

# “A Ritual Civil Execution”: Public Shaming Meetings in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union

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The resurgence of public shaming campaigns in modern societies has important antecedents in the relatively recent past. The paper addresses the practice of *prorabotka*, a ritual of public shaming that took place in schools, universities and workplaces in the Soviet Union. *Prorabotka*, whose genealogy can be traced to early post-revolutionary years, was aimed at the reinforcement of social norms challenged by political and moral deviance. Public shaming was applied to a wide range of behaviours, including ideological and moral deviations such as public drunkenness, marital infidelity by party members, planned emigration to Israel, etc. The paper applies a theoretical framework that builds on Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian approaches to ritual, Garfinkel’s outline of the theory of public degradation ceremonies, and Zizek’s account of split law. It shows that, in addition to an official script, the meetings had a supplementary script that unleashed a *jouissance* of punitiveness but also generalised guilt and fear in the face of collective justice. It addresses the consequences of shaming for the perpetrators and members of the group. It is based on oral history interviews with individuals who participated in the meetings as denouncers, witnesses or perpetrators.

## Keywords

character assassination, citizens’ justice, emotionalisation, everyday life in the Soviet Union, informal law, public shaming

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## **Introduction**

We are currently experiencing a renaissance of public shaming and character assassination campaigns, in which members of society express moral indignation about other individuals' past and present behaviours. While the two practices are closely linked, there is an important distinction between character assassination and public shaming. Both represent a strategic attack on an individual's moral worth, but while character assassination is performed by active denouncers, shaming mobilises members of the community. The community publicly unites in righteous anger against the shamed person, exposing collective representations of right and wrong and drawing the line between them.

The nature of moral campaigns of various kinds—which involve denunciation and shaming by members of society but may also be manipulated or organised by state and corporate actors—raises a number of important issues. These issues concern the functioning of informal versus formal justice, the role of emotions in the enforcement of collective norms, and ultimately the reproduction of social order. The reintroduction of public emotions into penal law, in a process that reverses the post-Enlightenment development of criminal justice and its institutions based on reason and universal legal procedures, has been extensively addressed by criminologists.<sup>1</sup> Yet collective shaming as a form of communal justice—its unwritten rules and emotional dynamics—has not been well understood. Indeed, following the work of Braithwaite (1989), collective shaming is now commonly seen as a positive tool of community reintegration and is extensively used in restorative justice and post-conflict mediation. Informal justice may have many benefits in terms of citizens' participation and its capacity to challenge existing power hierarchies and bring restitution to victims. However, as public shaming increasingly substitutes for formal procedural law, the complex emotions and psychic processes the former unleashes, and its consequences both for the targets of and the participants in judgement, call for renewed attention from social scientists.

In this article, I analyse the situational dynamics of disciplinary *prorabotka* meetings in the USSR and their aftermath. Next, I use a theoretical framework that builds on Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian approaches to ritual, Garfinkel's outline of the theory of public degradation ceremonies and Zizek's account of split law to analyse the ways in which the scripts of the meetings acted to fan moral indignation

<sup>1</sup> For a critical analysis of shame punishment in formal law, see Nussbaum (2004). See also Karstedt, Loader and Strang (2014) for a discussion of reason and emotion in crime and justice today.

and instigate *jouissance* of punitiveness, as well creating fear, embarrassment, shame and guilt. I conclude with further reflections on the democratisation of punishment and its consequences.

## **Public Shaming in Soviet Union**

For students of public shaming, an abundance of historical data can be found in the socialist countries, where public shaming played a major role and where the practice remains within living memory (including the author's own experiences). In the Soviet Union, the practice of shaming during group meetings, known as *prorabotka* (literally "working over"),<sup>2</sup> was one of the central rituals of public life. In Russia and the USSR, this form of public shaming was introduced soon after the October 1917 revolution (Fitzpatrick, 1999; Halfin, 2007) and ended with the collapse of the Soviet regime. Public shaming took place in schools, universities and workplaces. The shaming procedure involved a variety of organisational mechanisms. It could be conducted by the Communist Party, by youth organisations such as the Komsomol and the "Young Pioneers," by trade unions and labour collectives, or by schools and colleges. Public meetings that were ostensibly not intended to shame an individual often turned into such events.<sup>3</sup>

The targets of *prorabotka* meetings were typically those individuals who were seen as having violated the norms of socialist morality. This was a very broad category based on unwritten rules.<sup>4</sup> Ideological deviations, violations of work discipline, acts of moral misconduct such as drunkenness in public, marital infidelity (particularly in the case of Party members) or, from the early 1970s, planned emigration to Israel—all these behaviours were seen to testify to some moral defect and therefore demanded public condemnation. In some cases, the meetings were conducted at the request of law enforcement bodies,<sup>5</sup> but for the most part, they were organised independently, typically by authority figures within organisations. The consequences for individuals

<sup>2</sup> It was also known as *razborka*, *personal'noe delo* or *sud chesti*.

