

ACTIVITY 8

Why Communism Failed**From the Czar to Yeltsin: One Woman's Story**

As communism collapses in the Soviet Union it is time to tally up the cost of its 74-year reign. Valentina Kosieva, now 94, saw communism come and now she has seen it go. In the "Gulag Archipelago," Alexander Solzhenitsyn noted that "if you get a letter completely free of self-pity," it can only be from a victim of the Soviet terror: "They are used to the worst the world can do, and nothing can depress them." He might have been writing about Mrs. Kosieva. Recently she told her story to the Journal's David Brooks. It is presented here in slightly condensed form.

I was born in 1898 in Samara, a city on the Volga. I was only with my mother, as my father left us when I was three or four. We had relatives in Kazan, another city on the Volga, where my grandfather had a little shop where he made boots, and he was able to offer us a small room in his house. I studied in the woman's school, and we prayed for the health of the czar every morning, and then we sang together as a chorus, "God Bless the Czar."

Perhaps among the peasants there was a mood against the czar, for they were dependent for everything, but I didn't recognize any striking opposition. Those who worked hard and got money could live by their own standards—people could improve themselves by labor. Since my grandfather made boots we had something. Peasants would come to him and say, "I've been wearing your boots for 25 years. I'm sick of them. Make me another pair."

Of course there were many products in the stores. We never lived as we live now. We could buy enough food for the whole winter, for example. The cellars were full of ice and we stocked meat and chicken and so on. There was plenty of everything.

The revolution started in 1905. A lot of Cossacks came to Kazan to suppress it there. The pogroms started—the stores, homes, everything was ransacked. My uncle was told to clear out his watch store before everything was destroyed. As he and his 12-year-old son were running down the street, some Cossacks appeared and they began to shoot. The bullets hit the father in the hip and the son in the leg. The boy made it to the hospital and said, "They have shot my father." The father's leg was amputated, and he never regained his health. The watch store had to close.

In 1914 we moved to Kalmytskaya, which is on the lower Volga, and we met the revolution there. We did not learn of it immediately. But after the revolution, bands of troops roamed around our region, Red bands, White bands and some that were not affiliated with either side.

One night some White soldiers came to my door and I let them stay at my house, just for humanitarian reasons. I cannot say I was against Soviet power.

When they went away the Reds came and I was arrested because I had housed White soldiers for a night. Under guard I was taken to the militia and the commander told his soldiers to shoot me. But my mother had followed and she begged the officer, saying I was just a young girl who didn't know what she was doing, and in that way she saved my life.

Shortly afterward I married a Kalmyk. He was at the university in the literature department, and when the Soviet power was imposed upon this region, he had an education, and so he was immediately elected the head of local Soviet committee. Later he was appointed head of the Ministry of Education for the Kalmyk region.

After the revolution all foreign goods became unavailable and if you were a rich person you were repressed. Some rich people were shot. Some were sent to Siberia. Some just had their possessions taken.

During the [New Economic Policy] years it was wonderful. Everything was in the stores. Everything you liked was there; it was just necessary to have money. Then in Stalin's time everything became terrible again. People were arrested, for example, for being five minutes late to work. A woman in my office was arrested right from work, in the same dress, and sent to Siberia for five years, with no opportunity to say goodbye to her children. We were frightened all the time. We couldn't speak, and especially if you said something about Stalin. If you said something you could only wait to be arrested.

My husband was arrested in 1937. They came for him one night and told me and my children that in 20 minutes we should be out of the apartment. There was no explanation. We wandered around the city that night looking for shelter and finally found a peasant who was willing to share her room. After that everybody refused just to talk to me. Even my best friends. They wouldn't even say hello to me. They were afraid.

For a time he was kept in different jails, under the control of the KGB. Two times I was able to see him in prison. When we saw each other, it was prohibited to tell certain things. For example, it was prohibited for me to answer him when he asked where our daughter was.

He was sentenced to five years and sent to Magadan, which is very far east, and he died there. I don't know whether he died from disease or was killed there.

Many, many years later, in 1956, I received a short letter, just a few sentences, that said his

arrest was a mistake and that he was not guilty of anything.

During World War II, all the Kalmykian region was occupied. My daughter, her son and I moved out of our house while the German planes were overhead. They were shooting at us. We fled to Aktyubintz but they didn't accept us. They said they had too many refugees already. Then we were to move to Tashkent, but we didn't make it. We settled in Kazakhstan. Everything we brought with us we exchanged for food products. By then I was working as an accountant and we were there for a year and a half, until our home region was free.

At the time we fled my son was in military training. They were taking young guys and training them to become partisans. All of those boys were then sent behind the lines of the German forces. It was very difficult for them to fight in that region because there are no forests, no places to hide. It's very open, just plain. My son's unit was betrayed and surrounded, and only two were taken alive—my son and one other boy.

The Gestapo arrested him and asked: "Why should you fight for the Soviets? The Soviets killed your father. Why won't you work with us?" I was told that he became so enraged that he lifted up the chair and he began to fight with the soldiers. They beat him to death. He was 17.

After the war Stalin repressed not only certain people but also certain nations. The Kalmyks were repressed totally. They had just come home after the German troops were pushed back to the West when the Soviet troops came and moved them away from their place again. I was especially not allowed to live there as the wife of a People's Enemy. My daughter went to Kiev and later she called me there, so I went to Kiev, until 1966.

During those years I was always busy with my job, so I didn't think much. I couldn't tell anybody what had happened to my husband because I needed that job. And then in 1966 I moved to Moscow with my grandson's family, with my great-granddaughter and great-grandson, and now we are all a family.

On the night of the coup, we could see the tanks come by our window [1 ½ blocks from the Russian Parliament building]. My grandson was out jogging. I told him, "They are making a coup and you are jogging!" There was no television on the first day, but we could hear the broadcasts from Mr. Yeltsin. In the evenings the family made coffee and food for the young people who were at the barricades. After the second day, I could follow events on the television. Everybody thinks communism is finished. I am happy it is.

ACTIVITY 8 continued

1. What economic system did Russia use before communism?

2. According to Valentina Kosieva, what economic system had the most emphasis under the New Economic Policy?

3. Why do you think the New Economic Policy was ended?

4. Was communism primarily based on tradition, command, or the market system? (*Circle one.*)

5. Evaluate the communist system using Valentina Kosieva's story and reading from your textbook. How would you evaluate the performance of communism on these goals?

Economic Freedom

Economic Efficiency

Economic Equity

Economic Security

Full Employment

Price Stability

Economic Growth