

Former communists may never reach the promised land

By Dmitri N. Shalin

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The Jewish exodus from Egypt is an apt, if tired, metaphor for changes the Soviet people have undergone in recent years. Russian pundits have special fondness for this biblical story, which they invoke every time reforms take a dramatic turn.

In its early years, perestroika struck many as a God-sent chance to shake communist slavery, and what better way to light up hope for freedom than the rhetoric of exodus?

Then, reform leaders began to dawdle, and soon enough the pundits were serving notice on Gorbachev-the-Moses: "You delivered the nation from the Stalinist captivity, but you might not be the one to see the promised land."

A jubilant mood swept Russia after the failed coup but it soon fizzled out. And as the problems facing the fledgling democracy continued to mount, commentators reminded their readers that it took one day for the Israelites to exit Egypt and 40 years to reach the promised land.

Now the ancient tale is being given yet another and by far the darkest spin: "Only the new generation was allowed to enter Israel — all those born in captivity withered away during the 40-year wondering in the desert."

This latest reading captures the mood in Russia today. More than 90 percent of respondents surveyed in a recent poll complained about their chronically foul mood. My own experience from a recent trip to Russia bears this out. Grumpy faces, menacing demeanors, violent outbursts — emotional littering has become an eyesore on the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Russia's physical environment is as polluted as its spiritual landscapes. Evgenii Beliaev, Russia's health minister, cites a degraded environment as a major threat to public health. Eighty percent of school-age children in Russia show signs of a physical or mental ailment. Incidents of infectious diseases have doubled in the past 12 months. Remarkably, the crisis is less acute at the nation's periphery than its center.

According to a recent survey, 15 percent of fish, 10 percent of milk and seven percent of meat in Moscow food markets pose serious health hazards. Two-thirds of Moscow's drinking water supplies go untreated. Toxic waste dumping at the Izhorsky plant near St.

Petersburg is even more brazen today than in the past. In some cases, the law enforcement seems to have stopped completely.

A few months ago the Interior Ministry released crime statistics which stunned the nation. More homicides were committed in Russia during the first six months of 1992 than in all of 1991. Rapes, burglaries, car theft, aggravated battery — every major crime category has registered a dramatic increase. Letters to the editor published by the newspapers bitterly complain about the police refusing to answer calls for help ("No patrol cars available," explain the officials).

As the country continues its slide into chaos, more and more Russians lose faith in democratic institutions. Boris Yeltsin's ratings have slipped below 25 percent. His political allies have gone on the defensive. What bothers people is that corruption in the democratically elected governments is every bit as rampant as in the communist era. The popular weekly *Ekonomika i Zhizn* reports that for every embezzlement and bribery case in the private sector, six to 10 are committed in the municipal governments and state-run enterprises. Resentment is building against so-called "perestroika intellec-

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tuals" who have found cushy places for their children in the West, seize every opportunity to travel abroad, shop in hard currency stores, and seem otherwise oblivious to the price those less fortunate are paying for reform.

Alas, the Russian people no longer wish to defer gratification and exert themselves on behalf of future generations. They've been sacrificing for decades. A little decency is all they crave, and more than a handful are now willing to follow any leader who promises to deliver it in their lifetime.

There is much truth to the exodus story, which teaches us that habits of the heart endure for generations, that changing old ways takes more than good will and wise decrees, that those

who served the Pharaoh are ill-equipped to lead a free nation. The Jewish Midrash gives us a particularly heart-rending version of this tale, which seems pertinent today.

In the month of Ab, the Midrash tells us, the exodus generation would leave its desert dwellings and start digging graves. After tearful farewells and last confessions, everyone proceeded to lie in the ground. Next morning Moses would rise and cry, "Let the living separate themselves from the dead." Those destined to die remained in their graves, those still alive returned to their homes. The scene was repeated for 40 years. By then everyone born in captivity, except for Joshua, the son of Nun, was dead. At last, the curse was lifted and the new generation went on to claim the promised land.

Would that communists-cum-reformers get the message and voluntarily relinquish their power? The old nomenklatura culture bred into their bones is irrepressible. This wouldn't change the exodus generation's sorry plight, but this might help the new generation to come into its own and find its way to a decent future.

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