared less. And if you wanted to just drop out and go live in the woods, which by the late Sixties and later a lot of people did, they didn't care about that, either.

But, like I said, in reality there were very few Dmitrys of any kind. The vast majority of people, from Politburo members down to cleaning women, really, truly believed in what they believed in. In the end it all became a wonderful tautology. Everyone grew up being taught that the assumptions underlying Marxism were logical, obvious, almost a priori. More than that, they thought that they had a wealth of 'scientific evidence' backing them up. Then the society which developed as a direct result of these assumptions seemed to verify them. And even though only 3% of the population were party members, all the smart people in any positions of authority in the Soviet Union, from the professors to the fearless leaders, were members. And they kept reinforcing the truth of these beliefs.

Indeed, if you had shown up at Moscow State University around the year 1970 and asked for the opportunity to teach history or economics or anything else from a non-Marxist viewpoint, they wouldn't have turned you down because they were afraid of the 'truth'. They would have honestly thought that you were just profoundly ignorant, or maybe even a little crazy. And if you had then told them that they weren't open to 'free speech', they would have then known for sure that you were a fool. After all, anyone at the university was free to engage in vigorous debate on any subject.

Assuming, of course, that everyone involved had been thoroughly grounded in proper Marxist-

Leninist thought.

Now, again, I'm not suggesting here that I'm in any way condoning the Soviet Union or Marxism. Far from it. Nor am I trying to ignore or downplay the impact that the pre-existing Russian culture had on how the Soviet Union manifested itself. I'm just trying to show you how intelligent, well meaning people, just as smart and just as educated as you, could have run their entire lives on principles and ideas that, most historians now seem to agree, were pretty loony.

And here's perhaps the looniest part:

By the early 1980s it was pretty obvious to everyone in the USSR that things weren't working out all that well. Blame it on the exhaustion from fighting World War II. Blame it on the exhaustion from having to rebuild the entire country in the Fifties and Sixties. But the apathy, the inertia, and the stagnation were everywhere.

The fizz was gone.

But here's something that we in the West were never really made aware of. Because if you had gone over there and asked the people on the street what the problem was, virtually no one would have said, 'Well, we gave Marxism the best effort we could. But I guess this proves that the theory just wasn't right.'

No, instead you would have heard, almost without exception, something like this: 'Maybe it was Lenin, maybe it was Stalin, maybe it was just our incompetent Russian character, But we clearly screwed up in implementing it. Nonetheless, Marxism is still the greatest theory that anyone has ever developed to explain both economics and the nature of man.'

In other words, in the face of all the overwhelming evidence, the overwhelming majority of them were still true believers.

**As always seems to happens in situations like this, ideology had thoroughly trumped common sense.**

If you could just mull that over for a moment. For once one has bought into an ideology, then common sense just doesn't matter any more. The ideology must be correct. Reality must be wrong. And almost no amount of negative reality is going to change that belief.

Nor do you have to be a card carrying ideologue for this to happen. As I said, only 3% of the population of the Soviet Union were actually members of the Communist Party. And I've certainly met Russian individuals, such as Dmitry, who did almost instinctively hate Marxism from just about the day that they were born. But the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of Soviet citizens were good

Soviet citizens. They really, truly thought that they were putting shoulders to the wheel in order to create a better world for all of humanity.

And remember, this all came about almost by accident. If Czar Nicholas had been a little more competent, if the Germans hadn't transported Lenin from Switzerland to Russia, if the Russian aristocracy hadn't folded, then none of this would have happened. Yet in the end hundreds of millions of people came to believe that Marxism was the word of God.

Except, of course, that they were all atheists.

Which brings us to the final point of this episode. Namely, that there is one big qualitative difference between Marxism and Liberal Democracy. For, you see, for all of its atheism Marxism still had a vision that you the worker or you the revolutionary were working towards something much greater and much more important than just you yourself. And that's no doubt why so many people were willing to fight and die for such a cause.

But Liberal Democracy? As I've already mentioned, one of its foundational assumptions is that not only is Selfishness good, but that if everyone is selfish then everyone will be happy. And once again: No kidding. That's really there underneath everything. And you might well therefore take the time to rhetorically ask yourself: Who the Hell is ever going to fight and die for *that* principle?

So score one for the Commies. Liberal democracy succeeds in being even less inspirational than dry, atheistic Marxism.

Okay. And here's a final, final point. Because, yes, as I've already mentioned, I'm very well aware that Marxism preached and practiced violence. And I don't. However, it's really important to never forget that although the means of the two ideologies were different, that the ends were exactly the same: Total control. Because that's the only way that either system could work. And I will also point out that the techniques of social control are way more sophisticated now than they were a hundred years ago. You no longer necessarily need violence. After all, remember Charlie Rose, the intellectual face of PBS? No, of course you don't. He has become a non-person. In the wink of an eye. Totally non-violently...

Or how about this? Many people have noticed these past couple of years that a large portion of the population has become afraid of even discussing politics or of letting anyone other than really close friends know what their true opinions are. Just like in the old Soviet Union. Here in the land of the putative free...

Anyway, so far I've been telling you what a bogeyman liberal democracy is. But I haven't really explained the specifics of how it came about. Its origin story, as it were.

We're about to start doing that.

But I'm going to warn you beforehand that this is a story that is so bizarre, that is so unbelievable, that you probably won't believe it.

Although I would kindly ask that you please hear me out anyway.

Which will begin to happen just as soon as you hit Play on Episode 5.

And, in the meantime, thanks again for so far having listened.