

COLD WAR IN PSYCHIATRY

**HUMAN FACTORS,
SECRET ACTORS**



Robert van Voren

Cold War in Psychiatry

Human Factors, Secret Actors

On the Boundary of Two Worlds:
Identity, Freedom, and Moral Imagination
in the Baltics

23

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This book is dedicated to
Professor Pál Juhász
who withstood the pressure of totalitarianism
and followed his own conscience

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Foreword

The year 2009 marked the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even with a short look backward, 1989 appears to have been the year that was nothing short of a miracle. World War II, with its sinister and seemingly insurmountable divisions within Europe, appeared to leave no trace of the disbelief, despair and hopelessness that devastated Eastern and Central Europe for more than forty years. Instead, Europe was filled with joy and a sense of solidarity.

Adam Michnik, a hero of the Solidarity movement and a towering figure among public intellectuals and dissenters of Central Europe, commented that it is quite tempting nowadays to assume the role of having been the then-leading force and major inspiration behind the historic fall of totalitarianism in Europe. Therefore, it was with sound reason that Michnik called the year 1989 the “*annus mirabilis*,” the miraculous year.

In the United States, it is taken for granted that it was the economic power of America that stripped the former Soviet Union of its potential, thereby inflicting on it a humiliating defeat in the Cold War. German politicians would proudly assert that their wise and patient *Ostpolitik* was a decisive factor in this historic struggle, rather than the direct force and bellicose stance of America. In Poland, nobody doubts that Pope John Paul II came to delegitimize Communism both as a world system and a major rival ideology. The Solidarity movement, itself, dealt a fatal blow to the mortally wounded Soviet system by showing that working class people can revolt against the Working Class State and deprive it of its legitimacy. In the Baltic states, it is widely assumed - and not without reason - that the living chain of the joined hands of Baltic people in 1989, followed by the exceptional role of Lithuania as the first rebellious and breakaway republic also played a role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communism in Europe. This role was much too obvious to need emphasis.

All these reasons and arguments are more or less correct. If a unique combination of forces and inspirations had not been possible, 1989 would never have become the decisive year that changed history beyond recognition. Yet one more human factor exists that seems to have been overlooked in Eastern and Central Europe. No matter how much passion and controversy this factor and its mention may arouse, I have to spell out its first and last names. This is Mikhail Gorbachev, the first and the last official President of the Soviet Union, the secretary general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the architect of the restructuring

movement commonly known as *perestroika*. Needless to say, Gorbachev's personality was bound to bring a sharp dividing line between Eastern and Western Europe, probably nearly to the same extent as the assessment of 1968. The emergency of the New Left and of the student revolution in Paris and beyond engraved the memory of the West forming its new moral and political sensibilities. Yet this same year reminds us of how the Soviet Union killed the peaceful revolution of Czechoslovakia, thereby stripping Eastern and Central Europe of the last remnants of hope of creating a more humane version of its political modernity, the illusion known as socialism with a human face.

A Western European intellectual might view this as the Grand March of History stretching from the Latin Quarter of Paris to the rest of the globe, as the character Franz from Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* has it; but it was a tragedy and the jackboot trampling on the face of the human being in the way another character of the novel, Franz's mistress Sabina, a Czech artist in exile, describes it. Socialism and a promise of freedom as a theory in the West proved a horrible practice in the East in that same year of 1968. Memory politics, as well as opposing memory regimes, still divides Europe.

The same applies to Mikhail Gorbachev. A regrettable liar, coward and hypocrite in the eyes of Lithuanians who suffered most from the bestiality and brutality of Soviet troops in January 1991, Gorbachev is highly esteemed and cherished almost as a saintly figure in the unified Germany. On a closer look, however, he is more of a tragic figure straight from a Shakespearean play. Equally vilified in the Baltic countries as well as in Russia itself – the latter with its increasing nostalgia for the power and international prestige of the former USSR that is far beyond present-day Russia - Gorbachev is blamed for the collapse of the empire; he became a litmus test case of historical memory and political sensibilities. Yet the fact is that Gorbachev, whether a man of half-truth and of an inexorably doomed attempt to humanize totalitarianism, as the Lithuanian poet and literary scholar Tomas Venclova labeled him, proved far less driven by irrational impulses of power and blood-thirst than one could expect from the cornered head of the most dangerous and unpredictable state in the world. It is true that he misinterpreted nationalism of the occupied nations and misrepresented the real state of affairs of the USSR. More than that, he found himself totally confused and lost at a crossroads of the state whose very existence violated justice and all modern sensibilities. But there is a crucial point about the ambivalent gravedigger of the Soviet Union: Gorbachev willy-nilly allowed himself to be perceived globally as a rather

