

In the wake of World War II in Eastern Europe, a number of individuals with anarchist sympathies were able to escape to the West from the USSR. One of these was the engineer known only by the initials “V. T.,” a native of the industrial city of Dnepropetrovsk (today Dnipro) in Eastern Ukraine. He wrote a number of articles about life in the USSR for the Russian-American journal *Delo Trouda-Probouzh-*

denie while living in a camp for displaced persons in France.

In the article below, he describes the mechanisms for control of the work force in a huge industrial plant in the USSR of the 1930s. As an example of this control, he recounts the plight of an exemplary worker who, like many Soviet citizens, had a dangerous, potentially fatal, secret in his past.

Bolshevik Concern for the Individual

1936. A plant in Dnepropetrovsk swallows up and spits out 22,000 workers per day. The Communist Party has a complicated job to do: it’s necessary to “service” all the workers, to evince “Stalinist concern” for each one, to have a complete profile for each one. The Party has to know each person’s origins, going back four generations; their education; the details of their family life; the names of all their relatives, acquaintances, and friends (including those of their spouse); their disposition, conversations with comrades, and reactions to different kinds of events.

Then the Party wants to know about any loans and membership in so-called “voluntary societies” like OSOAVIAKHIM^[1], MOPR^[2], or study circles focused on the history of the VKP(b)^[3], etc., etc.

In order to accomplish all this, the Party has a large and well-paid apparatus that includes the Plant Party Committee, the Plant Committee of the Komsomol^[4], and the Plant Committee of the Trade Union.

All these committees have numerous sections: party, “cultural-propaganda,” production, personnel, secret, etc. Besides, in each of the 18 shops in this plant there are corresponding shop committees—Party, Komsomol, and Trade Union—with a corresponding complement of *seksots*^[5] strategically placed in all departments and branches of production.

The heads of these shop-level organizations are paid by the All-Plant Party Committee, and the shop informers who are workers receive a supplement for “extra” or “social” work, in accordance with the statutes of the Party and the Trade Union that deal with discipline. It’s part of the duties of the heads of the shops’ Party, Komsomol, and Trade Union Committees to submit the “information” collected by their “collaborators” (informers), including who heard what, who saw what, where, when, and under what circumstances, along with an accurate record of names and other data. The secretaries of these shop Party Committees coordinate all the material received and prepare a daily summary to present to the Plant Party Committee.

The author of these lines once had an opportunity to read such information: it happened that the secretary of the Shop Party Committee inadvertently left their briefcase on my desk. Just for fun, I read one of the reports, according to which someone had written on the wall of the latrine at night in chalk: “Long live our beloved leader Comrade Stalin.”

Thanks to this system, the All-Plant Party Committee is in possession of accurate information about all the details of life in the plant. Extremely helpful in this matter are the parallel organizations: the Trade Union and Komsomol Committees. But this still does not include the special *seksots* reporting directly to the NKVD, about whom

¹ Union of Societies of Assistance to Defence and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR.

² International Red Aid.

³ All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevist)

⁴ Communist Union of Youth.

⁵ *Seksot* is short for *sekretnyy sotrudnik* = secret collaborator, i.e. informer.

no one knows—not even the heads of the plant organizations knows who they are. As a result, the NKVD receives the most detailed information about the work of the plant: about the behavior of the engineers, technicians, office staff, and workers, including the communists of all ranks, beginning with the director of the plant. The NKVD receives information directly from its *seksots* and from the Party organizations.

In spite of its apparent complexity, the Soviet system of rule works efficiently, because costs are not taken into account and the results are evident: “treason” is nipped in the bud, even when it doesn’t exist. Here the Bolshevik slogan “concern for the individual” is complete justified—the tsarist police are no match for the Bolshevik *oprichniks*!^[6]

This “concern” affects all the workers, from the plant director to the janitors. Many are familiar with this “concern” and have experienced it firsthand in the form of a summons to an “interview” in the secret department of the plant, at the Party Committee, or in many cases directly to the NKVD for interrogation. It’s impossible to talk about this, but every worker in the plant senses this special oppression, and feels that they are being shadowed by people who, willingly or unwillingly, have been recruited as *seksots*. Normally each Party member is perceived as being a *seksot*—it’s part of their duties. So their company is avoided, both inside and outside the plant.

