



FELIX DZERZHINSKY

A Terrifying Success

Lev Neymotin | Uncompressed Thinking

Today's Wall Street Journal article about the Shanghai Agents got my memory in deep reverse. It carried me back to the early 1980s, soon after my brother and I came to the United States from the Soviet Union. We were fresh immigrants, still learning the country. Almost casually, my brother noted that he could see Felix Dzerzhinsky's hand in what America was already living through.

His remark stayed somewhere in the background for more than forty years. The article brought it forward again, with uncomfortable force. My brother would not be shocked to observe what is happening in America today. Only bitter and devastated by the proof.

Absolute success, Comrade Dzerzhinsky. A terrifying success!

Then I went back to the Soviet couple planted in China, Yakob Rudnik and Tatyana Moiseenko. What stopped me was not the cleverness of the operation. It was the people themselves. They gave up almost everything for ideas they accepted as true: their names, their normal lives, their freedom, even their child. They risked death and spent years in prison without revealing who they were.

People like this are usually described simply as agents, and technically that is what they were. But the word is too small. A hired agent can be bought and perhaps bought again by somebody else. These people were totally sincere. They were convinced. You cannot buy loyalty like this. Money can pay for an operation; it cannot by itself create a person willing to disappear into another identity and call the sacrifice a duty.

They were not doing what the system created by Dzerzhinsky and his gang wanted done simply for money. They were thrilled to do it. The Soviet Union supplied money, false identities, safe houses

and organization. The ideology supplied the people. That combination was almost unbeatable: bottomless coffers for the cause, and believers who did not consider themselves hired hands.

This is important. The strength of the Soviet operation was not only secrecy, financing or professional discipline. It was the ability to join a powerful organization to genuine belief. The organization did not always have to push. The believer pulled. Once people felt that history and morality were on their side, sacrifice became proof of virtue, and doubt began to look like betrayal.

Communism was also a magnet ideology for many sophisticated liberals in the West and in the United States. The Shanghai story shows how the machinery worked on them. Einstein, H.G. Wells and others supported the campaign to free the supposedly persecuted labor activists. They did not have to be Soviet agents. They only had to believe the story presented to them. Their sincerity then became part of the operation. Even their conscience could be used.

That may have been the greater achievement. A secret operative can be discovered, arrested or exchanged. A respected person acting from conscience is much harder to challenge. He believes he is defending justice. His friends believe it too. The political operation disappears inside a moral movement, and many of the people carrying it forward never see themselves as part of an operation at all.

This is what stayed with me after reading the article. Not simply espionage. Not two colorful spies caught in Shanghai. The long view. The Soviet Union sent innumerable copies of Rudnik and Moiseenko throughout the world, and very significantly to the United States. They carried money, instructions and organization. Around them were many more people who carried only the idea and believed it was their own.

The results were not theoretical. In China, one operation was destroyed, but the larger cause survived and eventually won. In the United States, Communist networks grew through the 1920s and 1930s, and Soviet penetration later reached politics, science and the atomic program. Western Europe developed powerful Communist parties, but the influence of the ideas moved much farther than party membership. One did not need to carry a party card to accept the language, the judgments and the moral divisions created by the movement.

Then the Soviet Union collapsed. For a while this looked like the end of the story. The flag came down. The names changed. Communism became a word many people avoided. But ideas that had already entered universities, media, political organizations and the minds of several generations did not come down with the flag. Neither did the method: organize patiently, finance generously, enter institutions, turn moral language into a weapon, and find sincere people who will advance the cause without seeing themselves as anyone's instruments.

And now I see people carrying essentially the same ideology on our streets and on the path into our government. Some are well funded. Many are sincere. I am not saying they receive envelopes or instructions from Moscow. That would almost be less frightening. The deeper success is that Moscow may no longer be needed. The mechanism can now run inside America, carried by Americans, financed through American and foreign channels, protected by American institutions, and presented as moral progress.

I am not describing one headquarters controlling every protest, professor, newspaper or politician. Reality is not that simple. I am describing something more durable: a way of thinking and organizing that has learned to live independently. It can change vocabulary, attach itself to new grievances and recruit new believers. The old sponsor may disappear while the work continues under new names.

This is where my alarm begins. I do not use the word alarm as an apology. An alarm is sounded because something dangerous may be happening and because waiting for complete proof can mean waiting until it is too late.

Our educational system is failing to produce enough thinking people. I do not mean people without diplomas. We produce plenty of diplomas. I mean people trained to read difficult material, compare claims, recognize propaganda, tolerate an opposing argument and still think independently. Too often we produce quick moral reactions and borrowed language. A slogan arrives before the facts, and the facts are then arranged to fit it.

