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Blaze the light

Liberals never tire of insisting that the communist countries are really very much like us. What separates East from West, they claim, are only mutual misunderstanding and fear.

Recently, three grim reports of political prisoners have come to me, providing shockingly clear proof — if any more was necessary — of the stark difference between the two systems.

1. Yuri Shukhevych — His crime: "Anti-Soviet activities." His true offence: Being the son of the Ukrainian nationalist leader, Roman Shukhevych, who was killed by Soviet troops in 1950 while fighting for Ukrainian independence.

The younger Shukhevych was first jailed at the age of 14. Ten years later he was freed after the Soviet government admitted his imprisonment to have been illegal. But when Shukhevych refused to publicly denounce his father, he was thrown back into the gulag for another 10 years. Upon release he was exiled for four years. Shukhevych still refused to speak against his father and was consequently jailed for a new term of 12 years at hard labor.

Today, Shukhevych, who has spent 31 of his 51 years of life in Russian prisons, is seriously ill and nearly blind. The Soviets, who are using this wretched man as a symbol of their determination to eradicate Ukrainian nationalism, refuse to free him — the son is to pay for the deeds of the father.

Shukhevych's adamant refusal to denounce his father evidently infuriates the KGB: In Russia, children are still encouraged to report "anti-state" activities of their parents to the secret police. Deep in the gulag, Shukhevych reminds them — and us — that the spirit of Ukrainian nationalism, and of basic human decency, remains alive.

2. The 17 Albanians — Yugoslavia likes to project to the outside world an image of democratic, human socialism. Behind this facade and the glitter of the Sarajevo Olympics is a darker face.

Seventeen Albanian political prisoners, and many hundreds more, have been jailed for daring to ask the Yugoslav government that their home province of Kosovo be transformed from an exploited appendage of Serbia into an Albanian ethnic republic within the Yugoslav federal state. Kosovo, 71% Albanian in population, is being governed by Belgrade like an occupied enemy territory.

His story is harrowing: Incessant beatings, ice-water torture, humiliation and sadistic abuse by Serbian guards. Nearly all of these Albanians, many of whom were educators or journalists, have suffered permanent injury or maiming. Most are seriously ill and are denied even rudimentary medical attention. Though thousands of other Albanian and Croatian political prisoners in Yugoslavia are reported to suffer from similar abuse, their plight has been largely ignored in the West.

Deported to Siberia

3. Mustafa Dzhemilev — During World War II, Stalin, suspecting the loyalty of the Muslim Crimean Tartars, had them deported en masse to Siberia. Though exonerated after the war, the Tartars were denied permission to return to their ancestral home.

The 39-year-old Dzhemilev has spent most of his adult life in Russian prisons. His crime: Urging Moscow to allow the return of his people to the Crimea. After his most recent five-year term, Dzhemilev was released. He sent a birthday-greeting telegram to a Tartar nationalist exile in New York. For this act, he was charged anew with "anti-Soviet agitation," tried in secret, and given a sixth term in prison.

All of these men are being used by the Russians or Yugoslavs to terrorize and silence their restive minorities: Ukrainians, Albanians, Croats and Muslims. Soviet efforts to expunge nationalist sentiments within its empire, where Great Russians will soon be in the minority, are best described by Tory MPP Yuri Shymko as "ethnocide".

During the 1930s and 1940s, the world watched in silence as millions of Ukrainians and Jews were exterminated by Stalin and Hitler. At first, individuals were taken away; then groups; then villages; and finally, entire peoples. Had the free world taken action in the early stages to protect individuals, the ensuing tide of death might possibly have been averted.

Today, Canada and the United States — the home in exile of Eastern Europe's lost freedom — can still take effective action. The first thing we can do is to blaze the light of public outrage into the dark recesses behind the Iron Curtain. The Soviets and Yugoslavs, who are extremely sensitive to their international image, have released political prisoners when subjected to persistent foreign protests.

The next step is to bring pressure on our own political leaders by demanding that, in dealings with the East bloc, release of prisoners of conscience be their first priority. In Canada, where almost 1.5 million voters are of East European origin, the oppression of their peoples should take precedence over selling wheat or importing Lada cars.

In its efforts to promote trade and appear an international Good Samaritan, Canada has gone to unseemly lengths to please the East bloc — including even the refusal to arrest Russian spies. Here is an excellent opportunity for Brian Mulroney to demonstrate that he and Canada stand for something more than our record of tired platitudes and efforts to be nice to everybody.

The great Roman orator, Cato, ended every senate speech by saying, "Carthage must be destroyed." Each time our diplomats meet with Soviet or Yugoslav officials they should emulate Cato by the demand, "Free Shukhevych and Dzhemilev, free the 17 Albanians."

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