

Between Two Evils

Mikhail Shifman

THIS WE KNOW: any number of great scientists were forced to flee Nazi Germany: Albert Einstein, John von Neumann, Kurt Gödel, Hans Bethe, Felix Bloch, Max Born, James Franck, Otto Frisch, Fritz London, Lise Meitner, Erwin Schrödinger, Otto Stern, Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, Victor Weisskopf, and Eugene Wigner, a few at first and then a flood. Most chose the UK or the USA as their refuge. A few preferred the Soviet Union. Among the latter were Fritz Noether, a famous mathematician and the brother of Emmy Noether, and Hans Hellmann, one of the founding fathers of quantum chemistry.

Their destinations became their destinies.

By the fall of 1932, the Nazi Party had entered fully into the German political mainstream, receiving, in the November elections, 196 seats in the Reichstag. The Communist Party of Germany rejected overtures from the Social Democrats to form a political alliance against the Nazis. Both parties were doomed. On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor. Two months later, the first concentration camp began its operations at Dachau.

This we know, too: or should. The cloud that had gathered over Nazi Germany had already gathered over the Soviet Union. Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks had led a coup d'état against the ailing government of Alexander Kerensky in October of 1917. The following July, they executed the Russian emperor and his family. The Red Terror began two months later. The Cheka was empowered to take hostages, pass extrajudicial sentences, and enforce them. In the first wave of the Red Terror, thousands of people were executed throughout Soviet Russia. My maternal grandfather was a self-employed tailor. His only property was a Singer sewing machine, which provided a living for his wife and four children. Twice he had to flee overnight to escape arrest as a bourgeois element: from Belorussia into Siberia in the 1920s and from Siberia to Moscow in the 1930s. In Moscow, he did not repeat his mistake. He hid his sewing machine and found employment in a factory.

The Communist Party began to implement the policy of agricultural collectivization in 1929. Farm workers were forced into labor at collective farms—*kolkhozes*. Millions of the most hardworking and productive farmers were

exiled to Siberia, where they were left to die during the Siberian winter. Collectivization resulted in the massive famine that struck the Ukraine and other areas of the USSR in 1932–1933. Indirect data provide evidence that the *Holodomor*, as it is now known, killed two to three million victims.

The *Holodomor*, although terrible, was limited; and Soviet citizens living beyond the Ukraine could regard the unfolding catastrophe with a sense that, if they had little to eat, they had, at least, little to fear.

The situation changed dramatically in the summer of 1937. The Great Terror had begun. Arrests, executions, and the Gulag began to affect virtually every family in the Soviet Union. In 1937 and 1938, the slaughter grew to industrial proportions. Between August 1937 and November 1938, the NKVD arrested 1,548,366 people. More than 680,000 of them were shot. An additional 115,000 “died under investigation”—in other words, under torture.

The atrocities committed in Nazi Germany were more or less in plain sight; those in the Soviet Union were hidden, often by propaganda. In 1937, Lion Feuchtwanger visited Moscow for two months. He was received by Joseph Stalin and attended the second Moscow show trial in January of 1937. Of seventeen accused top-echelon party leaders, thirteen were sentenced to death and shot immediately, and the remaining four were executed a few years later. Returning to the West, Feuchtwanger published *Moscow 1937*, glorifying Stalin and the achievements of his regime.¹ He saw no crimes being committed. Feuchtwanger was not alone of course.² A great many other intellectuals and writers suffered the same visual defect. One man without blinders was André Gide. He had been invited to the Soviet Union in 1936 and delivered a speech at Maxim Gorky's funeral. Then he toured the country. He was able to see beyond the façades of the Potemkin villages shown to him. After his return to Paris, he wrote,

It is impermissible under any circumstances for morals to sink as low as communism has done. No one can begin to imagine the tragedy of humanity, of morality, of religion and of freedoms in the land of communism, where man has been debased beyond belief.³

Gide was fiercely attacked as a traitor in the French press.