Coming from the Soviet Union, I do not confuse education with independent thought. A system can educate people very seriously and still teach them not to question the approved conclusion. Intelligent people are not automatically protected from ideology. Sometimes they are better at explaining to themselves why the ideology must be right. History, when it is reduced, simplified or bent toward today's preferred message, stops being memory and becomes another instrument.

Our political system is failing in a different way. Two parties spend enormous strength in hostile bickering, each fighting for money and positions. And by money I do not mean only campaign money. I also mean the politician's personal remuneration and reward: a well-paid and protected position, staff, status, influence, connections, security, and often the next attractive position after this one.

This reward does not have to arrive in a suitcase, and it may be entirely legal. It still shapes behavior. I am not accusing every politician of corruption. I am saying that staying inside the system is personally rewarding, while serious long-range thinking can be personally dangerous. A politician is encouraged to protect the next election, the next fundraising cycle, the next party fight and his own place in all of it. Meanwhile, people with a real long-term strategy are happy to wait.

It is painful to say, but credit is due to the Soviet Union for understanding what serious political strategy means. They looked far ahead. We bicker over chairs while other people study the building.

External influence is also rampant. We have open borders in more than one sense: physical borders and ideological borders. I came here as an immigrant. I know what the openness of America means and what it gives to people. I do not want America to become a frightened, closed country. But an open country is not a country without doors. A country must know who enters, who finances, who organizes and for what purpose. That is not hostility to immigrants or to ideas. It is elementary self-preservation.

Today money, ideology and organization can cross a border much more easily than a person. They move through foundations, universities, nonprofit groups, media, political organizations and digital networks. After several transfers, the original source can be almost invisible. By then, sincere Americans may be carrying the message, and any question about its origin can be dismissed as an accusation against them. The old mechanism has become cleaner and faster.

When I first asked whether we have any antidotes, the natural answers were historical memory, transparency of funding and organization, institutional pluralism and independent thought. I admire those answers. I want to believe in them. But my background makes me skeptical because I see all of them failing. Historical memory? Who is teaching it, and what version? Transparency? We often see the last organization in the chain, not the source of the money. Pluralism? Too often it means two hostile camps speaking only to themselves and punishing dissent inside their own ranks.

These are good words, but good words are not yet an antidote. They work only when institutions have the will to practice them and the public has the patience to demand them. Otherwise they become ceremonial language: everybody praises transparency, memory and free inquiry while finding reasons not to apply them to his own side.

So what can be done? I do not know enough to offer a beautiful solution, and beautiful solutions are part of what I distrust. But some things seem elementary.

We should stop being embarrassed to name the danger. Alarm is not panic. Panic runs blindly; alarm wakes people up. Naming a danger also does not mean accusing every dissenter of being a foreign agent. That would be both unjust and stupid. It would destroy the very distinction we need to protect: the difference between disagreement, organized political action, concealed financing and coordinated subversion.

We have to put history and thinking back at the center of education. Not a new approved ideology replacing the old one. Teach how totalitarian systems actually grew, how propaganda worked, how respectable people were recruited by moral appeals, and how money and organization moved behind the appealing words. Teach young people to ask simple questions: Who says this? Who benefits? Who pays? What is being left out? And allow them to ask those questions about every side.

Follow the money to its original source. Foreign or domestic, left or right, university or street organization, media project or nonprofit campaign - the public should be able to see who finances major political and ideological activity. Disclosure without the original source is not transparency. It is decoration.

Politics also has to become less of a protected profession and more of a temporary public service. Full financial disclosure, no private stock trading while in office, real limits on turning public position into private reward, and perhaps firm term limits would not create wise politicians. Nothing can guarantee that. But these measures could weaken the system of personal rewards that now encourages politicians to remain in office, remain obedient and think no further than the next well-paid position.

Control the physical border and pay equal attention to the financial, institutional and digital ones. Protect free speech absolutely, including speech I dislike. But covert foreign direction, concealed financing, intimidation and violence are not opinions. They are actions, and a country has the right to expose and stop them.

Most important, people have to recover the habit of thinking for themselves, including against their own side. That last part is difficult. It is easy to recognize propaganda when it comes from people we dislike. The test is whether we can recognize it when it flatters us, confirms us and promises victory to our side. No law can create that habit for us. But without it, every other antidote will be administered by the same institutions that are already failing.

Are we on the waiting list? I fear that we are no longer waiting. The process is already here. It does not mean that America is finished. It means the alarm is late, not premature.

If this sounds alarmist, so be it. An alarm is supposed to sound before the house is fully in flames.

Absolute success, Comrade Dzerzhinsky? Terrifyingly close. It becomes final only if we refuse to see it.