

The Lessons of Another Tolstoy

by Daniel Hager

This is the tale of another Tolstoy—not Leo, the nineteenth-century Russian count, novelist, and social reformer. This Russian came later, in the twentieth century, and was not of the nobility. His first name is obscure. His good friend Vladimir V. Tchernavin, who recounted his story, referred to him only as V. K. Tolstoy.¹

Leo wrote about war and peace. V. K. wanted only peace but was swept up into a war—a special kind of war, waged by a government against its people. Leo’s life was full of fame and honor. V. K.’s turned toward sorrow.

V. K.’s father was a physician with a humble practice. The family’s austere living habits yielded enough savings for university training for V. K. He found his niche in ichthyology and after graduation began research work that improved the Russian fisheries. When the Bolshevik revolution arrived, it concerned him little—he was apolitical. He took an administrative position and discharged his duties with his usual diligence.

The revolution turned into convulsion. Famine and privation swept the land. As dictator in charge, Lenin had the power to order a change of direction, which he did. His New Economic Policy (NEP) was a reversion to the incentives of open markets. Peasants began again producing surpluses because they could keep the profits. Lenin

used shrewd marketing to mask the insult to Marx. His slogan was this: “A communist must be an industrialist and a trader.”

After Lenin’s death Marx’s specter was re-fleshed. One-year plans for industries were ordered to be stretched out to five years. Each year after 1925 saw a new five-year plan drawn up to replace its failing predecessor. In 1928 came the unveiling of the comprehensive nationwide Five-Year Plan to end all five-year plans—the *Piatiletka*.

Until then V. K. Tolstoy was the director of state fishing operations both in the Black Sea in the south and in the Barents Sea in the cruelly inhospitable north. The Northern State Fishing Trust functioned almost like a private enterprise because its base in the settlement of Murmansk, a gray carving out of soilless granite beyond the Arctic Circle, was too grim and remote for meddling from Moscow. This self-contained exclave yielded no great rewards for its inhabitants other than the sheer joy of achievement, of identifying opportunities and applying skills and knowledge, and realizing results. The catch more than quadrupled, and the processing improvements produced quality equal even to the demands of the export markets. Then the *Piatiletka* came along to ruin everything.

Tolstoy had employed science and reason and orderliness in his administration. He was still a researcher at heart who liked to see scientific findings applied to practical problems. He published some scholarly papers. He lectured at an agricultural college.

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But under the *Piatiletka* the nation's fishing industry was placed in the Political Bureau. Tolstoy transferred to the Scientific Institute of Fishing Economy, where he returned to research full-time.

The new breed of managers—party people—understood little about fishing but much about the power of numbers. They set grandiose production goals that made them initially look good. After the Northern State Fishing Trust had attained an exceptional catch of 40,000 tons by dint of hard work and sound management, it was ordered under the *Piatiletka* to reach 175,000 tons within five years. Then a telegram came from Moscow raising the goal to 450,000 tons. Another telegram followed, then another, each with a higher target. Finally the order arrived mandating a million and a half.

The trawlers required for such a feat did not exist and could not be bought or built in time. The personnel to captain the fancied 500 trawlers could not be recruited and trained so soon. The Murmansk infrastructure to process such an overwhelming catch could not be constructed under such tight constraints.

Fumbling Academic

V. K. Tolstoy was an academic now. He had always been the sort who fumbled through his personal life, a loner who didn't even bother to repair the holes in his boots. Tchernavin recalled that Tolstoy was one of the few who failed to profit during the transient prosperity of the NEP. V.K. poured his life into fish.

As a researcher he was assigned to study the carrying capacity of the Barents Sea fisheries. His conclusion was that a 500-trawler fleet was fatuous, that anything over 125 would be inefficient.

When he read his report in public, the party members who could not avoid attending fidgeted in silence. They knew he was right, but they did not dare to offer either support or rebuttal. Their reactions would become known up through the party ranks and to the GPU, the secret police, so they sat with faces of stone.

The purported leap forward of the *Piatiletka* provided good copy at first for the government-controlled newspapers. The foreign press picked up on the superior accomplishments of the unshackled proletariat compared to the anemic past under bourgeois bondage.

But then reality overtook the propaganda. Not only were the *Piatiletka* goals not being met, but the entire food system was also unraveling. Lenin-style famine was staring Stalin in the face. The pillars of production—the Fishing Union, the Meat Union, the Canning Union, the Vegetable Union—were all in a shambles. The incantation in the newspapers was “difficulties of growth.”