Many of the young quantum scientists living under the Nazis were either Jewish or Communist sympathizers, or both. They had no choice: to save their lives they had to flee. A few made the fateful decision to seek refuge in the Soviet Union.

Hans Hellman, a pioneer of quantum chemistry, was born in 1903 in Wilhelmshaven near Hanover, Germany.⁴ He studied at Stuttgart and Kiel Universities and graduated from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Chemistry in Berlin—Otto Hahn and Lise Meitner's Laboratory. Hellmann earned his doctoral degree under the supervision of Erich Regener in Stuttgart. It was in the home of Professor Regener that he met his future wife, Regener's stepdaughter Victoria Bernstein, a Jew from the Ukraine. In 1929 their son, Hans Hellmann Jr. was born. By 1933, the 30-year-old quantum chemist was almost at the top of the German academic hierarchy. Hellman himself was not endangered by the Nazi racial laws; he was of pure Aryan descent. Nor was he a member of the outlawed German Communist party. His scientific career in Germany could have continued had he divorced his wife. He refused to do so.

He received two job offers, one from an American university and the other from the Laboratory of the Structure of Matter at the Karpov Institute of Physical Chemistry in Moscow. He chose Moscow. The family moved to Moscow and Hellman assumed the leadership of the Karpov Institute's Theoretical Group. He gave up his German citizenship and became a Soviet citizen. In 1937, he published in Russian a classic monograph *Kvantovaya Khimiya* (Quantum Chemistry), the first textbook on the subject. The German edition followed shortly after the Russian edition.⁵ It was released in Vienna just before the Anschluss. This would be the last lucky event in Hellman's life.

On March 9, 1938, he was arrested by the NKVD and sentenced to death. On May 28, he was executed by firing squad.⁶ The NKVD did not forget about his wife either: in 1941, she was exiled to a small town in Kazakhstan. Their son was sent to a special orphanage for the children of enemies of the people.

Even before World War II, it was possible to obtain information on what was really going on in the Soviet Union. Niels Bohr and his circle in Copenhagen were well aware of Stalin's mass arrests. Bohr and a number of physicists in Paris were heavily involved in the campaign to save outstanding Soviet mathematicians and physicists from the NKVD and the Gulag. In England, David Shoenberg, professor at the Mond Laboratory at Cambridge, shared his impressions after having spent a year in Moscow at the onset of the Great Terror. During his visit, he had witnessed the arrest of Lev Landau, who had written a leaflet attacking Stalin. George Placzek left Kharkov

in early 1937 and spent time in Copenhagen, London, and Paris, where he explained the realities of the communist regime to his left-leaning colleagues before he left for the US in late 1938. He would later join the Manhattan Project. After miraculously escaping from the USSR in 1937, László Tisza and Victor Weisskopf offered their eyewitness testimonies, too.

After the end of World War II, the Red Army installed puppet pro-Stalin governments throughout Eastern Europe. Political assassinations became common and a wave of political trials swept Eastern Europe in 1949.⁷ Charged and tried, Soviet style, were the veterans of the Spanish Civil War, communists who returned to East Germany from exile, Eastern Europeans who fought the Nazis on the Anglo-American side, and many others. In 1948, the so-called anti-cosmopolitan campaign was launched. Instigated by Stalin, it was a lightly camouflaged anti-Semitic attack. At the same time, Soviet scientists in biology, cybernetics, history, and linguistics were accused of bourgeois-idealistic methods of research.

