

# Arrested Development

A prominent critic of Trump's America offers a familiar diagnosis of her home country

SEAN GUILLORY

THE FUTURE IS HISTORY: HOW TOTALITARIANISM RECLAIMED RUSSIA BY MASHA GESSEN NEW YORK: RIVERHEAD. 528 PAGES. \$28.

The word *totalitarianism* has an ominous ring. At the height of the Cold War, in the 1950s and 1960s, Western social scientists began using it to describe the political structure of the USSR, as part of an ideological effort to equate the Soviet system in general, and Stalinism in particular, with Nazism. That effort was very successful. The “totalitarian model” gained such a powerful grip on people’s imaginations that when, in the 1980s, a new generation of scholars began poking holes in it, they took a pummeling, accused of being Communist sympathizers or apologists for Stalin’s crimes.

As early as 1972, the great Sovietologist T. H. Rigby pointed out that *totalitarianism* had “acquired such conflicting and misleading connotations and become embedded in such dubious social attitudes that its use tends to obscure rather than to communicate the reality behind it.” Yet it was only when Soviet archives opened up in the 1990s that people began to abandon the model. It became clear that while the Soviet regime may have *aspired* to be totalitarian—to exercise complete control over a helpless population—actually existing socialism was something else entirely. The state did deploy violence in order to govern, but it did so because it was fragmented and weak, not all-powerful. And the Soviet citizens portrayed in the archival record were also very different from the numb, brainwashed, passive figures of dark totalitarian fantasies. Many managed to live active, creative, and purposeful lives, even in the shadow of large-scale state violence and coercion. Among historians today, the totalitarian model has been mostly discredited as a way to understand the Soviet experience—it has been *passé* for at least twenty years.

So it’s rather surprising that the journalist Masha Gessen is now seeking to rehabilitate the concept and apply it to the Putin era in her new book, *The Future Is History*. If you have been paying any attention at all to post-Soviet Russia, you will be familiar with Gessen’s work. Best known for *The Man Without a Face*, her 2012 biography of Vladimir Putin, Gessen has written books on all sorts of topics, including Pussy Riot, the Tsarnaev brothers, and even the Soviet authorities’ failed attempt to create a Jewish national homeland in Siberia. A consistent critic of the Putin regime over many years, she writes frequent op-eds for the *New York Times* that serve as one of the main sources of Russia analysis for American readers.

From what I can tell, her interest in totalitarianism originates from her family history—her parents were Soviet Jews who immigrated to the United States in 1981—but Gessen also speaks from a position of special authority on Putin’s Russia and its ills, because she is herself a kind of political exile. As a gay woman with children, she had to leave Russia in 2013 after the state enacted threatening new homophobic legislation. More recently, she has used this perspective to become one of the more prominent and insightful critics of Trumpism. And she has injected a much-needed dose of calm

and logic into the current US hysteria over Russia. Her emphatic rejections of conspiracy thinking around Russiagate in her *New York Review of Books* pieces particularly stand out. Unfortunately, she does not always exercise that sort of temperance in her discussions of Russia itself.

In *The Future Is History*, Gessen provides a lively and intimate narrative of the USSR’s collapse and its aftershocks, through the eyes

there are no lesbians in Russia?” “I also heard,” Gorshkov retorts, “that there was no sex in the Soviet Union. Yet you are here.” He, like Gessen, eventually left Russia after becoming the target of a homophobic witch hunt at his university in Perm. And perhaps most familiar to readers is the journalist Zhanna Nemtsova, whose father, the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, was assassinated near the Kremlin in 2015. Feeling



Soviet Union propaganda poster, 1941.

of seven individuals. Most were still children in 1991 and came of age under Putin; more or less all are the descendants of Soviet elites—former members of either the intelligentsia or the *nomenklatura* (those who held important posts in government, industry, agriculture, and so on). There’s Marina Arutyunyan, a psychoanalyst who circumvented the strictures of Soviet psychology to embrace Freud and the unconscious. There’s Seryozha, grandson of Alexander Yakovlev—a member of Gorbachev’s politburo who helped uncover Stalinist crimes—who like several of Gessen’s other characters was galvanized politically by the mass protests of 2011 and 2012. Then there’s Lyosha Gorshkov, a young gay man who comes out to his mother in a touching scene, and who, after becoming a scholar of Russian LGBT struggles, must navigate homophobic responses to himself and his research. “Are you aware,” another academic asks him at a conference at Moscow State University, “that

political pressure in the wake of her father’s murder, Nemtsova also left, resettling in Bonn, Germany.