<sup>3</sup> On occasions when a person needed a character reference (for example, when planning to travel abroad or join a Komsomol or Party organisation), the collective would be presented with an opportunity to examine previously unexplored and under-interpreted faults and misdemeanours; the meeting could also turn into a shaming event.

<sup>4</sup> Although the Party made an attempt to codify it in the "Moral Code of the Builder of Communism", adopted in 1961.

<sup>5</sup> This concerned, for example, emigration to Israel. From 1970, according to the information note from the Ministry of Interior to the Central Committee of the CPSU of 26 February 1973, "preliminary discussion of the applicant's reference at the general meeting of employees at the applicant's place of work" became a part of the process for all wishing to emigrate to Israel (cited in Kuksin, 2007).

subjected to *prorabotka* ranged from reputational damage to a variety of disciplinary outcomes. This could be an official reprimand and demotion at work or expulsion from the organisation; in the Stalin era, it could have entailed arrest and imprisonment or even death.

The existing literature shows that similar ceremonies and rituals of collective shaming were features of other socialist states (Dittmer, 1973; Flam, 1998). They coexisted with a variety of other forms of community sanctions, such as the so-called comrades' courts at one's work or place of residence (Gabdulhakov, 2018; Gorlizki, 1998) as well as visual shaming via street posters or organisational wall newspapers (*stengazety*).

The academic literature on *prorabotka* meetings under socialism is relatively scarce and addresses mainly the period from the revolution to the end of the Stalin era in the context of wider ideological and political campaigns. However, there seems to be a consensus that shaming was largely used as a tool of Party control. Indeed, Party members were subjected to shaming for certain acts that other citizens might not have been (including such symbolic deviations as loss of Party card, marital infidelity or divorce), and the consequences of shaming could be more serious for their lives and careers than for those of ordinary people. To become a Party member was to make a long-term commitment to Party morality, and shaming was one of the key weapons used to ensure this commitment (Cohn, 2015; Flam, 1998; Halfin, 2007). However, similar (albeit weaker) moral commitments were expected of members of the Komsomol organisations, as well as people who were not members of political organisations at all. Moreover, among the most famous campaigns of the 1940s–1950s in the USSR were campaigns against academic dissent, where political membership was not always significant. Scholars working in a wide range of subject areas, from biology to history, were subjected to what might be called heresy trials. While some authors see these events as designed to demonstrate the power of the Party and its leadership and crush any dissent among the scholarly community (Likhachev, 2015), others point out that collective shaming could also serve the interests of specific academic clans and groups, who used the meetings to destroy the reputations of their competitors (Leibovich, 2008).

Some commentators focus on the role of the meetings as a means of establishing broad social conformity to the Soviet regime. In academic institutions, for example, the *prorabotka* campaigns had the effect of keeping scholars constantly attuned to the changing dominant discourse in their profession (Tikhonov, 2016). Ledeneva (2013) sees the practice of shaming and the pressure for individuals to admit to often non-existent crimes and misdemeanours as part of a range of strategies employed by the Soviet system to make individuals compromise their personal integrity and submit, at

whatever personal cost, to its formal and informal rules. In addition to analysing the place of the meetings within the Soviet political system, scholars have also sought to trace their historical origins. Using Foucauldian analysis, Kharkhordin (1999) sees collective- and self-denunciation as rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition of public penance and disciplinary practices aimed at the creation of a particular subjectivity, while Pushkareva (2012) emphasises the rural traditions of informal social control, particularly in relation to women.

On a structural level, the use of public shaming also depended on the strengths of state and group power and the relationship between them. After Stalin, as violent state coercion weakened, community punishment became the main mechanism of social control (Gorlizky, 1998; LaPierre, 2012). With Khrushchev's policies intended to "stimulate mass participation in corrective efforts" (Kharkhordin, 1999, p. 284), *prorabotka* meetings, alongside comrades' courts and other forms of social control, became key institutions of community correction. But while deviance-hunting continued under Brezhnev, and even into Gorbachev's perestroika, increasing routinisation of Soviet official practice meant that meaningful engagement by participants with the authoritative (official) discourse presented by organisers became less pronounced (Yurchak, 2005).

Quite apart from the background factors that historically and structurally led to the flourishing or withering of this form of collective judgement, the meetings were also performances that need to be analysed in their own right. These were repeated forms of social communication based on a shared understanding of the intentions and contents of collective events. From a micro-sociological perspective, they were social dramas in every sense of the word. These Soviet morality plays, while following familiar scripts in a set organisational context, took the participants outside the realm of everyday communication and the key conventions of civility, where individuals strive to save each other's public face in social situations (Goffman, 1959), and into the field of interactional violence. The intensity of such violence varied significantly, but the conditions for its release were there in the script, as the group moved from denouncing a particular violation to attacking the subject's entire moral character. In the process, a space emerged for individual hostilities and repressed emotions to play out. Moreover, shaming was not only a socially traumatic event for the targets, who came under attack and whose social bonds were strained or broken as a result, with long-term adverse consequences for their identity (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). It was also traumatic for other members of the group, people who did not share the moral indignation of the denouncers but were fearful of dissenting in the face of the outburst of collective righteousness and the power of the organisational authorities behind it. In other words, public shaming had a "supplementary" script and consequences that

are sometimes glossed over in purely functionalist accounts, which emphasise the communal unity achieved in such rituals, as well as making romantic representations of the curative power of citizens' justice.