These events were widely covered in the Western European and American press. The first books by witnesses to these atrocities were published in Europe and the United States. One was written by Alexander Weissberg, an Austrian-German physicist and engineer, who went to Kharkov to build a cryogenic laboratory at the Kharkov Institute for Physics and Technology. He was arrested by the NKVD in 1937, the very same day construction for the laboratory was finished, underwent torture in Stalin's prisons, and in 1940 was transferred from the Gulag to the Gestapo. He miraculously survived and after the war published his memoir.⁸

Books and written testimonies were not enough to discourage Western intellectuals. Victor Kravchenko was a high-ranking official in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who defected to the United States during World War II. He published *I Chose Freedom* in the United States in 1946 and in France in 1947.⁹ His was the first detailed exposé available to Western readers documenting the atrocities committed by Stalin and his henchmen. He depicted mass arrests and executions by the NKVD, the Gulag, the artificial famine in the Ukraine, and the atmosphere of total fear. Although a best seller, the book was met with ferocious attacks from European communist parties. Given Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, and the archival data that became known in the 1990s, it is obvious that Kravchenko in no way exaggerated the situation. Reality had been much worse than he could have imagined.

An especially vicious attack on Kravchenko's character by the French communist weekly, *Les Lettres Françaises*, made him sue the publication for libel in a French court.¹⁰ The trial lasted from January to March 1949. The communist magazine was defended by counsel Joe Nordmann and his team, who summoned numerous witnesses to assert

that Kravchenko was lying. From the Soviet side: Lieutenant Leonid Rudenko, writer Ilya Ehrenburg, directors of the Magnitogorsk, Dnepropetrovsk, and Nikopol factories, and Kravchenko's ex-wife.¹¹ From the French side: Nobel laureate Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Canadian MP Fernand Grenier, journalist Pierre Courtade, writer Simone de Beauvoir, and others. Their testimonies were backed with false documents prepared by the journalist André Ulmann, which were received through an NKVD agent. The left-wing press covering the trial focused on one thing:

the indignation of all honest people of our country [France] who have not forgotten the services rendered to France by our Soviet ally in the fight against Nazi barbarism, and 17 million dead Soviet people will also appear in court as accusers of the traitor Kravchenko.

Kravchenko's legal team enlisted witnesses mostly from the survivors of Soviet prisons and camps. Among them was the Gulag survivor Margarete Buber-Neumann, widow of the German Communist leader Heinz Neumann, who perished at the hands of the NKVD.¹² Another was André-Remy Moynet, a deputy in the French National Assembly and a former air captain who had received numerous decorations from both the French and Soviet governments for missions flown against the Nazis in Soviet territory. "I can testify," said Moynet, "that I saw inhuman episodes similar to those narrated on the pages of Kravchenko's book with my own eyes."¹³ Kravchenko also received around 5,000 letters from displaced persons all over Europe—former Soviet farmers, workers, and engineers. Many of these had been Gulag prisoners whom the Nazis had deported from occupied Ukraine to German labor camps. They all wanted to testify that Kravchenko's book was truthful. Kravchenko selected twenty of them as witnesses.

Their testimonies fully corroborated Kravchenko's allegations.

At one of the last sessions, looking at the courtroom that held foreign diplomats, Jean-Paul Sartre, de Beauvoir, Elsa Triolet, and other celebrated intellectuals present, Kravchenko said: "I believe that I will return to a liberated Russia, otherwise my life would have no meaning. I believe that the world will breathe freely once more. That is the meaning of my struggle."¹⁴

French communists characterized Kravchenko as a Menshevik, fascist, drunkard, gambler, lecher, idiot, fool, puppet, Neanderthal, rat-faced traitor, and rotten severed head.¹⁵

AND THIS, TOO, we should know: when we look around, we see an imperfect world in which there is grief, poverty, resentment, death, betrayal, blood, and sweat. Life is unfair. Someone may be born into a family of loving parents, but someone else into a family of alcoholics. Someone may have wonderful teachers, but

someone else indifferent and ignorant teachers. Thousands of accidents make our starting conditions unequal. Equality before the law is not all that we might hope for but it is the best that we can expect.

There are many ills in modern society, even in the wealthiest countries. It is tempting to conclude that policies already undertaken by the USSR, North Korea, Cambodia, or Venezuela will cure these ills. This is not so. The type of rigid social control required will destroy society, leaving the survivors in misery.

I am a physicist and believe in experimental data. Communist regimes have a clear and discernible history. If they failed in achieving social justice, they have succeeded in exterminating human dignity. As a physicist, I must conclude that the solutions proposed were wrong.