weak and confused individual, which would have been unthinkable with his predecessors and successors. If anyone doubts that, let us try to imagine Yuri Andropov or Vladimir Putin in Gorbachev's shoes, let alone other ghosts of the Kremlin.

For lack of a better word for this phenomenon, I would call the reason behind Gorbachev's unwillingness to respond to his failure in the Baltics with massacre a form of decency and humanism, or at least human weakness and moral intuition that may have suggested to him that his story was over. Another epoch had begun, one in which he didn't belong. If one is able to step away from a powerful position and office without causing bloodshed and casualties in retaliation, it is a sign of decency and dignity. Therefore, sometimes it is worth celebrating not only the courage and resolve of those on our side, but the human weakness and confusion of our adversaries as well.

At the same time, we are witnessing how a sinister tendency is increasingly getting stronger in the United States and in Europe. Politicians find themselves preoccupied with two domains that serve as a new source of inspiration: namely, privacy and history. Birth, death, and sex constitute the new frontiers on the political battlefields. Politics is dying out nowadays as a translation of our moral and existential concerns into rational and legitimate action for the benefit of society and humanity, and, instead, is becoming a set of managerial practices and skillful manipulation of public opinion. Thus, it is not unwise to assume that a swift politicization of privacy and history promises the way out of the present political and ideological vacuum.

Suffice it to remember the hottest debates over abortion, euthanasia, and gay marriage over the past twenty or so years conclude that the poor human individual continues to be regarded as either property of the state and its institutions or, at best, a mere instrument and hostage of a political doctrine. This can be considered whether (s)he is born, or is dying, or consummating her or his marriage, etc.

Nothing new under the sky, though. If we are to believe such incisive dystopian writers as Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, or such groundbreaking social theorists as Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman, modernity always was, and continues to be, obsessed with how to get as much control over the human body and soul as possible without physically exterminating people. The same is true with regard of society's memory and collective sentiment.

As we learn from George Orwell's *1984*, history depends on who controls those archives and records. Since human individuals have no other form of existence than that which is granted by the Party, individual memory has no power to create or restore history. But if memory is controlled or manufactured and updated every day, history degenerates into a justificatory and legitimizing design of power and control. Logically enough, this leads the Inner Party to assert that who controls the past controls the future and who controls the present controls the past. If the reader thinks that it does not make sense to refer to the Orwellian world any longer, please think about memory wars in present Europe. That Russia has already become a revisionist power is obvious. Moreover, it attempts to rewrite the history of the twentieth century rehabilitating Stalin and depicting him as merely a wise, albeit sometimes cruel, modernizer of Russia. As we can see, Stalin appears here to have been just another version of the Great Modernizer of the State, just like Peter the Great.

Needless to say, an attempt to outlaw what is regarded in Russia as historical revisionism has its logic; that is, criminalization of any effort to put into question whether the Soviet Union with its labor camps, overtly fascist practices and anti-Semitism (for those who have doubts about this, please do recall the Holodomor in Ukraine or methodical extermination of Russian Jews and Jewish culture under Stalin) was any better than Nazi Germany. By no means is it about the past. As early as under Mikhail Gorbachev, a plethora of decent and courageous Russian historians exposed the Soviet Union to have been a criminal state. Stalin was explicitly regarded as a criminal and paranoid dictator who committed horrible crimes against humanity. The fact that Vladimir Putin's Russia changed the interpretation of the past nearly overnight shows that everything is about the present, rather than the past.