## **Public Shaming Rituals: Collective Values, Meanings and Emotions**

The processes by which communities sanction members who have violated their norms have been extensively studied by social scientists. Stigmatisation and labelling of deviance, where a line is drawn between good and evil, the moral majority and the polluting individual(s), have been addressed in a number of classic studies (Becker, 1963; Erikson, 2004; Goffman, 1963). Once the moral line is drawn, it typically leads to a purging organisational response (trial of the deviant, social isolation, expulsion or incarceration) that tends to take a ritualistic, ceremonial form.

While there are many different approaches to ritual (Bell, 1992), according to the classic functionalist understanding, it is an event where core collective beliefs are generated, experienced and affirmed as real. As Durkheim argued in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in bringing individual moral transgressions to public judgement, society affirms existing mental constructions of good and evil and connects them to individual experience and action. In coming together in condemnation of people who break social norms, communities strengthen their social bonds. According to Durkheim (1915), "The very violence with which society reacts, by way of blame or material suppression, against every attempted dissidence, contributes to strengthening its empire by manifesting the common conviction through this burst of ardour" (p. 238).

Neo-Durkheimian scholars apply this approach to ritual to a range of public performances in modern societies. Jeffrey Alexander argues that the binary division between sacred and profane, good and evil, continues to be intrinsic to the social construction of the public sphere. Exclusion and othering (whether through judicial and quasi-judicial punishment, moral panics or scandals) help society in its efforts to achieve fusion and sustain its moral values (Alexander, 2003, 2006). Alexander acknowledges that unlike in the traditional societies described by Durkheim, where rituals took place in closely-knit groups, in modern societies "organisations, power, and face-to-face confrontations are critical in determining how and to whom binary representations of good and evil are applied" (Alexander, 2003, p. 116). But even here, in complex societies, these distinctions rely on symbolic intensity and need to be experienced in emotional and vivid ways, through Durkheimian "collective effervescence". In his analysis of emotional energy that lifts the group's collective

spirit, Randall Collins wrote about “an especially Durkheimian form of short-term emotion”, righteous anger, that is used to enforce group cultures against perceived heretics or scapegoats. Righteous anger can be expressed in a particularly intense form because the denouncer, as Collins noted, can “express it in the secure knowledge of the community’s support” (Collins, 2004, p. 127). This emotion, in his opinion, finds its most common expression in traditional societies or wherever there is an attempt to create “fusion of community with polity”, such as socialist regimes (Collins, 2004, pp. 127–129).

Other scholars, however, have questioned the emphasis on value consensus and fusion achieved by collective rituals. Lukes observes that there is little evidence of value integration achieved by rituals and that the degree of collective effervescence is often overemphasised. The meanings of political rituals are prescribed by the power holders. Instead of focusing on emotional and social bonds, we need to address how the rituals act to reinforce—or, occasionally, challenge—the political status quo on a cognitive level, at the level of collective representations (Lukes, 1975, p. 302).<sup>6</sup>

Garfinkel suggests that the efforts of denouncers to mobilise moral indignation by the participants depend on their ability to imply a malicious motivational schema behind individuals’ behaviour and bring the group to share it. During the ritual, which he names a “status degradation ceremony”, the denouncers typically claim not only that the particular deviant act is unacceptable, but that it is the result of some evil intent. Behind the familiar public façade, a new motivational schema is uncovered and is now seen as guiding the actions of the denounced person. Should the group members identify with the perpetrator and fail to experience moral indignation, the ritual fails (Garfinkel, 1956).

While drawing on these theoretical approaches to rituals as mechanisms for reinforcing social control by ceremonially uniting the participants and reordering the public identity of the subject as deviant, I seek to supplement them with a micro-sociological analysis of how the scripts of these meetings generated heterogeneous behaviour and unintended outcomes. This makes it possible to address complex and conflicting moral emotions, submerged hostilities and fears that the participants experience during and after the event. Rather than being united by anger, disgust or contempt—all the moral emotions that are the main forms of moral indignation—and sharing in “intuitive system of cognition” (Sunstein, 2009), people can experience an

<sup>6</sup> Garland (2005), in his study of public lynching in America, addressed the “penal excess”, the terrible cruelty with which victims and their bodies were debased in the name of retribution. Garland saw lynchings as attempts to assert the racial hierarchy, which was felt to be under threat from liberal legislative and political changes.

array of emotions that defy easy categorisation. The interviews that I discuss below show how participants delighted in the pleasure of moral restrictiveness, even cruelty towards others, but could also feel fear, guilt and empathy towards the perpetrator. These could be experienced both in the heat of the moment and long after the event. In other words, the collective “feeling rules” upon which the shaming ritual relied (Hochschild, 1983) could clash with the actual feelings experienced by participants.

