

A Child of the Terror

In Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, Peter Yakir spent his teen years trying to survive the dictator's prisons

CHARACTERS

Peter Yakir

Vera Komerstein, a family friend
Moskovkin, an officer of the NKVD
(secret police)

Lekhem, an NKVD chief

***Ivan**, a prisoner

Yura Garkavy, Peter's cousin

***Abanya**, a prisoner

Marsya, a theater director

Kartashov, a Gulag warden

Mischa Medved, a prisoner

Colonel Petrov, a NKVD officer

Narrators A-E

*Indicates fictional or composite character. All others were actual people.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Communist** (*adj*): relating to a political system in which the government controls most aspects of daily life, with personal freedom severely limited
- **purge** (*n*): a widespread, organized campaign to remove or eliminate a group of people
- **totalitarian** (*adj*): relating to dictatorial control by a leader or group

PROLOGUE

Narrator A: In 1917, the Russian Revolution shook the world. That year, a group of revolutionaries led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin helped overthrow Russia's monarchy. Within a few years, they had built a massive **Communist** empire made up of Russia and neighboring republics. It was called the Soviet Union.

Narrator B: Under the **totalitarian** system, anyone who opposed the Soviet leaders could be killed or jailed with little reason. Millions of political prisoners disappeared into a vast network of prisons called the Gulag (*see map, p. 24*).

Narrator C: After Lenin died in 1924, Joseph Stalin seized power. Stalin was obsessed with finding "enemies" of his rule—most of them imagined. In 1937, he unleashed a **purge** of high-ranking Soviets called the Great Terror. No one was safe—not the most powerful generals, not their children. This is the story of one teenage boy who was caught up in what is often called "the other Holocaust."



SCENE 1

Narrator D: In May 1937, Peter Yakir, 14, is living with his parents in Kiev, in the Soviet Republic of Ukraine. Because his father, Ion Yakir, is a top general in the Soviet Union's Red Army, the Yakirs have a good life. But one night, Peter comes home to find agents from Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, tearing their apartment apart. A family friend sits with his mother, who has collapsed on a couch.

Peter Yakir: What's going on here?



Gulag prisoners dug the White Sea Canal in northwest Russia by hand from 1931 to 1933. More than 25,000 died under harsh conditions.

Vera Komerstein: Peter! Your father's been arrested. Your mother is taking it very hard.

Peter: What are these men searching for?

Komerstein: Proof that your father's a foreign spy, they say!

Narrator E: Within a few weeks, Peter learns that his father has been convicted on false charges in a secret trial, then executed. Peter and his mother are also called "enemies of the Revolution," simply because they are family members.

After being exiled to the city of Astrakhan, Peter's mother is imprisoned and Peter is hauled before NKVD agents.

Moskovkin: You are charged with organizing a cavalry [horseback army] and spreading anti-Soviet ideas among schoolchildren.

Peter: That's ridiculous! I just enjoy riding horses with friends.

Narrator A: The local NKVD chief enters.

Moskovkin: Comrade Chief, the little snake won't confess.

Lekhem: We'll sign the confession ourselves. Take him away.

SCENE 2

Narrator B: In the weeks that follow, Peter is moved to various dirty, freezing prison cells. His food is mostly bread and watery soup. Peter is routinely beaten by the guards. Then he is thrown in with a group of other boys whose parents have been arrested.

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Ivan: You look like you haven't eaten for days. We heard you were coming and saved you some soup and bread.

Peter: You're saving my life. Why are you in this prison?

Ivan: They claimed I was part of an organization that wanted to restore Russia's monarchy. That boy over there, he's only 13. All he did was fire his slingshot at a portrait of Stalin!

Narrator C: One of the boys in the cell is Peter's cousin Yura.

Yura Garkavy: We're suffering for the crimes of our parents. But it was right that they should be arrested and shot.

Peter: You're crazy. What crimes did they commit?

Yura: There must have been some reason. Stalin is a genius.

Ivan: That's still what a lot of Soviet people think. But Stalin's been rounding up and killing people for years for no reason.

Narrator D: Peter organizes a hunger strike to demand the prisoners' rights and gets a reputation as a troublemaker.

He is sent from prison to prison on a long journey that takes him north into the Ural Mountains.

Months later, he finds himself in a cell with walls that are covered in graffiti, which he reads aloud with a fellow prisoner.

Abanya (reading): Listen to this: "January 5, 1938. Gone to the firing squad. But I shall die a Communist."

Peter: How about this? "Let my family in Moscow know that I was shot on February 20. I'm innocent."

Abanya: The story of the Soviet Union is written all over these walls. None of us knows why, but the revolution is swallowing us up.

SCENE 3

Narrator E: Peter is transferred yet again, this time to the Disciplinary Colony for Juveniles in the town of

Verkhoturys. He is allowed to take part in a theater troupe directed by Marsya, a girl from the town. One day, Peter gets permission to leave the colony grounds to perform in a play—secretly intending to escape. As he meets Marsya outside the colony gates . . .

Marsya: Listen, I know what you're up to. But it's OK. There's a river here, and on the other side, deep in the brush, is a deserted windmill. I'll meet you there when I can.

Narrator A: During the play, Peter escapes through a window and crosses the river in a stolen rowboat. It takes him hours to find the windmill, where he spends the night, hungry and cold. Finally, Marsya appears with warm clothing and food.

Peter: What's happening in the camp?

Marsya: When they found you were missing, they went crazy. The guards have herded all the boys back into the camp, and the warden has sent dogs out after you.

Narrator B: Peter runs for another day before the dogs find him and the guards take him back to the colony. The warden is furious.

Kartashov: The other boys in the troupe want to wring your neck, and so do I. Why did you run?

