



IRON GRIP AND IRON CURTAIN

Behind the Iron Curtain

As a totalitarian state, the Soviet Union sought to control the lives of its citizens. As pointed out by Hannah Arendt in her classic 1951 study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a totalitarian system attempts to transform a citizen from an individual into a component of the undifferentiated masses, with the goal of removing any potential objections to the unchallenged power of the state. In such a state, it is not enough to merely prohibit political opposition or restrict the freedom of the press; a totalitarian system attempts to control the private behavior and innermost beliefs of an individual, directing one's personal decisions, ranging from where to live to choice of career, marriage, and the way in which to raise one's children. In the Soviet Union, an elaborate system of mechanisms of control, coupled with a self-censorship born of fear and a politically enforced sense of isolation, gave the state unparalleled control over the lives of its citizens.

Control Mechanisms

The chief control mechanism in the Soviet Union was the Communist Party, whose ideology and regulations determined how the people should live. Members of the party had to obey its strict rules and transmit its ideology to the masses. The agency for enforcing this order was the secret police (the KGB). Despite its vast resources and almost unlimited power, however, the KGB could not control all aspects of the lives of every individual. Instead, it supervised the process and dealt with the most flagrant violators of these rules, such as political dissidents.

Ensuring that citizens complied with the regulations of the party, then, rested with other institutions, beginning at the top with government ministries and extending down to individual factories, offices, and schools. The Ministry of the Interior, for example, not only determined where one lived by issuing residence permits but, together with the prosecutor's office and the judicial system, compiled a criminal code containing a vast catalog of felonies punishable with imprisonment, ranging from homosexuality to possessing foreign currency and selling any item for a profit. The Ministry of Communications ensured that communications by mail and telephone would not be used "against the interests of the state," cooperating with the KGB to wire-tap phone conversations and monitor mail.

Censorship: Within and Without

The State Committee on Publications censored all books, newspapers, and other published material. Yet this and the other methods of control could not have succeeded to the extent they did without a key element of totalitarianism: self-censorship in response to state terror. After the Stalinist purges, Soviet citizens lived in a state of fear, not daring to take any step not approved by the government. "Whatever is not explicitly allowed is prohibited," became the basic law of life for many. Yet it was difficult at times to know what was permitted, in that many regulations and laws were considered classified and not available for the average citizen to examine. Soviet citizens were thus left to guess at the rules and respond accordingly.

Isolation and Secrecy

Soviet people were also isolated, with the ability to travel abroad the privilege of a select few. Even fewer people were able to emigrate; unauthorized attempts to leave the country were a serious crime punishable by a lengthy prison sentence or death. To enforce the law, more than one million guards were stationed along the border, with orders to shoot anyone who dared to cross. The flow of information into and out of the country was also seriously restricted.

In addition to isolating Soviet citizens, the Iron Curtain also fostered a climate of secrecy, a pillar of all totalitarian societies. Such secrecy not only separated Soviet citizens from one another but kept them unaware of events in their own country. Breaches of secrecy were punishable offenses; such secrecy allowed the government to operate, through a system of secret laws and regulations, the secret police and secret courts.