An agreement about the shamed person may be achieved and the ceremony may indeed be successful in terms of undermining a member’s public reputation, but the unity may cover up heterogeneous emotions and motives that have little to do with the original transgression. Wherever we deal with ceremonies and rituals of citizens’ justice, we step onto treacherous ground where conflicting feelings, emotions, moral sentiments and meanings collide. This is where Zizek’s “obscene supplementary of law” is particularly valid. To Zizek, lynchings, witch hunts, show trials and other forms of communal law represent the “obscene underside of the Law” (Zizek, 1994, p. 57). Here people engage in carnivals of cruelty, enjoying the suffering of the Other. As Zizek points out, contrary to the idealised version of carnival beloved by Bakhtin’s followers, carnivals can have terroristic and sadistic properties (Zizek, 1994, p. 55). But the enjoyment of restrictiveness and cruelty towards others is not the only emotion that such public events induce. Members of society, as Zizek argues, have “an indeterminate Kafkaesque feeling of abstract guilt, a feeling that, in the eyes of the Power, I am a priori terribly guilty of something, although it is not possible for me to know what precisely I am guilty of” (Zizek, 1994, p. 60). Diffused guilt, a feeling of “there but for the grace of God go I” is also present in encounters with the Law. The pleasure of moral condemnation and the comforting feeling of being on the right side of the Law can be coupled with a fear that can induce people to be particularly ardent in their condemnation, but also contains the possibility of empathy with the perpetrator.

## **Methodology**

To this point, scholars who analyse Soviet shaming meetings have mostly relied on organisational records, i.e. the protocols of the meetings, and on newspaper reports based on these original documents (for example, Halfin, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 1999; Kimerling, 2017; Leibovich, 2008). These protocols, however, have certain limitations as sources of data. They were often significantly edited after the fact. They also cannot sufficiently capture the unique personal and emotional dynamics of the meetings as individual events. According to Sigurd Schmidt, who drew on personal experience of these meetings, they were shaped by many factors, including individual characters and



motivations, interpersonal relations, group rivalries, and so on (Schmidt, 2012, p. 516). Memoirs, diaries and other reconstructions of events by participants can allow us to gain deeper insight into the realm of feelings, beliefs and perceptions than that afforded by analysis of organisational records. They also make it possible to study memory and trauma, and to see how moral emotions and judgments are re-experienced and re-evaluated in changing historical circumstances.

In this paper, I use interviews with participants in shaming meetings that took place in the late Soviet Union as my main source of data. I have collected 29 oral history interviews with people who participated in Soviet public shaming meetings between 1956 and 1989. These participants lived in different areas of the Soviet Union at the time and participated in the meetings in a range of capacities (as active denouncers, witnesses or subjects). I followed an inductive, open-ended interview model where participants were encouraged to link individual experiences to the wider contexts in which they occurred. The oral history method presupposes that participants have valuable knowledge to share about their lives, including values, feelings, rituals and beliefs. It gives them an opportunity to reflect on their life experiences as they re-construct their stories (Leavy, 2011). All participants gave informed consent. I do not use their real names or the names of their organisations. I indicate the year (or years) and places where the events took place.

Oral history research has certain disadvantages as a method of data collection. People's recollections of events are not always reliable, and oral history is as prone to misrepresentation as any historical data (Lang & Mercier, 1984). Nevertheless, it provides access to important aspects of social reality that may be missing from other sources of data such as published and unpublished organisational documents.

Despite taking place a long time ago, these events still elicited strong emotional memories among research participants. As Randall Collins noted, intense moments of participation in collective rituals are "high points not only for groups but also for individual lives...kept alive in symbolic replays for greater or lesser expanses of one's life. These are significant formative experiences that shape individuals" (Collins, 2004, p. 43). All participants, both those who were shamed and those who witnessed or conducted the shaming, remembered the events in considerable detail and described what they felt at the time. Participants also reflected on the organisation of shaming, the personal relations that influenced the course of the meetings, and the outcome of the shaming for the people involved. Almost everybody presented the event in a broader historical context, describing how individual behaviour depended on the political and moral climate of the time.

In what follows, I will analyse the recollections of the shaming events as rituals that, while running according to routine and conventionally understood scripts aimed

to produce collective moral outrage, took the participants into a space of interactional violence and unleashed an array of conflicting moral emotions and meanings.

