



Episode 914: A Gallop Through Soviet History

Guest: Kristaps Andrejsons

WOODS: There are so many topics we could cover, and I finally decided I don't know if I can or even want to narrow them down for at least this first time that you're on. I just want to ask you some things that interest me about the history of Eastern Europe and Soviet history in particular. So let me raise one with you that became fashionable in the West in some circles, certainly in communist-sympathizing circles. It's the good-Lenin/bad-Stalin myth. In fact, my own professor of Russian history, Vladimir Brovkin, said that this drove him crazy that there were people who believe that Lenin was basically a good guy, and then Stalin came along and corrupted everything. How would you respond to that?

ANDREJSONS: Oh, I'm doing actually – my new episodes are on the Russian Revolution, which is all about Lenin, and I started to look at Lenin since his very birth and I looked at his family history and everything. And Lenin – well, I don't know. Lenin started the massive terror. He was one of the institutors of war communism. He personally wrote orders so that hundreds and thousands of kulaks would be hanged in public so that everyone would be afraid and would just collaborate. Lenin was just as bloodthirsty as Stalin; it's just that they had other political conflicts late in Lenin's life. But yeah, Lenin was just as ruthless a murderer as Stalin was. There are no good-Lenin/bad-Stalin thing going on here. And Trotsky was just as evil as these two, so it was kind of weird.

But during that revolution, I have to say Nicholas II was also not a nice guy. And yeah, for the most part, everyone who was involved with the communist revolution were – it was basically a black versus all-consuming void of darkness kind of conflict. Not even black versus gray.

WOODS: Right, right, right, of course. But on the other hand, let's go back for a minute here to – well, I don't know. I think you could probably make a better case for Nicholas II, but I'm not here to do that.

ANDREJSONS: Slightly, but he still used cannons to shoot at peaceful protestors, at his own people who were just coming for him asking for help. Because Russia has this stereotype over there. Whenever something goes wrong in Russia, and this happens up to this day, a lot of people treat it as like we have this good czar daddy up there and then everyone –

WOODS: Oh, right, no, I get that.

ANDREJSONS: – everyone else, it's just the fault of the bureaucracy that's at fault. So the czar at the beginning was kind of the good person who didn't know anything, and then the ordinary peasants just went for a petition to the czar to improve their situation in life, and then the czar just decided to shoot them with cannons.

WOODS: Right, right, there's absolutely no defending that, yet I feel like I would rather have lived under him if I had to choose, because I think the possibility that I would be arbitrarily killed was infinitely small, whereas under Stalin I could be arbitrarily killed. There would be no reason. In fact, that was part of the merits of the Terror, from his point of view, was precisely to terrorize the general public. And that's one of the ways people distinguish Lenin from Stalin. They'll say, Sure, Lenin may have killed some people, but he didn't go and kill communists. He didn't kill truly his own, so at least there were some limits. Whereas Stalin had everybody living in terror.

ANDREJSONS: Yeah, but it's still mass murder of people, and Lenin instituted the very first, very early stage of all of this, and he just basically starved people to death. He started all this idea of just taking grain from the people, complete and total control of the state over everything that's going on. And that was terrible.

And one of the early things that Lenin actually started as he was there, when Cheka was founded, which later became KGB, was that he began instituting this denunciation mechanism. Essentially everyone was welcome to just write secret letters to the secret police telling that, you know, My neighbors, they have saved up some gold from the old days and they're not giving it to the government, so that the Cheka arrived, take those other guys away, and probably you could live in their apartment or whatever. So it was also not only this fear of being sent to gulags or executed or all of this; it was also the fear of mistrust towards your own neighbors at all times. And this was created on purpose. The Soviet government since the creation of Cheka, which Lenin always tried to make sure that everyone mistrusts each other so that there could be no very organized resistance towards the Soviet. You would be afraid of your neighbors as much as you would be afraid of the government.

WOODS: You were mentioning agriculture and taking grain away. Let's talk about the best known example of that, the Ukrainian terror famine of 1923-3. There you do get from time to time people certainly in the West who will say that this has really been exaggerated or that there really was no actual plan to starve these people or this is just propaganda meant to put the Soviet Union in a bad light. You can still hear people to this day saying that. Is there any truth to that whatsoever?

