

Culture

How to kill your dragon

To understand modern autocrats, read Soviet children's literature

Evgeny Shvarts explores the delusions of the populace as well as the depredations of leaders



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IN THE CLOSING days of the cold war, when St Petersburg was still Leningrad, that city's Herzen University Institute of Foreign Languages used a short play by Evgeny Shvarts to teach Russian to foreigners. Shvarts was a great writer who had dodged Stalin's purges by taking refuge in the relative safety of children's literature. "Dragon", completed in 1944, presents itself as a whimsically ironic take on a fairy-tale plot. In fact, it is among the most perceptive deconstructions of authoritarian rule ever written—one that is bitterly relevant now that autocrats are making a comeback.

Lancelot, the hero, arrives in a land that has been tyrannised for centuries by a three-headed dragon. The dragon demands a maiden every year as well as colossal quantities of cattle and other delicacies. Lancelot declares his intention to slay the

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knights who tried to kill him got themselves crisped, and only made things worse. Besides, he protects them from the other dragons. When Lancelot suggests there may be no other dragons, they refuse to believe him.



Undaunted, Lancelot goes ahead. The dragon and his flunkey, the mayor, plot to sabotage the knight, and most of the populace collude with them. But a small underground supplies Lancelot with weapons and a flying carpet. When the battle starts the villagers obediently proclaim loyalty to the dragon. As the first two heads crash to the ground, propagandists insist nothing is wrong. Only when the last head comes off do the fickle townsfolk celebrate.

A year later, Lancelot returns to find that the mayor has forced the villagers to embrace the lie that it was he, not Lancelot, who killed the dragon. Using spies, prisons and the citizens' own penchant for corruption, he has taken the tyrant's place. The disappointed knight concludes that beheading was not enough: the worm has twisted his subjects' souls, and "we have to kill the dragon in each one of them."

In order to avoid the gulag, Shvarts claimed the dragon stood for Hitler; obviously it stood for Stalin, too. During the period of *glasnost*, readers of "Dragon" took it as a brilliant indictment of a form of totalitarianism that was receding from the world. By the late 1980s communist governments had mostly lost their appetite for killing their own subjects. Indeed the citizens of Soviet-bloc nations were out in the streets, bringing their dragons down.

Reading the play 30 years later, however, is heartbreaking. The dragons are back, from Ankara to Moscow, hoodwinking their peoples while claiming to protect them from non-existent threats. Some of their subjects tolerate them; many cheer them on. Shvarts captures it all: the lies which tyrants spread to mask their depredations as patriotism, their cynical insistence that resistance is futile and their need to murder those who speak the truth.

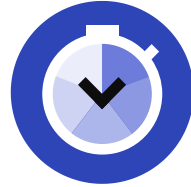
Most of all he shows how citizens are corrupted to collaborate in their own

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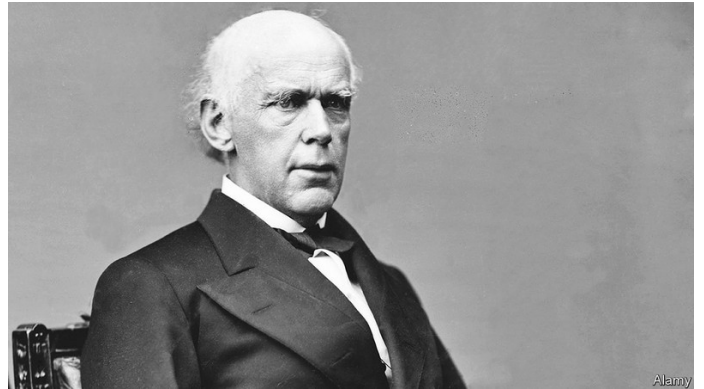
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