## **Orchestrated Anger**

Soviet shaming meetings were highly orchestrated affairs in which the denouncers (typically the leaders of the local Party or Komsomol organisation, managers or teachers) aimed, by presenting malicious motivational schemas, to produce collective condemnation of the accused. Accounts of meetings demonstrate that participants were encouraged to feel moral outrage not only at particular transgressions, but at the very persona of the perpetrator. The aim of the ritual was to unmask his or her “true” nature and show that “What he is now is what, ‘after all,’ he was all along” (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422).<sup>7</sup>

The denouncers often prepared a scenario in which members of the collective were asked to also bring previous transgressions to the attention of the group.

The scenario was always the same. After the main accuser has spoken, other people are asked to make speeches, and it is agreed in advance that people must bring up all the person’s character flaws. For example, not only did he do that, but he often came to school in a dirty shirt or was late to meetings. It was necessary to add all the things that presented him in a bad light, and this scenario repeated itself every time (Arsenii, Moscow, 1956).

Even without preliminary preparation, those present at the meetings intuitively understood what was required of them, with some spontaneously joining in character assassination:

When we were Young Pioneers, we had two delinquent guys in our class. Everybody knew they were thieving. And after police came to school for the n-th time, it was decided to exclude them from the Young Pioneer organisation. And there was a meeting where we had to discuss this and condemn them, and I remember one girl lifted a hand and said that she remembered how they abused a dog as well (Danila, Moscow, 1979).

A previously unnoticed or ignored deviation was now overinterpreted in the collective construction of evil. But while in some cases moral indignation was mobilised around

<sup>7</sup> In Stalin-era academic witch hunts, *prorabotka* meetings would often be called to discuss specific mistakes in a colleague’s scholarship, but the discussion would soon escalate to the accusation that the colleague “deliberately made assertions that are contrary to Marxism-Leninism” (Gurevich, 2012, p. 36).

easily understood misdeeds, in others people were asked to shame individuals for actions the meaning of which they could not even understand. The accounts of the meetings show that accusations could be vague and people might struggle to understand them, and yet often no questions were asked. Stepan, for example, remembered a case from when he was 12–13, when a girl in his school year from a troubled family was shamed by the whole class because, as he later learned, somebody spread a rumour that she visited the army barracks in the neighbourhood to have sex with soldiers: “We had a class meeting, and she was shamed for ‘amoral behaviour’. I had no idea what was going on, what they were talking about” (Stepan, Moscow, 1967).

Similarly vague accusations were made against a student at a later Komsomol meeting where the same interviewee was present. As Stepan recounted:

Later on, there was another meeting of this kind at university. I could not understand anything either, and only later on did I figure out what was going on. There was a very bright student, and a good friend of the leader of our Komsomol organisation, who was, as I later came to understand, gay. At the time, sexuality was never publicly discussed—I sort of knew that something like this existed in the *zona* (penitentiary), but that’s all. And there was a Komsomol meeting, where he was expelled from the Komsomol, and later from the university, for “amoral behaviour”. Komsomol leaders made some vague speeches; none of us understood what was going on, and those who understood kept *shtum*. It was all just a ritual. A ritual civil execution (Stepan, Moscow, 1974).

Rather than asserting communal norms and values that were broken by the transgressor, the meetings asserted the power of the communal law itself. Just as in Zizek’s conception of law, we are not required to understand the law’s injunctions. As Dean noted, commenting on Zizek, “We obey the incomprehensible Command. This traumatic, non-integrated character of law is a positive condition of law” (Dean, 2004, p. 13).

The operation of communal law had little to do with due process. Unlike in the rational public law procedures, the accused were given little chance to defend themselves, to answer accusations in full. They were not shown any documents or other evidence in advance of the meeting, and sometimes were not even aware of the meeting’s purpose (thinking that they had been invited to some inconsequential discussion of their behaviour or even to a regular collective event that was not dedicated to their case). Thus, the meetings often functioned as traps, where a person was completely unaware of the scenario in which he or she would suddenly find himself treated as a transgressor by the group. While the denouncers could become

entrained in their own righteous anger,<sup>8</sup> the accused would be put in a passive and powerless role from the very start. They were typically required to speak only at the very end, and even then, if they attempted to justify their behaviour or propose amends, their words often had no major effect. The meeting's official decision, coded in terms taken from authoritative (rather than judicial) discourse, would condemn "amoral behaviour" (in cases of deviation from sex and gender norms), "political immaturity" (ideological deviations), "betrayal of the Motherland" (usually planned immigration to Israel), "violation of the norms of socialist communal life" (often meaning drunkenness in public places), etc.

The shaming led to changes in a person's public identity. People reported being shunned by their classmates, fellow students or colleagues. Institutional consequences also followed. These ranged from a reprimand (which went into one's personal file) to demotion and expulsion from Komsomol or the Party organisation, which in turn resulted in losing one's place of work or study. For male university students of conscription age, being expelled typically led to army service, from which students in full-time education were exempt. In the rare cases when the collective refused to follow the script and condemn a member, institutional consequences could be avoided or a person would suffer a less significant penalty (for example, a reprimand instead of a demotion or expulsion).