Now here is an example of how the system works. In my shop there was a patternmaker. He was highly skilled: working independently from technical drawings, he quickly prepared complex patterns. And since the patterns he produced were quite valuable, and he was working on a piecework basis, his pay was not bad at all. He often earned bonuses, and as a Stakhanovite^[7] he was never absent from the “Red” honour roll.

By nature he was a gentle person, and extremely polite in dealing with his supervisor and fellow

workers. All of his fine qualities served only to provoke malice from his communist comrades, workers who were less capable but who were careerists. They wanted to be paid the same as him, not because they had his skills, but simply because they belonged to the Party. I was a non-party supervisor and it didn’t matter to me whether or not a worker had a Party card—I only cared that they did their jobs. But these careerists were determined to play a dirty trick on their own comrade.

An opportunity to do so soon presented itself. As an aside, let me mention that I don’t know where this patternmaker is now, but for his own safety I won’t mention his name and will simply call him the Patternmaker.

On one occasion while the workers of the pattern workshop were having lunch, the Patternmaker, while describing the beauties of nature, happened to mention Finland. He described the wonderful charms of nature in that country, and talked about the Finns and their customs and lifestyle, their industriousness and innate honesty. He got so caught up in describing the details, that he scarcely noticed his own enthusiasm.

“And how come you know so much about Finland?”

The Patternmaker in his enthusiasm had thrown caution to the wind and inadvertently revealed that he had been to Finland. A couple of days later, the secretary of the shop’s Party Committee invited him to come see him in his office after work.

Suspecting nothing and not feeling the least bit guilty of anything, the Patternmaker went to see the secretary. Here the “grooming” of the Patternmaker was begun.

“Hello, comrade, it’s good that you have dropped by, that you’re not avoiding our Party. I want to talk to you about something. The Party knows you as a good worker—a Stakhanovite—and a good comrade. We know you are well-disposed towards the Party and the communist government, otherwise you wouldn’t have accepted my invitation.

⁶ The *oprichniks* were the dreaded secret police of the 16th century Russian ruler Ivan the Terrible.

⁷ A Stakhanovite was a Soviet worker who produced more than was required, by working harder and more efficiently. Such workers not only received higher pay, but also non-monetary incentives, such as scarce goods and apartments.

The administration of the shop values your work. Because of your special skills, you almost always earn bonuses, your name is never absent from the honour roll, and you are rather well-paid. It seems to me that you must be satisfied, am I right?"

"Of course I'm satisfied, I work honestly for the good of the state and for my labour and know-how I'm well paid. And I try to pass on my experience to younger workers."

"Well, you are doing an outstanding job. I just want to ask why you haven't joined our Party. We need people like you."

The conversation continued for some time in this vein, i.e. with praise for the Patternmaker and an attempt to recruit him for the Party. Not expecting to be "pressured" in this way, the Patternmaker, who had no sympathy for the communists, parried the first blow, referring to the unexpectedness of the secretary's proposal, to his complete unpreparedness for Party work with its numerous obligations, and to his lack of political indoctrination. He said that he wasn't ready to make such a serious decision.

But the first "grooming" was followed by a second, then a third. And there were some open meetings where the Patternmaker was "elected" to the presidium. Little by little this persistent nagging began to wear down the Patternmaker, and, sensing this, the Party secretary redoubled his efforts. It wasn't easy to get out of this predicament and, after consulting with his wife and loyal friends, he finally made up his mind to agree to join the Party. The fact is that in those terrible days of 1936, rejecting such a insistent proposal could have dire consequences. The Patternmaker could have come to be regarded, if not consciously, at least unconsciously, as belonging to the enemies of the Party.