Although the denial of the Holocaust is too complex a phenomenon to be confined to legal practices and administrative measures, Germany outlawed the denial of the Holocaust because of its firm commitment never to repeat its past. Russia cynically denies its occupation and annexation of the Baltic States, as well as its numerous crimes against European nations, because it sends a message to us that it would gladly repeat recent history restoring the past and rehabilitating political doctrine which Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's Russia regarded as overtly criminal and hostile to Russia itself.

Thus, the Baltic States and Eastern-Central European nations attempt to work out an antidote against Russia's revisionism. All in all, this attempt is understandable, but the idea of a political and moral equivalency of

Communism and National Socialism is highly debatable, to say the least. Western Europe and the USA will always take a deep exception to the claim that the Holocaust and Soviet crimes were of the same nature, and quite rightly so. Yet this is not merely a matter of dangerous political implications or morally repugnant conclusions that politicians tend to draw from our painful dilemmas.

The point is that history can never be left solely to politicians, no matter whether democratic or authoritarian. Like human beings and human rights that can never be reduced to a property of the state, history cannot be confined to the supplement of a political doctrine or relegated to the margins of a political regime it supposedly serves. History, if properly understood, is the symbolic design of our existence and moral choices we make every day. Like human privacy, our right to study and critically question history is a cornerstone of freedom.

Robert van Voren's remarkable study of the Cold War in psychiatry and of the political use and abuse of psychiatry in the name of law and order or for the sake of fostering a rival blueprint for a global social and moral order sheds new light on the attempt of Soviet psychiatry to marginalize, clinicalize, stigmatize, and, in effect, criminalize human rights activists and dissidents in the former Soviet Union. A valuable, intensely researched, well documented, provocative, and rich study, it covers an immense discursive, moral, and political territory stretching from a personal perspective and travel story, or an account of friendship and a moral autobiography, to in-depth exploration of the anti-psychiatry-based trend in North American and West European political philosophy, sociology, and psychology. This trend is, perhaps, best exemplified by Michel Foucault and his followers among French poststructuralists and historians of consciousness engaged in what the eminent American sociologist of Lithuanian background, Vytautas Kavolis, aptly described as resistance knowledge.

The book allows the point of entry into the aforementioned ambivalent and sinister tendency of modernity: namely, the conquest of the sphere of privacy and legitimate human secrets by power discourses and power politics. This is, hence, the added value and originality of this deeply personal, yet uniquely universalistic and humanistic book. Even putting aside its scholarly and overall intellectual value, the monograph serves as a potent antidote against a sort of moral and political amnesia from which Europe seems to suffer and also appears as a deeply symbolic and timely token of European solidarity. Van Voren's book reads as a *cri du cœur*, as a war cry, and as a rational political appeal to civilized humanity. It reaches

out to a sensitive readership opening up for a dialogue with those who know little about the war that the Soviet system mercilessly waged on dissidents and human rights defenders through the network of mental asylums, and also through the means of instrumental “rationality” of psychiatry as a science and as an instrument to exercise power over the cornered individual and disciplined society.

A year ago, the book series on Baltic studies “On the Boundary of Two Worlds” offered to an English-speaking readership *On Dissidents and Madness: From the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev to the “Soviet Union” of Vladimir Putin*, the book by Robert van Voren originally written in Dutch and published in The Netherlands, and then translated into English and published with Rodopi. It is with pleasure, then, that now I can present his new landmark contribution to Baltic and East/Central European studies.

This time the readership will be able to enjoy Robert van Voren’s magnificent new book, *Cold War in Psychiatry: Human Factors, Secret Actors*. I wish this new book a long and happy life which it richly deserves.