## **The Dark Undercurrents of Collective Judgement**

The meetings gave license to emotional excess and cruelty. Previously submerged hostilities could now rise to the surface, and fellow students or colleagues would become entrained in the unforbidden pleasure of criticism, in the *jouissance* of restrictiveness towards others. People on the receiving end of shaming, meanwhile, experienced powerlessness, abandonment and paralysing fear. Any participation by one's colleagues in the ritual was painful for the accused, even when they tried to be reasonable and mild in their criticism. Their very willingness to join the side of the denouncers was felt as a betrayal.

Nina described a meeting at her workplace, a literary museum in Leningrad, that was assembled after she applied for an exit visa to emigrate to Israel on a bogus invitation from a non-existent Israeli uncle (a common ruse at the time, organised by Israeli supporters of Jewish emigration). Despite the fact that all the participants (apart from her boss) had been good colleagues and even friends, and the tables were

<sup>8</sup> See Collins (2008) on violent entrainment and emotional energy.

already set in the next room for a party after the meeting, people expressed unexpected hostility:

“Who invited you?” “Who is your uncle?” “Is your uncle in Israel rich?” “Are you doing this because of the money?” “We trusted her, and she betrayed our trust.” All these words were pronounced. Yes, they said all these things with tongue in cheek. But it was terribly unpleasant. It was said that the Motherland had provided me with a free education. These were all my colleagues, including people with whom I went to the party after the *prorabotka* (Nina, Leningrad, 1971).

Feelings that people were not allowed, or were embarrassed, to express publicly could find a sudden outlet. As the everyday norms of civility were broken, prejudices and hostilities could now be openly aired by people who had never publicly expressed them before. Mikhail recalls being shocked by the sudden animosity shown towards a colleague who was being denounced at his place of work, an engineering bureau:

There was a Komsomol meeting about a fellow member, a son of a famous *refusenik* family. They wanted to emigrate to Israel. The meeting was fairly formal. But there was this guy, he was an alcoholic, a womaniser, not any kind of activist, and I never saw him as an anti-Semite either. And yet I heard him saying that yes, this man is indeed a traitor to the Motherland. I was shocked at how deeply ingrained that was. He said it from the heart (Mikhail, Moscow, 1976).

Very often, hostility was expressed towards individuals who occupied a privileged position in an organisation. Status envy fed into moral outrage at the misdeed. Academics spoke out against prominent figures in their field, while students denounced those among them who had previously enjoyed privileged positions due to their status in the Komsomol or the Party.

Olga described the shaming of a student at the Moscow State University who was denounced for having simultaneous affairs with a young woman and her mother, after a young woman wrote a letter of complaint to the university. Olga admitted that people seemed to be engaged in especially vigorous condemnation because he was a Party member:

These Party members used to be the appointed leaders of student groups (*starosty*). When we were taken to the countryside to harvest potatoes, they were always appointed as our supervisors, they disciplined us, they did not allow us to smoke, and so on. That is why there was a certain *schadenfreude* in his downfall (Olga, Moscow, 1979).

Larissa remembered a meeting in 1977 in a Moscow college after a fellow student was caught by the police buying jeans from foreigners for re-sale. The police reported him to the college while also accusing him of stealing a skirt from the hotel room of a foreign tourist with whom he had struck a deal. A student Komsomol meeting was convened and they voted to expel him from the Komsomol, which automatically led to expulsion from college. His rumoured privileged position contributed to the readiness to participate in condemnation:

We all heard (although this was just a rumour) that he was the nephew of the candidate member of the Politburo, Aleksandrov, and somebody said when we were discussing whether he should be expelled from Komsomol, “Don’t you worry, he’ll get reinstated in a year’s time and work where none of us has any chance of working. So this is nothing serious. He’ll have a little break and then get readmitted.” Personally, I was indignant about the theft of a foreign visitor’s skirt and said publicly that he brought shame on the Soviet people. There was absolutely no pity, none. First, I thought, it’s wrong to steal, and second, there was this general opinion that he would get a job somewhere where none of us would even get let in the building. Who knows, maybe this was class hatred, maybe Aleksandrov wasn’t even his uncle—it’s a common enough surname—but people said, “Don’t feel sorry for him, the time will come when you have to bow before him.”