Once in a while I meet someone who says that he, or as often she, is proud to be a democratic communist. I will risk offering a piece of advice: if you believe in a social theory or idea, try to find at least some experimental evidence of its validity. Even beautiful theories must be abandoned if experimental data do not support them.

And this is something every physicist knows.

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1. Lion Feuchtwanger, *Moskau 1937: Ein Reisebericht für meine Freunde* (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1937).
2. Henri Barbusse, *Staline: Un Monde nouveau vu à travers un homme* (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1935).
3. André Gide, quoted in Tarek Heggy, *Culture, Civilization, and Humanity* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 353. André Gide, *Return from the U.S.S.R.*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1937)—for a recent edition available online, see [Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19999/19999-h/19999-h.htm).
4. For Hellmann's biography, see W. H. E. Schwarz et al., "[Hans G.A. Hellmann \(1903-1938\)](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19999/19999-h/19999-h.htm)," trans. Mark Smith et al., from *Bunsen-Magazin* 1-2 (1999): 10-21, 60-70.
5. Hans Hellmann, *Einführung in die Quantenchemie* (Leipzig & Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1937; Springer Verlag, 2015).
6. A similar fate befell Fritz Noether.
7. One of the most prominent assassinations was that of Jan Masaryk in Prague in 1948; Masaryk was the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia who was not ready to blindly follow instructions from Moscow. Examples of the staged trials include those of Hungarian minister of foreign affairs László Rajk and of Bulgarian deputy prime minister Traicho Kostov, as well as the treason trials of distrusted communists in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Albania.
8. Alexander Weissberg, *Hexensabbat* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter

- Hefte, 1951), translated to English by Alexander Weissberg in *The Accused* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951). A German edition was released in Austria under the title *Im Verhor: Ein Überlebender der Stalinistischen Sauberungen Berichtet* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1993).
9. Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946); *J'ai choisi la liberte!* (Paris: Editions Self, 1947).
 10. I should add that much later, in 1968, *Les Lettres Françaises* tried to criticize the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia. This was the end of it: the Soviet government decided to withdraw its subsidies, and so did the French Communist Party. *Les Lettres Françaises*, being stripped of its financial lifeline, ceased publication within a couple of years.
 11. Joe Nordmann stated that, at the request of the defense team, Kravchenko's ex-wife Zinaida Gorlova expressed her desire to travel from the USSR to Paris to testify against him. Everyone who has ever lived in the USSR, especially in 1949, would laugh at the unimaginable, monstrous falsity of this statement. See *Le Procès Kravchenko – Compte-rendu sténographique* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1949); Gary Kern, *The Kravchenko Case: One Man's War on Stalin* (New York: Enigma Books, 2007). In Russian: Nina Berberova, in *The Last and the First: The Case of Kravchenko* (Moscow: Sabashnikov Publishers, 2000).
 12. Heinz Neumann was a German communist politician and a journalist. He was a member of the Comintern, editor-in-chief of the party newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*, and a member of the Reichstag. In 1927, Heinz Neumann was an adviser to the Communist Party of China and participated in the uprising in Canton. In 1932–1934, he was an instructor of the Comintern in Spain. At the peak of the Great Purge, he was arrested in Moscow on April 27, 1937, by the NKVD and sentenced to death on November 26, 1937. His wife was sent to the Gulag.
 13. In Russian: Boris Nosik, *This Strange Paris Trial* (Moscow: Moskovsky Rabochii, 1991).
 14. Kern, *The Kravchenko Case*, 9.
 15. When I read the reports of the trial I was astonished by the humiliations that Buber-Neumann and other witnesses on Kravchenko's side had to go through just to say what they knew was true. Ironically, the court was much more sympathetic with the French cultural elite and tended to ignore poorly dressed and hardly educated commoners on the Kravchenko side—the same simple people, workers and farmers, for whom the elite aspired to build the radiant future.

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