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Introduction

Writing history, like any work on the past, never consists of establishing facts and nothing more. It always also involves selecting those facts that are more salient or significant than others and making connections between them. Selection and combination cannot only be directed toward truth; they must also always strive toward a good. Scholarship is obviously not the same thing as politics, but scholarship, being a human activity, has a political finality, which may be for good or bad.¹

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is hard to imagine how the East-West confrontation dominated daily life, not only in Europe but also across the globe. Looking back, there are few elements of life that were not connected to it in one way or another. Clearly the most ostensible element was the political standoff between East and West, between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but this was only the icing on the cake. Underneath, virtually everything was divided: an individual was either for or against, left or right, progressive or conservative. The political division dominated politics, daily life, and every other aspect related to it. In the West using “communist” symbols was an act of protest, expressing dissent, and many Western Communists purposely bought a Soviet *Lada* or a Czechoslovak *Skoda*. In the Soviet Union, anything “Western” was the closest you could get to being “hot.” Plastic bags, ballpoint pens, plastic lighters and chewing gum were signs of bourgeois decadence, a small treasure, enough to bribe an official or to pay for a service rendered.

In my life it was no different. I grew up in the Dutch port of Rotterdam and in secondary school the majority of the kids was against the Vietnam War, especially those whose company you enjoyed. Those in favor of the war were considered to be nerds, dull creatures who studied hard and were keen to become productive elements of society: exactly the group in which I did not want to belong. Parents were usually against the USSR, even afraid of it, so adolescents were therefore automatically inclined to be in favor. I grew up in an environment that was definitely pro-American, even if only because I was born in Canada and my father lost his heart to that country. Throughout my youth, he longed to return so we frequented an

¹ Todorov, Tzvetan: *Hope and Memory*, p.128

American church and had American friends. Until adolescence I looked like an all-American kid. Anti-Sovietism was mostly the result of reading about Stalinist terror: first *Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and then an avalanche of other books that unintentionally shaped not only my views but also the course of my life. By the end of the 1970s, I was heavily involved in human rights work on behalf of Soviet dissidents, with a special interest in prisoners that wound up in psychiatric hospitals for purely political reasons. In University in the early 1980s, most of my friends were against the American cruise missiles and in favor of unilateral disarmament and being against the Soviet SS-20s was ‘not done’ as it was almost heresy. I tried to refrain from political discussions, but as soon as they found out my political views some fellow students stopped talking to me because of my alleged “ultra-right attitude.” University studies were dominated by Marxism-Leninism in all sorts and varieties, and criticism of the Soviet Union put you immediately on the wrong footing.



Robert van Voren, 1980

It all came to an end, quite suddenly, and somehow the issue was buried. People went on with their lives, and only a few returned to the past, to discuss the positions they had taken, how they interacted, why they made their choices and the associated implications. Yet this standoff inadvertently destroyed many relations, poisoned human interaction. It was a war, a psychological war, which victimized people on both sides and had long-lasting effects that still influence affairs today.

The first idea to write this book was formed during the throes of creation of another one, which consisted mainly of my own reminiscences of the past thirty years. One particular period seemed to offer more questions than answers, and when reading some documents and papers on the subject I became even more intrigued. I had been an active and quite centrally positioned actor in the events in question; however, it became increasingly clear to me that I had been living in a sort of mental cocoon, being part yet at the same time not knowing the full and maybe even the real picture. I let it be, for the time being, but promised myself to come back to it for further exploration.

The relevant period covered the years 1983-1989, when I was in charge of the International Association on the Political Use of Psychiatry (IAPUP)² and we “waged war” on the World Psychiatric Association (WPA). Our goal was to keep the Soviet All-Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists (AUSNP) from being readmitted to membership of this international body, from which it had been forced to leave in early 1983 after it became clear that a majority in the General Assembly of the WPA would vote for its expulsion, because of the continued abuse of psychiatry for political purposes in the USSR. The campaign in favor of the expulsion of the AUSNP had been one of the main reasons for the founding of our organization in 1980. Automatically, GIP and the WPA were standing on opposite sides of the barricade.

I deliberately call it “waging war” because these were times when nuances were difficult to find. We were convinced that we were right, that the truth was on our side, and that the Soviets were deliberately using psychiatry as a tool of repression. The people within the WPA who tried to keep the issue off the agenda and, subsequently, wanted to bring the Soviets back into its fold were, in our view, “fellow-travelers” who ignored the pleas for help from the victims of political psychiatry and were not interested in defending ethics within their profession. I myself belonged to the hardliners.