Peter: Because I have been imprisoned for nothing.

Kartashov: For this *nothing*, you can be sent to a labor camp where you'll be worked to death.

Peter: There's a song the prisoners sing. It goes, "Death or freedom, that's the only choice you have."

Narrator C: Peter is sent to a maximum-security camp but keeps trying to escape. Each time, he is caught and brought back.



Created in 1922, the Soviet Union had grown by 1940 to be the largest country in the world. Its network of "camps of special significance"—known as the Gulag—expanded widely in the 1920s. At its height, the Gulag system was made up of hundreds of camps, many in Siberia. Tens of millions of prisoners were sent to the camps.

JOSEPH STALIN

ONE OF HISTORY'S MOST FEARED RULERS

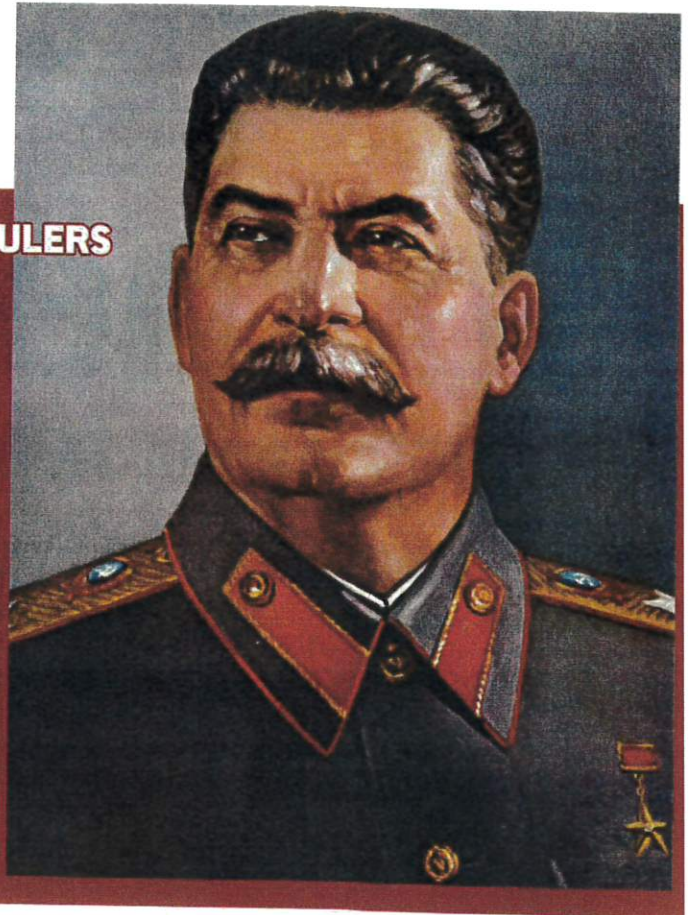
Probably no one has held power over more people than Joseph Stalin [1879-1953]. Born into a poor family, he didn't become a priest as his mother wished. Instead, Stalin found his calling as a ruthless politician.

Taking absolute control of the Soviet Union in 1928, Stalin set about transforming Soviet society. In less than a decade, the country became an industrial giant second only to the U.S.

After World War II

[1939-1945], the Soviet Red Army seized control of Poland, Hungary, and other Eastern European countries. Stalin set up Communist governments there, establishing control over an additional 100 million people.

Stalin ruled with an iron fist. Few people dared to challenge him. Once, reviewing a list of prisoners to be executed, he sneered. "Who's going to remember all this riffraff in 10 or 20 years' time?" he said. "No one."



SCENE 4

Narrator D: Peter is punished by being sent to labor camps. The work outside in the mountains is hard, and the weather is bitterly cold. The inmates are plagued with lice, and many are so hungry that they are reduced to near-skeletons. Peter and his friend Mischa talk about how wide Stalin's terror has spread.

Mischa Medved: Did you hear about Moskovkin and Lekhem? Not long after they arrested you, they were imprisoned themselves.

Peter: Serves them right.

Mischa: They say that Moskovkin ended up with a bunch of prisoners he had interrogated. They drove a stake through his heart.

Peter: That's what this fear does. It creates monsters out of everyone.

Narrator E: The Great Terror ends in November 1938. But Stalin and his secret police keep sending people to the Gulag. Peter continues to be moved between prisons and

work details. Then one day in 1942, he is called before an NKVD agent.

Colonel Petrov: So this is what you're like. I thought you'd be bigger and tougher-looking. Peter, how would you like to redeem your father's guilt?

Peter: I still don't know what my father was guilty of.

Petrov: Let's not get into that now. He was convicted as a traitor, and you'll have to prove that you're a real Soviet man. We've decided to release you. You'll be sent to the city of Sverdlovsk, and you will be able to work and study there. What's so funny?

Peter: I thought you had brought me here to shoot me.

Narrator A: Soon Peter is given a new camp uniform, two lumps of sugar, and some canned meat and is put on a train to Sverdlovsk. After five years in the Gulag, he is free as suddenly as he was imprisoned.

EPILOGUE

Narrator B: There is no way of knowing how many millions of people were thrown into the Gulag. By one estimate, 30 million people died in the prison camps between 1918 and 1956. When Stalin died in 1953, many Gulag camps were closed and hundreds of thousands of prisoners were freed. Yet the Soviet Union remained repressive, and its secret police feared.

Narrator C: The Gulag marked Peter Yakir for life. In 1972, after years of speaking out against Stalin's crimes, he was arrested again, on trumped-up charges. Under intense interrogation by Soviet security agents, he signed an apology for his previous criticisms of the government. Yakir died in 1982, at age 59. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and split into 15 separate countries. The great Soviet experiment was over.

—Sean Stewart Price