The bulk of Gessen’s narrative describes the ways in which these people try to make sense of the larger events happening around them. A gifted writer, Gessen is at her best when she’s recounting her characters’ experiences. She sought out these individuals because she considered them both “regular” and “extraordinary,” in that they could represent the experience of “millions of others” but were also “intelligent, passionate, introspective, [and] able to tell stories vividly.” In other words, she sees these seven as somewhat equivalent to the philosopher-heroes in Plato’s allegory of the cave, those few exceptional thinkers who are able to free themselves from the distorted shadow play on the wall (which everyone else has mistaken for reality) and turn to see what is actually going on.

This notion is key to Gessen’s project here, which is to diagnose, often in psycho-

logical terms, what is wrong with Russia—a creeping totalitarianism that she identifies directly with the Soviet past—and why the vast majority of the population seems so willing to accept the current political situation as it is. She is rightly dissatisfied with the tendency of most books on Russia to tell only one of two basic stories: that of the repressive regime or that of the everyday lives of the people themselves. In Gessen’s view, looking at Russia from either of these angles is like examining only half of “the animal,” without attempting to explain how it “holds together—or what kind of animal it is. My ambition this time was to both describe and define the animal.” She wants to give a single, unified account that encompasses both the mechanisms by which citizens have been “losing rights and liberties for nearly two decades” and the story of the citizens themselves, which she characterizes as a tale of “freedom that was not embraced and democracy that was not desired.”

How can we explain why people are incapable of knowing what’s good for them, why ordinary Russians seem not to have wanted freedom and democracy enough? What can be the matter with them? Gessen’s theory, in part, is that the USSR robbed its citizens of “the ability to make sense of one’s life in the world,” an ability that is “a function of freedom.” They lost “the intellectual tools for sensemaking,” and so “the only stories Russia told itself about itself were created by Soviet ideologues.” Moreover, she claims, the system’s co-optation of intellectuals reinforced this effect. “If a modern country has no sociologists, psychologists, or philosophers, what can it know about itself? And what can its citizens know about themselves?” In Gessen’s view, Putin’s rule is a brand of totalitarianism lite that relies on the same human material as did the Soviet regime—i.e., “the Russian citizen weaned on generations of doublethink and collective hostage-taking: the *Homo Sovieticus*.”

Leaving aside the inherently problematic notion that Russians are powerless to understand their world without a separate class of intellectuals to explain it to them, the picture Gessen paints of them as incapable of individual thought and action has a particular history. The depersonalized figure of *Homo sovieticus*, a kind of Communist golem unable to shake its slavish mentality or embrace the “inner freedom” of liberal democracy and capitalism, has been around for a long time. Alexander Zinoviev popularized it in the early 1980s with his satirical novel *Homo Sovieticus*, which described the typical Communist subject as conformist, indifferent, passive, debauched, and credulous. This character quickly developed from an object of satire to a subject of history. In the late ’80s, the prominent Russian sociologists and pollsters Yuri Levada and Lev Gudkov, both of whom Gessen cites frequently in *The Future Is History*, made *Homo sovieticus* a category of sociological study. A Frankenstein’s monster created by Soviet totalitarianism, this creature was, according to Levada, defined by its Orwellian “doublethink,” the capacity to “hold two contradic-

tory beliefs at the same time.” Members of *Homo sovieticus* supposedly lived in a panopticon-like arrangement designed to make them keep one another in line, called *krugovaya poruka*, literally “circular guarantee” but usually translated as “collective responsibility”—or, in Levada’s and now Gessen’s derisive formulation, “collective hostage-taking”; Levada described it as one of the most “morally abhorrent Soviet institutions.” (This argument is an especially curious one: By no means a Soviet invention, the concept of *krugovaya poruka* first appeared in the eleventh century in the *Russkaya Pravda*, Russia’s earliest law code. Originally a method of government control by which, for instance, peasants in a village shared responsibility for taxes and policing, it eventually also became a form of community solidarity, a weapon of collective defense against a capricious state.)

As the USSR was crumbling, Levada theorized that *Homo sovieticus* was on the verge of extinction and that Russians could soon make the transition at last into rational liberal subjects. By the 2000s, though, as Putin cemented his hold on power, Gudkov and others were puzzled that this transformation had apparently failed to take place. Following Gudkov, Gessen writes that totalitarianism in Russia today is “like a recurrent infection”: not as deadly as the previous outbreak, “but the symptoms would be recognizable from when it had struck the first time.”