We observe here what Nietzsche described as *ressentiment* (1996), where people manifest intolerance and envy towards those who have achieved success.<sup>9</sup> Gender shaming was also often present, either on its own or mixed with other motives. Sonya was 18 when she started working for a tour company in the Ukrainian town of Kramatorsk. One day her friend, also a young woman, told her that, thanks to her connections in the local Komsomol, there was a rare opportunity for the two of them to go to Bulgaria with a delegation from the city Komsomol organisation. All they had to do was to have a quick medical check, pass an interview at the city Komsomol organisation, and get a character reference from their place of work. Everything seemed to be ready for them to go, but suddenly their colleagues refused to give them a good reference:

A meeting was called where older people who worked as tour guides, tour planners, or accountants were present. They practically took us apart, found all kinds of faults with our performance, and one of the

<sup>9</sup> Ranulf (1938) argued that punitiveness flows from envy, resentment and moral indignation experienced by people in subordinate class positions.

strongest accusations was (this was later put in writing when they gave us the references) that when we'd travelled to Volgograd with a tour group, we were running all over the train just in thick tights, without skirts or trousers. Why they said tights I don't know—these were warm leggings. It was in the middle of winter and we were cold. And this was enough to say that we were guilty of "amoral behaviour" and that we were irresponsible. And they also said: "We are two, three times older than you, and we have never been abroad." And I was so traumatised that I resigned from that job straight away. They were very animated, these men and women, and the feeling was: we can't go, so you will not go either. We are three times as old as you, and you've just started working, you do not deserve this. I think this was their main motivation, not to give someone an opportunity that they lacked themselves (Sonya, Kramatorsk, 1974).

## **Fear, Embarrassment, Guilt**

The pleasure of restrictiveness towards others in the name of moral law, the thrill of entering a forbidden domain in the name of duty, or mere enjoyment and comfort of being on the right side of the law, is often coupled with generalised guilt and fear (Zizek, 1991, p. 83). The participants' accounts indeed show that moral indignation often went hand in hand with enjoyment of peeking into the forbidden, as well as the vague "guilt feeling", a sense that one too could be guilty in the eyes of the Power. Olga, in her account of the meeting when a fellow student was shamed for his simultaneous affairs with mother and daughter, described a sense of prurient fascination with the forbidden as well as a sense of general discomfort as people felt they too were potentially vulnerable:

Many of us felt uneasy. On the one hand, there was laughter and banter. It was a long meeting and people wanted to know the details, what he felt about all this, how he managed to be with two women at once, was he repentant and so on. But at the same time, we were also unhappy that such things were being discussed publicly. Yes, of course, things can be talked about, but we felt we were free individuals and we did not want the details of our own personal lives to be discussed the same way (Olga, Moscow, 1979).

According to the memoirs of sociologist Igor Kon, fear was one of the main emotions among the participants of the Soviet *prorabotka* meetings:

It is difficult to recover from this experience. When it's you who is beaten, at least you develop some psychological resistance. But when you witness the beating of others, you mostly feel vulnerable yourself,

fearful that this can happen to you as well. In order to suppress this fear, one tried to believe that may be “these people” are indeed guilty, and you are different, and this will not happen to you (Kon, 2008, p. 14).

Stepan remembered a meeting in a Moscow school in 1973 dedicated to the violation of a sacred object, a symbol of collective identity—a classic case of ritual denunciation (Giesen, 2006, p. 332). In this case, this was a portrait of Lenin:

The whole school was called for an emergency meeting in the assembly hall. One girl used a cloth with which she had washed the floor to wipe the dust from Vladimir Ilyich’s portrait. And a teacher saw it, and made a kind of show out of it, told us how terrible that was, how could she have made this sacrilege. I still remember that horror, that atmosphere of nauseating fear. Everybody thought, thank God it was not me (Stepan, Moscow, 1973).

Sometimes the denouncers were implicated in the very same misdemeanours and lived in fear of being discovered. This may have accounted for added vigour in denunciation. Polina, who lived in Iskitim, a small town in Novosibirsk region, recounted how her friend was shamed at a meeting convened after he applied to join the Communist Party at the end of the 1980s. The chief denouncer, a Party secretary, told the attendees that the friend could not join the Party because he was divorced. However, there was gossip that she was a divorcée herself. In an attempt to maintain the pretence of being married, she kept a pair of men’s slippers and a coat near the front door of her flat for the visitors to see.

The situational fear was often followed by a long-lasting sense of guilt. One such example was recounted by Evgenii, who attended a *prorabotka* meeting at work:

I worked at the conservatory at the time. We had a collective meeting about one musician who was detained by the police in the street for being drunk. They reported him to the conservatory authorities and a meeting was called to condemn him. I didn’t say anything, but many people made speeches. Some did so in order to support the management (as all the protocols of the meeting were already prepared), and some really thought that he brought shame upon the conservatory. I kept quiet and felt very embarrassed about my behaviour afterwards (Evgenii, Kazan, 1986).

The denouncers, too, could feel guilt afterwards. Larissa admitted that she now feels guilty for speaking out at the meeting and wonders if the story about the theft of the skirt was a fabrication by the police:



Now I think: did he really steal the skirt, or were we just told this by the management? When I was talking at the meeting, I kept talking indignantly about the skirt, and he (the accused student) told me, “Why do you keep going on about this skirt?” I was thinking about this story recently and I suddenly thought that maybe everything was not as we were told, maybe this was a cover-up for something else, but I naïvely believed everything then.