Yet time has the tendency to soften views, to help reconsider positions and conclusions, and to make it possible to look at one’s own behavior from a distance. Although I have never doubted that psychiatry was indeed used in a systematic manner as a tool of repression in the Soviet Union and in a number of other countries, I also have learned to see things from a different perspective. I became friends with Soviet psychiatrists, who had seemingly been on the “other side,” including some who had been at WPA meetings as members of the Soviet delegation, and I started to understand their positions, their views on these events. It took a while, but gradually history lost its sharp edges and became more and more explorable.

The period 1983-1989 continued to intrigue, because there were too many hidden factors and open endings, questions to which I was seeking answers. I discovered that our organization had been infiltrated by the East-German secret service Stasi, with very unpleasant consequences. I also found out that one of the members of the Executive Committee of the WPA had been an informal agent of the Stasi, which made the picture even more complex.

² In 1989 renamed into Geneva Initiative on Psychiatry (GIP), and in 2005 into Global Initiative on Psychiatry (GIP).

Undoubtedly, other intelligence agencies also had been engaged, yet their archives remained closed, either because the governments decided not to open them to the public or because no political change took place that would allow for disclosure. Although almost to the very end the Soviet AUSNP maintained that there had been no political abuse of psychiatry in the USSR, the Soviet press frequently wrote about such cases, thereby making the AUSNP look ridiculous and detached from reality.

The period did not end with the World Congress of the WPA in Athens in October 1989, where the Soviets managed to obtain a conditional return. However momentous that moment might have been to those of us so deeply involved in the issue, it was nothing in comparison to what happened on a global scale: less than a month after the WPA World Congress, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, and before the end of the year communism had met its end in Eastern Europe. A few months later, in March 1990, Lithuania declared its independence as the first Soviet republic to make such a move and, although Soviet leadership resisted with armed force, the end of the USSR was an historical inevitability – and the consequences are still there today.

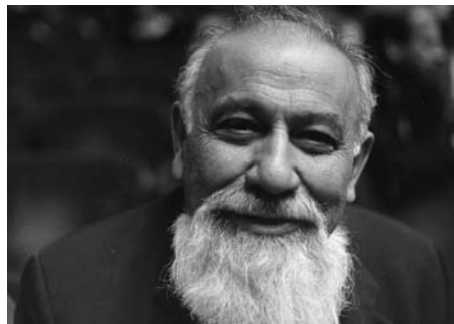
However, further exploration of the period 1983-1989 brought forth a very different picture than originally envisaged. It was not the main political events that triggered my attention but the people behind them, those who had “waged war” with me, on either side of the barricade. When discovering their lives, their backgrounds and convictions, history truly came to life and made it possible to see the political events from a human perspective. In particular, the lives of two members of the WPA Executive Committee intrigued me. One I had known, the other was only a vague image and name. Yet their lives gradually became like threads of DNA, circling around each other and intertwined at certain points, meandering through the history of the twentieth century with all its turmoil, horror and lost hopes. I traveled back with them into their past history and that of their parents, trying to bring back that was lost, or what was seemingly hidden under the dust of time. In addition, in the course of writing the book I met other actors, who became equally engaged and who also shared their reminiscences and views of what happened during those days.

The result of this odyssey is now in front of you. It is not a complete picture or the full story. Some parts were irretraceably lost, either because of inaccessible records (e.g. those of Western intelligence agencies, except for the FBI records on Mel Sabshin, which became available in the course of my research) or because the memories faded away with time. The objects

of my research became researchers themselves, trying to recall what happened, looking for clues and documents, reading texts and commenting on them. What started as my own odyssey became a collective one, a collective effort to tell the story of our “war.”

When I was a history student, a future Sovietologist, one of my favorite books was one by the German writer Heinrich Böll and the Soviet Germanist Lev Kopelev, *Why did we shoot at each other?* The book never reached a wide audience, yet the essence was majestic. It told their story during the Second World War, when both men were drafted into the army to fight each other, two peons in a war that engulfed the world and turned Europe into an endless graveyard. In time, the men became friends, engaged in the struggle for human rights in the Soviet Union, both on the same side of the barricade.³

This image of two former enemies becoming friends and companions stuck with me when writing this book. Also in my case, a friendship developed with one and deepened with the other. Even more important was the fact that I developed a deep respect for both, for their principles, and their roles in this particular history.



