

Simchas Torah in Soviet Russia

Zman Speaks to Heroic Jews Who Led a Spiritual Revolt, Centered Around the Joy of Simchas Torah, That Helped Bring Down the Communist Regime

In the 70 years of its existence, the Soviet Union nearly succeeded in completely wiping out any trace of Judaism in Eastern Europe. Millions of Jews were systematically destroyed, some physically and others spiritually. The elderly Jews who attempted to defy the state-enforced atheism were usually dispatched to the Siberian Gulag, where they suffered terribly until they succumbed to the combination of hard labor and hazardous conditions. In their absence, many children were brainwashed with the new state-sponsored "religion" of Communism.

Despite all these exhaustive efforts to extinguish the Jews' faith, the spark of Judaism failed to go out. During the 1960s, that spark was fanned into the roaring flames of a spiritual renaissance. One historic Simchas Torah day when a group of Jews celebrated their religion openly in the streets of Communist Russia, the KGB finally admitted defeat, acknowledging the brave defiance it could not find a way to suppress. That day marked the beginning of the end for Soviet authorities, and in a few years the first cracks would appear that would lead to the sudden and total collapse of Communism.



- Dov Levy



The list of enemies against the Jewish people is long, beginning with Yishmael, Esav, Lavan, Pharaoh, Nevuchadnezzar, Haman, Hadrian, Torquemada and Chmielnitsky. And of course, let us not forget their modern-day successors, such as Hitler and Ahmadinejad. Prominent among the names of exceptional anti-Semites of the recent past is a figure sometimes forgotten in the bigger picture: the tyrannical and despotic Joseph Stalin.

While Hitler's activities are highly documented (and any attempts to repeat them will likely be subject to a public outcry), Stalin's history is much less publicized and understood—at least in the Western world—despite the fact that he was directly responsible for 50 million murders and countless deaths and disappearances. The reason for our ignorance of such an evil person's deeds is due to his incredible success at orchestrating his crimes. While the Nazi regime collapsed after 12 years (and there were a fair number of survivors who were interested in telling their tales), Stalin reigned completely uninhibited for over a quarter century. By the time of Communism's downfall in the early 1990s, there were precious few left to point fingers and lay the blame for the destruction of an entire spectrum of life in Communist Russia.

The Dark Era of Stalin

The Jews of Russia had suffered for centuries under the Czar before the foundations of Communism had even been created. While many Jews supported the Bolshevik Revolution and the equality it promised to all, it quickly proved to be no better than the Czarist regimes that had preceded it. Still, the worst was yet to come. Nothing that had happened yet could prepare Russia,

and especially Russian Jewry, for what now awaited it.

Stalin came to power in 1924 and remained in control until his demise in 1953. He trusted no one and feared everyone. As a result, he ruled his country with an iron fist, using the Communist ideology as an excuse to carry out the excessively evil inclinations of his fertile imagination.

His road to the premiership was paved with the blood of colleagues and former friends whom he eliminated without a second thought. He maintained his control through a combination of propaganda (that inundated the citizens of his lands with constant praise of their dictator and his accomplishments) together with a reign of terror that prevented his underlings from entertaining any doubt in their minds as to the greatness of their leader.

Cut off from the rest of the world, the average citizen imprisoned in Stalinist Russia had little choice but to accept the constant stream of propaganda fed to him daily—there was simply no other news to go by. The press, radio, and television were completely controlled by the State; nobody could learn about events in the world unless they heard about it as presented by the puppets of Stalin's government. People soon learned that utter loyalty to the only government they knew of was the only way to survive, and they readily tattled on their closest friends for harboring thoughts that might be at odds with the ideals of Stalin and his programs. The KGB then took care of the guilty party in such a manner as to ensure that nobody else would dare to repeat that unlucky person's mistake.

Like every dictator, Stalin lived in fear that his power would be lost. To forestall that possibility, he initiated the Great Purge of 1936-1938, which was carried out by the NKVD (the predecessor of the KGB). Anyone believed to be involved in counter-revolutionary activities (an extremely broad term that came to be used for just about any behavior) could be stripped of his personal rights, tried, sentenced, and executed.

Even after the Great Purge ended, tens

of millions continued to be executed. Many were imprisoned under deplorable conditions without seeing daylight or proper food for years, or shipped off to the Siberian camps where they labored until they died of hunger, starvation, disease, or the bitter cold. These camps used the same system of enforced labor—minimal food rations, roll calls, and frequent punishment—that had been perfected by the Nazis for their concentration camps. Workers were forced to chop down trees, cut stones in massive quarries, or work in underground mines in inhumane conditions. All this enabled Stalin to maintain his hold over a vast empire for 30 years until his eventual death.

The power of the terror was incredible. Fear of disappearing forever in the dark of night caused friends to worry over the possibility of being informed upon, even by those closest to them. A joke from that period goes as follows: a small group of Jews are sitting together in silence. After a few minutes, one lets out a deep sigh. When a second member of the group mimics the sound a few moments later, a third speaks up in a stage whisper: "Stop complaining, or we will all be arrested!"

The final years of Stalin's reign brought the suffering to a bitter climax. In January 1953, Stalin concocted what became known as the infamous Doctor's Plot, in which nine Kremlin doctors—of whom six were Jewish—were accused of willfully misusing their medical knowledge to kill prominent Communist leaders. Together with other intellectuals, they were charged with plotting to bring down the Communist regime.

Some Jews were arrested and hanged publicly, and the resultant wave of anti-Semitism quickly poisoned the air of the Soviet Empire. Undoubtedly, this was precisely what Stalin was hoping for. In a stroke of Divine intervention, however, Comrade Stalin died suddenly on Purim day, and the fate of the accused took a turn for the better.

In the ensuing atmosphere of de-Stalinization, their captors were accused



A rabbi risks his life to study Torah with a fellow Jew in a Russian synagogue.

of breaking the law and the Jewish internees were eventually released. When Stalin's death was finally revealed to the public several days later, Soviet Jews celebrated their own modern-day Purim miracle.

World Silence

Stalin's sudden death allowed people to open their eyes somewhat, and subsequent leaders (beginning with Nikita Khrushchev), denounced the widespread use of violence and terror to intimidate the population that had taken place under Stalin. The deification of Stalin was slowly reversed. None of his followers would repeat it. Nevertheless, conditions remained very unpleasant for Jews in Russia, with any religious activity still strictly forbidden.

Under Malenkov, Stalin's immediate successor, some foreigners were granted entry to the previously impenetrable Soviet lands, and the handful of Jews who slid in were able to bring a breath of life to those whose still harbored memories of a better time when their religion could be practiced openly. Still, studying Torah, gathering to