Emotions of moral indignation and fear grew in intensity or subsided depending upon the moral climate of the time. A common feature of accounts were reflections on the specific time in Soviet history when the meetings took place and how this historical context influenced the strength of the collective condemnation and the consequences, both for the accused persons and those who attempted to defend them (or wanted to but were deterred by fear). A frequent refrain in the interviews that described post-Stalin meetings was that this was not the Stalin era. The routine character of many of the meetings, the lack of “real” passion and the absence of the terrible consequences that befell those people who were denounced under Stalin’s totalitarian regime figured prominently in people’s accounts of the morality plays that they witnessed:

This was 1971 and not 1950. This was just inertia [from earlier times], not like the terrible trials under Stalin. My father had experienced such a meeting, and in four days he was fired and arrested. And I knew of course that this would not happen to me. ...What happened to me was a pale imitation, this was the inertia of a dying system that had lost its mind. It was terrible, but I could still say something. And I said, thank you all for the great play that you showed me (Nina, Leningrad, 1971).

Already by the 1960s, but especially towards the 1980s, the rituals seemed to have lost much of their emotional energy, and people who witnessed them sometimes remembered the meetings almost as non-events, with the audience passive and indifferent. But even when people maintained a cynical distance from the Soviet regime and its moral norms and took part in the ritual without identifying with it, they still regulated their public behaviour in accordance with its symbolic order.<sup>10</sup> The meetings, these expressions of “popular justice”, ultimately confirmed the authoritative discourse, and the power of the administrative-political agents who stood behind it.

<sup>10</sup> Zizek calls this form of power “manipulative authority” (Zizek, 1991, pp. 94–95).

For those shamed, the meetings were highly traumatic ordeals. The lack of support from colleagues, friends, or parents (in the case of schoolchildren), reputational damage, and practical consequences (being expelled from college, moved to another class in school, demoted at work, or receiving an official reprimand that went into one's file) left a sense of injustice and disaffection. Feelings of disillusionment with the Soviet system, as well as one's colleagues and friends, remained with such interviewees for many years after the event. The meetings were also traumatic for people who witnessed the shaming of others, exposing them to cruelty and fear, and creating a long-term sense of injustice.

## **Conclusion**

The shaming meetings drew the moral line between good and evil while inviting participants to come up with negative judgements not just about specific behaviours, but also about the personality of the perpetrator, assassinating their character as a whole. Unlike formal legal procedures, these acts of communal justice relied on amplified emotions and intuitively-understood interpretative schemas and afforded little protection to the accused.

These violent events invited members of the collective to experience *jouissance* from restrictiveness and punitiveness towards the other. They encouraged the unleashing of conflicting moral emotions and psychic processes, and previously submerged and repressed hostilities would find a sudden—and socially approved—outlet. But the expression of collective violence, whether powered by emotions born out of righteous indignation, resentment and envy, or simply following the conventional scripts, had an undercurrent of mortifying fear, shame and guilt—and not just for the accused. Instead of repairing social bonds, the shaming rituals left trauma and ruptures in their wake. Nevertheless, they were highly consequential in asserting the power of communal law—even if the meaning of the law remained vague and consensus about the meaning of the deviant act was not achieved.

The meetings can be seen as a historical case of the “ostentatious” and “emotive” punishment that is increasingly becoming a feature of modern society (Pratt, 2000). The feelings of righteous indignation experienced by accusers, the frequent focus on gender role shaming, the added pleasure in bringing down people who are seen to occupy privileged positions, and the profound consequences for the personal and social identity of the accused are all features of Soviet-era public shaming that are also present in modern-day moral campaigns (Ronson, 2015). Of course, the Soviet case differed from contemporary campaigns in the sense that representatives of the political authority often played a significant role, directing the collective

performances explicitly or behind the scenes. However, it should be noted that modern organisations also frequently play a central role in staging collective events of condemnation, defining the procedural rules and presenting a moral framework in which accusations get played out.

Many of my interviewees, reflecting on the lessons they learned from taking part in the Soviet meetings, said that they felt that that history can repeat itself at any time, given the “right” organisational framework and conditions. Reflecting on the lessons of the meetings, people reported acquiring depressing insights into human nature, becoming aware of the potential for a sudden welling-up of cruelty, the sickly fear of authority and the collective judgement that paralyses the will, and the cowed conformism towards the group that most individuals tend to demonstrate. They also explained that their memories of the meetings have made them suspicious of any forms of collective moral campaign.

Ultimately, for all the potential benefits of informal justice, it is an imperfect and dangerous tool. Contrary to the post-Enlightenment historical process that has created, through public law, mechanisms for restraining emotions, it reintroduces violence into public life. The lessons of the Soviet shaming meetings show how oppressive this democratisation of justice can be.

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