Lev Kopelev

I understood what they probably knew all along: that there was more that bound them than divided them, and that their different historical realities in no way prevented them from developing a friendship that survives until this very day.

There is nothing more complicated than history and the attempt to understand why things happened the way they did, what human interaction formed the chain of historical events. It is much easier to put people into boxes and to reduce them to simple stereotypes. It is more challenging to understand the full scope of human emotions, fears and desires, and external factors that determine whether a person winds up in history on the “good” or the “bad” side, or on both.

³ Böll, Heinrich, and Kopelev, Lew: *Warum haben wir aufeinander geschossen?* Lamuv Verlag, 1981

Yet probably the most difficult task is to develop a similarly distant view of oneself, to be able to evaluate one's own role and deeds critically, and with the same desire to put things in perspective. In a way it seems to go against human nature, against the desire to believe in your own importance and the importance of the activities that you undertook. In writing this book, I tried to look at myself, and at my role, from a distance. I tried to be critical, to understand. It is the reader who should judge whether I was successful. In some ways I may have been too lenient, in others too harsh; yet like all the other actors in this story I was shaped by my past, my environment, and by a limited view of what happened around me. Thus, unintentionally, this book became somewhat of an autobiographical one, an attempt to understand my own past activities and put them in a wider context.

For the above-mentioned reasons, this book is not a typical scholarly work⁴. It is based on archival research and on extensive interviews with many of the actors involved. It is equally based on personal recollections, both of myself and of others. And although the central historical event is the 1983-1989 struggle against Soviet political abuse, the book places these events against the backdrop of the turbulent history of the twentieth century. In mixing all these aspects into one story, I tried to maintain an acceptable level of clarity, and I hope I succeeded. This complexity doesn't make the book easier to read, but hopefully makes it more realistic: there is not one clear line in history; there is not *one* history. History is like a whirlwind of factors and actors, both hidden and overt; it is a concoction that never fails to attract and repel, an intriguing mix of what one learns and what will remain untold.

Odyssey

This book would never have been without Ellen Mercer, so my first and heartfelt thanks go to her. It was she who showed herself to be a real friend by maintaining contact with Jochen Neumann throughout the years, and who was the first to suggest to him that he should think of telling me his part of the story. Without her mediation, as Jochen confided to me later, this would never have happened and he would never have developed the trust in me that was needed to open up and tell me his life story. And it was again Ellen Mercer, who edited the manuscript, turning it into the form it has right now.

And that is when the odyssey began. My first intention was to do archival

⁴ The book *Cold War in Psychiatry* was written as a dissertation for obtaining a doctoral degree in political science at Kaunas University, Lithuania.

research and interview both Jochen Neumann and Melvin Sabshin, the two main characters in the book. Yet gradually it got out of hand, and in the end I interviewed more than a dozen people in many countries, sometimes more than once, combining trips for my regular work with interviewing, and usually putting things to paper during the night, while sitting in my hotel room or at home when my wife and children were asleep and my time was my own.

Unforgettable events were the joint interviews of Jochen Neumann and Melvin Sabshin, later joined by Ellen Mercer as well, when, in a strange way, the Executive Committee of the WPA came back to life and the discussions provided a unique blend of memories that helped recreate the atmosphere as it had been years before. Also the long sessions with Costas Stefanis are lasting and dear memories. During these sessions, I had endless conversations with a man who initially seemed to be a main adversary but with whom, in many ways, took on the colors of a friend. Many thanks to those who agreed to be interviewed, in particular, of course, Jochen Neumann, Melvin Sabshin and Ellen Mercer, but also (in alphabetical order): Yosé Höhne-Sparborth; Andrei Kovalev; Valentinas Maciulis, Dainius Puras; Elena Raes-Mozhaeva; Norman Sartorius; Eduard Shevardnadze, Costas Stefanis and Antonis Vgontzas.

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