The *Homo sovieticus* character to whom Gessen is so attached is only the latest in a long line of domestic scapegoats conjured by Russian intellectuals, who have found a variety of ways to lay blame for the country’s historical and political disfigurement at the feet of the faceless masses. For many Russian radicals in the nineteenth century, there was the Russian peasant, a benighted and brutish character so susceptible to czar worship that he couldn’t be converted to a revolutionary worldview (a problem that led the radicals to resort to terrorism instead in the 1870s). A similar figure was blamed for slowing down the development of socialism during the early Soviet period: in the 1920s and ’30s, Communist intellectuals and activists decried the so-called remnants, or *perezhitki*, of the petit-bourgeois mentality, including the *meshchanin*, or philistine, and other types of “former people” who simply weren’t ready for the future and were holding the rest of society back.

Gessen adds a slight twist to this tired trope by bringing in the concept of trauma. Over the past century, Russia has arguably experienced a series of social traumas, and it’s intriguing to consider these in the light of research done by many social scientists in recent years on how the psychological effects of traumatic experience can be inherited by one generation from another. After the collapse of the USSR, as Gessen describes via her seven protagonists, euphoria was quickly overshadowed by fear. Accustomed to the stability of Soviet life (however austere), many found the topsy-turvy ’90s difficult to navigate. Gessen offers a vibrant portrait of people’s attempts at recovery, both in terms of historical memory and in the therapeutic sense.

Stalin’s Terror had annihilated its victims symbolically as well as physically: Often all public references to their existences were erased and talk of them became taboo even within their families. Citizens scratched or cut pictures of “enemies of the people” out of

books, and concealed or destroyed family records and keepsakes. In one of the more bizarre practices, subscribers to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* received extra pages in the mail and were told to glue them in as substitutions for entries on repressed “enemies.” When the secret police chief Lavrentii Beria was executed in December 1953, his four-page entry in the encyclopedia was replaced with one on the Bering Strait. Gessen movingly describes individual attempts to fill in the gaps. For Arutyunyan, healing is possible through family genealogy. Believing that “wounds formed when something was missing, willfully unremembered,” she works to reconstruct the lives of her grandparents, Anna Mikhailovna and Grigory Yakovlevich Yakovin, who were victims of the Terror. Others delve into esoteric philosophy, join political movements, and even fall for charlatans and swindlers—all part of an effort to make a repeatedly shattered subject whole.

Gessen deserves much credit for her sensitivity to the plight of Russians seeking to figure out who they now were and who they should become. Yet her suggestion that trauma can be—and has been—deliberately used as a political instrument of the state seems less persuasive. Emphasizing Russians’ craving for stability, she uses the example of one of her Arutyunyan’s clients, who is suffering from anxiety after Moscow authorities somewhat arbitrarily demolish overnight all the stores on the street where she lives. “It was not just this client who was living in a state of constant anxiety: the entire country was,” Gessen adds. “It was the oldest trick in the book—a constant state of low-level dread made people easy to control, because it robbed them of the sense that they could control anything themselves.” Gessen’s recognition of the place of trauma in post-Soviet Russia is beneficial in and of itself—for one thing, it humanizes the Soviet collapse and helps explain why so many Russians still see that as a tragedy. The problem is the conclusion she draws from it: that citizens were so damaged by what they had been through over the years that they were unable to embrace the freedoms of liberal democracy and capitalism.

There’s a more likely possibility, and it doesn’t hinge on accumulated historical trauma or some irrational longing to go back to the Soviet system. With the USSR’s fall came the loss of many other things Russians valued: their country’s stature in the world, decent living standards, the welfare state, education, even a sense of community and collective identity. Putin’s apparent promise to restore some of these things is a far better explanation for his widespread popularity at home than the theory that most citizens have been too brainwashed and traumatized to think for themselves. It’s also difficult to discern what analytical value the concept of a new totalitarianism provides. It suggests a Russian state far more powerful and organized than Putin’s actually is, and it implies that nothing in the country has really changed since Soviet times. Like too many popular treatments of Russia, Gessen’s analysis tends to envision the country as a place outside history. The past, present, and future seem to collapse into a recurrent cycle, even as, in fact, Gessen’s impassioned portraits of her seven protagonists show history unfolding all around them. □

Sean Guillory is the host of the SRB Podcast, a weekly conversation about Eurasian history, politics, and culture.