Tolstoy was vexed that some of his most competent cohorts from his days in the fisheries were mysteriously disappearing from their offices. “Something incomprehensible is going on,” he said. As more chaos ensued, more of the scientists and engineers and technicians received visits in the night from the GPU.

On the journey to a classless social structure a new culprit class came into being. The identifying term was “wreckers.” They were counterrevolutionaries, bourgeois reactionaries. Through the summer of 1930 the captive press chronicled the “breaches” of the “wreckers” in all sectors of the economy, from food and chemicals and lumber to coal and steel and rubber, and on and on. Veterinarian wreckers poisoned pigs—hence the shortage of meat. Unsanitary handling of foodstuffs caused a shortage of vegetables. “Who interferes with the supply of vegetables?” blared one headline, followed by “Why is prosecution inactive?”

It wasn't, for arrests were mounting night by night. Not uncuriously, the victims were all noncommunists. The role of party members was to point out the wreckers and fabricate evidence.

Tolstoy wrung his hands at the events but never fully grasped the new realities. “I'm so glad I have nothing more to do with planning,” he said. “Scientific work is much more peaceful.” In August he was in Baku, on the Caspian Sea, and might have been able to slip across the nearby border into Persia but

never made the attempt. He returned to Moscow, apparently unmindful of the machinery then grinding away. His apartment had been searched during his absence. A few days before his departure a communist professor had publicly alleged that the Barents Sea could yield 15 million tons of fish, that the trawlers were bringing in only 5 percent of the potential catch. Those who averred otherwise were wreckers.

Oblivious to Doom

On September 11, 1930, the unworldly V. K. Tolstoy, a noncommunist fisheries expert, a scientist first, last and only, sensed no personal danger but was already doomed. On September 12 he was arrested. A September 9 memo by the GPU contained “testimonies” that Tolstoy was a wrecker.

Also rounded up were other apolitical experts, one a specialist in international fishing law, another the nation’s leading authority on fresh-fish refrigeration, another the foremost expert on fishing equipment. The September 22 newspapers exposed a total of 48 from all the food sectors as part of a conspiracy, “a counter-revolutionary organization of wreckers of the workmen’s food supply system,” rooted in the pre-revolutionary privileged castes, funded by foreign capital, aimed at “the producing of famine in the country . . . and thereby attempting to precipitate the downfall of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

As the court cases against the 48 advanced, workers around the nation were forced to attend meetings and call for “justice.” Newspaper stories on September 23 and 24 published enthusiastic worker resolutions endorsing execution.

The GPU acceded to this groundswell of demand. It announced that the 48 had been condemned to be shot. Furthermore—“the sentence has been carried out.”

V. K. Tolstoy fell before a bullet like a common criminal. He was guilty of being a scientist. No communists were among the 48, just some of the most essential technical talent in the nation.

Outside apologists still were unwilling to believe. The *New York Times* published a party-line dispatch claiming the 48 were “members of a secret counter-revolutionary society” comprising mainly “former noblemen, Czarist officers, manufacturers and property owners.”² It editorialized that “the long waiting lines before the food and goods stores are due in large measure to counter-revolutionary machinations” and that “today the food supply organization of the country is still at the mercy of irreconcilable bourgeois and ex-Czarist experts.”³

The reporters and editors had not talked to Vladimir V. Tchernavin. He also was a fisheries expert and was himself soon arrested. He fled from a prison camp to Finland with his wife and son in an escape so harrowing and incredible that, had it been from Nazi Germany, it would long since have been a movie.⁴

But the mythology of Marxism persists today. The problem, we are supposed to believe, was not with Marx but with Stalin. A more benign leader would have avoided the butchery.

However, the problem is Marx. Central economic planning is not really about economics. Politics trumps economics. The populace must be politically manipulated to be kept in place. That end must be achieved by whatever means.

Egalitarianism is inherently oligarchic. Hence it is conservative. Socialism, once it replaces an *ancien régime*, immediately becomes its own *ancien régime*. Marx was not a revolutionary but a reactionary trying to craft a new model of royal privilege to be enjoyed by a new nobility—himself and his kind.

The unremembered burial sites of V. K. Tolstoy and the other 47 are testimony to the futility of a lingering delusion. □

1. Vladimir V. Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1935). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from this book.

2. “48 Executed in Soviet as Damagers of Food; All Convicted of Plotting a Counter Revolt,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1930, p. 1.

3. “Stern Measures in Russia,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1930, p. 22.

4. Tchernavin, and Tatiana Tchernavin, *Escape From the Soviets* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1934).