ANDREJSONS: Yeah, I actually argued about this on the internet a few days ago, because some listeners just look at my logo and decide that I'm very pro-communist and then they add me to various Facebook groups. And I got added to this Facebook group where there were people with exactly this argument. And when you look at the pictures and you look at all the documentation, it is ridiculous because, see, Ukraine is one of the more fertile places on the planet, and that's where most of the grain was grown also in the Russian Empire. So what Stalin did was he needed money for industrialization and he had also spent huge gold reserves on it already, so what he did was he chose this region where most grain was produced and just confiscated it all and sold it off to Americans. No seriously, your country were the top buyers of this grain from Stalin.

WOODS: But I think there's more than that, though, because he —

ANDREJSONS: There's also some racial hatred, yes.

WOODS: Yeah, why does he want to target the Ukrainians in particular?

ANDREJSONS: Because he personally thought that they were among the least trustworthy Soviet citizens. Even though he himself was a Georgian, he became extremely, extremely Russian supremacist at one point. And in Ukraine, he thought that these are fertile lands, we might use them later, and that Ukrainians are the most likely people who could rebel en masse against the Soviets. But he did that to all sorts of minorities in the Soviet Union. For example, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians were often just sent to gulags when we were occupied by the Soviet Union, with our crime — you know, when you have to fill in the blanks, and the crime was just stated "Latvian." Poof, off to gulag you go.

It was just trying to Russify everything. We call this process here Russification, the elimination of local minorities and introducing the Russian colonial — Russian people get settled here forcibly, as well, and they get incentives to move to these regions so as to ensure that no region in the Soviet Union would have a non-Russian majority, so that everywhere throughout the Soviet Union, Russians would be the majority. That's what happened there, as well. So Stalin had to exterminate Ukrainians so that the Russians would remain as at least a huge minority; the best case he hoped the majority in that region, and thus he believed it would be easier to control.

WOODS: I don't know how far his book spread, so I'm not sure if you're familiar with a British historian named Robert Conquest, who wrote a lot of books about Soviet crimes. And he wrote in particular a book called *Harvest of Sorrow* about the Ukrainian terror famine that I always recommend to people, because it's like you're reading a work of fiction. You can't believe these things happened. And it does seem to be pretty well documented to me. But Conquest also wrote a major work on the Great Terror, and I'd like to get into what the Terror was all about, but first I'm curious about the opening of the Soviet archives. There seem to be different opinions on what we found there, because some people say we opened the archives and it turns out the crimes were even more scarlet than we realized, and others say we opened the archives and it turns out we had exaggerated the extent of the crimes. What did the opening of the archives really tell us?

ANDREJSONS: You mean the archives in Moscow?

WOODS: Yes.

ANDREJSONS: Well, the archives in Moscow told exactly what the people opening them wanted them to say, because the biggest problem with studying Soviet era history in general is that a lot of the documents written in the Soviet era by Soviet authors, Soviet historians — like, you know, everyday newspapers, everyday documents written by clerks, they contained falsehoods themselves. So there's the issue. The government blatantly used misinformation, and a lot of this stuff is very unreliable.

And for me, that's the biggest difficulty when I do my *Eastern Border* show, that I have to triple check everything. I have to rely not only on these sources, but on the opinions of these sources, because, for example, Russia these days has a tendency to only – all the archives haven't even been opened yet, for starters. So the parts that have been opened are obviously thought by Russian experts today as being okay to open. So there is still stuff that we don't know about.

And there is also the stuff about the Soviet archives, like these KGB collaborator lists, like people who were kind of the secret agents of the KGB, who just worked with the KGB who were these denouncers. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian military took a lot of these lists away with them as well, and that has also caused a lot of suspicion. I don't know. Any time you read something from the archives, you really have to look at multiple sources and a difficult process ahead of you, because you have to really sift through and understand what's a falsity and what's a fact and how all this process of researching that will go.

WOODS: Well, let's talk about another of the crimes that Robert Conquest wrote about, and that's the Great Terror of the 1930s, which if I'm remembering correctly originated because of allegedly a plot against Stalin, and of course now this gives him free rein to go out against the saboteurs and to accuse people of being involved in it. But it extended into the Communist Party itself. It extended across the country. And the figures that are given for the people who were victims of the Terror are almost impossible to believe. They're so extensive, well into the millions. Give me the background here and how this could have happened.

