

Cold facts don't warm the heart

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I rang in the New Year with a head cold and an upset stomach. As I get older, I do less ringing in and more checking out.

On Tuesday night, after a mild November and December, the temperature sank to a wind-chilled minus 10 F. That's cold for Virginia, even for the foot of Snowy Mountain in January.

I've been thinking about cold, because that's how it is, and I have one, too.

In the past, I've been chilled to the point of shaking, but I've never been stone cold for very long or close to frostbite. As I write, wind-driven snow shakes my windows and rattles my walls, but I am warm. I know cold is here, but I'm not paying much attention. Still, it's a fact that won't disappear by not looking out the window.

I had lunch last week with a friend from Finland whose grandfather had been executed in a Soviet prison camp in Kolyma, a hostile permafrost and tundra in the Russian Far East.

Beginning in the 1930s, Stalin directed that hundreds of thousands of criminals, political prisoners (those said to be "Enemies of the People" or "counter-revolutionaries"), intellectuals, rich peasants, religionists, total innocents and others be sentenced to slave-labor in this mountainous wilderness where winter temperatures fall to more than minus 50 F during winters that last six months.

Prisoners worked 12 hours a day or more to survive, if only, to generate heat. With hand tools, they cut trees, mined for gold, copper, coal and other minerals; built roads and factories. If they met their work quota, they received about 1.5 pounds of bread per day; if they failed, they received 10 ounces.

In the 1930s, a Soviet citizen could be sentenced to as much as 25 years for telling a joke about a Communist Party official.

In Soviet elections, a single Party candidate ran for each office. A citizen voted by placing his ballot with somber ceremony in an official box. Beekeeper Ivan Burylov scribbled "Comedy" on his "secret" ballot in 1949 and was sentenced to forced labor for eight years.

Between 1934 and 1953, about 25 million Soviet citizens and German POWs were sent into the Soviet Gulag, labor colonies or internal exile.

These facilities were scattered throughout the country. Their remnants lasted until the late 1980s.

A significant number of Russians still admire Stalin, the man who led them to victory over Hitler and forced them into 20th Century industrialism. Vladimir Putin invokes Russian nationalism to win support in a way that criticizes Stalin just as we, Americans, shake our heads over our ancestors' mistreatment of Native Americans. Progress, it seems, demands sacrifice.

Had I lived in the Soviet Union, I would have ended up in one of these prisons. Probably one of the ice-boxes. Maybe Kolyma.

I like to think that most Americans would have, too, but I usually underestimate the ability of people to adapt to dreadful circumstances.

My crime would have been some version of failing to believe the party line, or failing to pretend earnestly to believe it, or mouthing off, or being a jackleg gadfly, or just being.

How many decades would I have received for writing in "Donald Duck" after crossing out Comrade Stalin?

One nice thing about American politics is that for better or worse, anybody can say just about anything about any candidate.

What's said -- by both the candidate about himself and his opponents about him -- can be absolutely true, mostly true, more or less true, sort of true, not very true, basically untrue or just a baggy-diaper lie. These days, I hear true facts and false facts, and whether a fact is one or the other often depends on what the definition of is is.

Today, we have no fear of spreading falsehoods about our leaders; under Stalin, citizens feared saying the truth.

The next 11 months of electioneering will disgust us with name-calling (traitor, enemy of the people), distortion, exaggeration, quotations out of context, innuendo, cover ups, hair-splitting, weaseling, spinning, venality, cynicism, pandering and promises that can't be kept even if they are sincerely made, which most won't be. As bad as this will feel, it's better than the enforced silence and blindness that Stalin imposed.

I might write "Comedy" on my paper ballot at the Blue Grass Ruritan Building next November. And I'm thankful that nothing will happen to me.

Unfortunately, writing "Comedy" on my ballot won't do anything to change the system that makes it one.

If I knew I would spend the next eight years in Kolyma for sticking out my tongue at the authorities, I would not do so. I'm too old for such self-indulgences, and the globe is not warming fast enough to bring palm trees to the shores of the Bering Sea in my lifetime.

Fortunately, Americans have figured out that political stability is more effectively achieved by encouraging cacophony than by suppressing it.

Perhaps I would write differently about these subjects if my head wasn't leaking like a colander plug in a fire hose. Facts, however inconvenient, are facts nonetheless.

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