After considering all this, he accepted the application form . . . In the basic form there were 124 questions—the candidate was literally turned inside out! And it was not just the candidate who was being scrutinized, but his grandparents, in fact all his close relatives, and his wife. The questionnaire covered his whole life experience, and it was impossible to conceal anything, for every

question had to be answered clearly and comprehensively.

Only now the Patternmaker realized that he had fallen into a trap, and that he was now compelled to reveal something that would otherwise have remained unknown. But there was nothing he could do about it—he had to forge ahead, because false or misleading testimony could result in a cross-examination where he would be caught in contradictions. He would be giving his opponents the possibility of exposing him as a secret enemy of Soviet power with all the attendant consequences. So he made up his mind to tell the whole truth.

He filled out the questionnaire including an admission that he had been in Finland where he had ended up after retreating across the ice from Kronstadt after the fortress city was surrendered to the Red Army. He handed in the application to the secretary of the shop Party Committee and for a while he was left in peace.

After a couple of months an open meeting was held where the agenda included an item: "Admission to the Party." The Patternmaker was summoned to this meeting. When his turn came, he was called to the tribune. The secretary of the Party committee read out the declaration of the Patternmaker about joining the Party and gave a brief summary of his biography. And then he asked:

"Are there any questions for the candidate?"

There followed the usual questions: why did the candidate decide to join the Party? what percentage of his production quota was he achieving? how much was he earning? how much political education did he have? and was he familiar with the history of the Party? etc. Everything seemed to go smoothly and all the questions were dealt with.

"Are there any more questions?" asked the secretary. Silence. After a minute's pause, one of the communists (undoubtedly by previous arrangement) said:

"I've got a question."

"Go ahead."

"Is it true that the Comrade Patternmaker took part in the Kronstadt revolt against Soviet power?"

“Yes, that’s true,” answered the Patternmaker. When asked to explain what happened, he gave the meeting a fascinating account of the history of the revolt, the surrender of the fortress, and the evacuation of the insurgents to Finland.

The questions fell thick and fast:

“Who were the rebels?”

“Sailors and soldiers of the Kronstadt garrison. The leaders were members of the Communist Party and the Anarchists. Their slogan was “Soviet Power Without Communists.”

The interest of the meeting was aroused and things might have taken a dangerous turn, as the Patternmaker elaborated on his story—truthfully, objectively, but in engaging fashion. And his story was rather different from the one found in the textbook about the history of the Party.

Noticing that the Party meeting was sympathizing with the rebels, the secretary of the Party committee put a halt to the discussion and called for a vote. And the charmed listeners were awakened as if from a sweet dream:

“You see, comrades,” began the secretary, “what a serious crime the Patternmaker is guilty of before the Party, before Soviet power. His guilt can be expiated only by activity proving his devotion to the Party and the state. The Party will not reject a comrade without giving him this possibility. In the meantime we can’t afford to give him the ben-

efit of the doubt.”

The vote was unanimous—everyone was against admitting him.

After this the Patternmaker came to my office for advice. It turned out that he had already been summoned to the NKVD, where he had to sign an agreement not to travel anywhere. He now was required to register with the NKVD every two months. He had already served 10 years in prison, camps, and exile and had a minus-10.^[8] I recommended that he be patient; I was prepared to defend him as a specialist-worker.

Over a period of time, the Patternmaker was removed from the roll of honour, excluded from the trade union, and endured a host of minor indignities in his work life at the plant.

Then the war broke out, and evacuation took place. All of the Patternmaker’s “judges” took to their heels. Later, under German rule, I happened to run into him.^[9]

“You know what?” he said, “I actually had to sign an agreement to spy on you. But I never gave them anything useful.”

Where are you now, unfortunate hero of Kronstadt?

V. T. (engineer, dp), Moselle, France

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⁸ A “minus-10” meant that he was forbidden to live in ten major cities of the USSR.

⁹ Dnepropetrovsk was under Nazi occupation from August 17 1941 to October 25 1943.