ANDREJSONS: See, Stalin – Stalin was his nickname. His previous nickname, by the way, was Koba. He used to go to an Orthodox seminary, but then he started reading Marxism there and then he decided to become an atheist and then he started robbing banks to finance the Bolsheviks. But essentially, by this point in 1937, why this happened was that you had a power struggle in the Communist Party. And Lenin before his death even wrote specifically that he does not want to see Stalin becoming his follower.

And how Stalin rose to power also is interesting, because the party elected him to be the General Secretary, and Stalin, instead of moving to a position – like previously they had president, they had chairman of the party, whatever, but we all know from Soviet history the General Secretary is the top position there. Well, Stalin made it the top position. It was just the secretarial – like technically, when he became the General Secretary, he was basically the top clerk of the country, but who was responsible for putting his people everywhere. Like he was the guy who assigned all the midlevel bureaucrats and everything.

And then he made it the top position. And he was so angry about the fact that nobody liked him and nobody supported him, and so, well, then he just decided to ruthlessly exterminate any political threats that he might have and just deal with the old guard of Lenin, so to speak, so that he would rule alone with his superior clique of – I don't know, lackeys, I would say. Yeah, probably. And with the rest of the country, well, he had to do these things because of industrialization.

As Stalin, well, we must look at Stalin in two periods, really: Stalin before World War II and Stalin after World War II. And the Stalin before World War II really never stopped thinking about this world revolution. That's why he kind of palled up with Hitler briefly and that's why they conquered Poland together, and that's why he started the Winter War. Stalin was going for the world revolution. He was kind of a supporter of this idea, a supporter of this expansion so that the Soviet system could go stronger and he would be able to rule over more. And he just understood that if some form of totalitarian rule isn't established in the USSR, that it would just eventually collapse because people would just run away from it or just see it for what it really was, which was essentially a ginormous prison for all the people involved except for those at the very top. He just did it to consolidate power, I think.

I could speak about why and how Stalin did all of these things for like eight hours right now, but as far as I get it, we don't have that much time, so this is my very short, concise answer.

WOODS: Well, I guess what I want to know is we hear these stories of people getting this knock on the door in the middle of the night and then we never see them again, but that seems like an incredibly inefficient and slow way to displace millions of people. It seems hard to imagine –

ANDREJSONS: Oh, no, no, no –

WOODS: – so what actually happened?

ANDREJSONS: No, no, that only happened in the cities, you see. That happened in the cities and that was the job of the secret police. If you ever visit Latvia, we have a KGB museum here. It's open to the public and you get a tour through the torture chambers and the prison and everything. That only happened in the cities.

The organized mass deportation and shootings happened in a way that – well, at least here in the Baltics, we had two of these: one in 1940, one in 1949. And it's just basically the army arrives at the town, gives an order to the mayor of the town, "Give me 1,000 unworthy, untrustable elements from this place." And it doesn't matter who they are. You just have to come up with a list of exactly – if you have 997 people who would be probably criminal, you just have to add three more in, because otherwise you'll get sent away. So you know, there's a quota of how many people need to be sent out or exterminated from each of the administrative districts.

Then they all gathered in one spot, just stuffed into these huge trains like in the wagons where cattle used to be transported throughout the Soviet Union. Yeah, you just get thrown into these without any heating or anything. You just get thrown into these, and then you just get deported to Siberia to the gulags. It was a very industrial form of killing. It was just simple. And those who died on the way there, yeah, they were just thrown out.

WOODS: Well, then that makes me curious about – of course I want to ask you about Latvia, in particular. The Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic is established in 1940. How is the average person's life different after that?

ANDREJSONS: 40% of Latvians die.

WOODS: How exactly? Tell me.

ANDREJSONS: Well, you see, the whole establishment of Latvian – and the same thing happened in Estonia and Lithuania and many other places, most recently in Crimea. But yeah, what happens is very simple. The Soviet Union just comes up to your borders and says, *Hey, we will invade you if you do not comply with our ultimatum to have an army based in your territory.* So our government says, *Well, okay, we should trust the Soviets. Let's allow them to have an army base.*

Three days later, the Soviet government says, *Oh, well, you tricked us somehow and something happened to an army base. I don't know, we now have a pretext. We shall now come in with our army and overthrow your radical, crazy government, which obviously does not respect international treaties and create a nice, fair election. We have all the candidates on this list already. Our tanks will be on the streets while you go and vote. And yeah, the voting is absolutely not private. Voting has to be public, and there are guys from KGB staring at how you vote.* Very fair election, basically.

And after that, it was simple. The nationalization started, basically. So Soviet army officials just come to your place and say that you're just too well off. Then they just confiscate everything that they want and sometimes leave you alone, sometimes just arrest some members of your family because the list of crimes for which you can be arrested is crazy. Like you could get arrested in Soviet era, like even in the 1940s, just as they occupied us – imagine one day you live in Latvia. Next day you live in Soviet Latvia. And apparently, you can now go to prison for ten years for having the flag of your old country still in your place somewhere, not even waving around. So essentially they went around and took everything they could from the people, gave it to the army, and then decided to just populate this whole region and stuff. It was just a lot of people died. We call it the Dreadful Year, the Dreadful Summer, basically. It's a massive tragedy here as the Soviets essentially, because of their army, just started confiscating everything they wanted and started just putting people in prisons, shipping them off to gulags, whatever, just since someone's house was nice, so this Soviet officer decided he would like to live in this house. What do you do? Well, you just have to murder everyone who lived there previously.

WOODS: Now, I assume things become at least somewhat more normal after the war was over?

ANDREJSONS: After Stalin's death, yes. Well, after Stalin's death in 1953. Then things started to become your usual stagnation and it wasn't so much of direct terror and being afraid of being shot. Khrushchev already thought normalized his relations with the outside world in a way, and he kind of thought that Stalin just was a bit too excessive in his mass murders of people.

WOODS: Yeah, why do you think Khrushchev gave the anti-Stalin speech in 1956? What did he stand to gain from that?

ANDREJSONS: Political power, because Khrushchev wasn't also already the imminent leader of the USSR after Stalin went away, after Stalin died. He had to basically wage an internal political war versus Zhukov, the famous general from World War II – Marshal Zhukov, actually. And then there was also Beria, who happened – Beria was also one of these guys who could have been the leaders, and there were some other minor figures there. And Zhukov, the general, he was a tough, hardliner Stalinist, and then there were also some kind of more liberal guys who wanted to go back to the new economic policy which the Soviets had. They had limited capitalism from 1921 to 1928, and there were some guys who wanted to move the country in that direction.

So Khrushchev came in as sort of a middle-ground candidate who basically used these anti-Stalin tricks to gain political power and just gain more votes in the conference of the Communist Party's Central Committee meetings. But at the same time, he also did this so that his own crimes weren't being investigated, because during Stalin's era – and at this point, only these people who were placed in power by Stalin were running the country. During Stalin's era, Khrushchev was in Ukraine. He was the chief of Ukraine, essentially, Ukrainian highest party official. So he was directly involved in Holodomor. He was directly involved in the terror that happened in Ukraine and the nationalization there, and he signed orders of mass killings himself. And by kind of stepping aside from Stalin – and so did the others. Essentially, their excuse was, Oh, I didn't know what I was signing. I just signed these orders because I was afraid Stalin would kill me, and stuff like that, so they would just sort of, I don't know, cleanse their own consciences and try to pretend to the rest of the people that they had nothing to do with all these crimes that had been going on, while of course they had been playing major roles in them.

WOODS: Well, now to complete our incredibly rapid gallop through Soviet history, let's talk about one of the most interesting topics of all, which is how it all came to an end. What do you think the contributing factors were?

ANDREJSONS: Jeans and rock and roll, man.

WOODS: So it was that.

ANDREJSONS: It was exactly that, and I've got a bunch of episodes on this, because this is kind of how the show started. But you see, my dad, he used to play bass in the opera orchestra for 20 years. But you know, as a young student, he wanted to get an electric guitar. And he had to build one on his own, because you just couldn't get them there. But so there was always a huge black market for everything. And like your average salary for an engineer was 120 rubles per month. That was kind of a higher up salary, middle class salary, so to speak. A pair of jeans smuggled in from the U.S. cost about 200 rubles, which is over a monthly salary, obviously.

And everyone was making the craziest illegal stuff ever, especially when it came to music, because not only illegal tapes were just circulating around; no, at one point – this was a bit early. This was already I think in the '70s – there was something called *Roentgenizdat*, which is like when people dug through the garbage bins of the hospitals looking for old *roentgen* images. Like *roentgen* images just thrown out, you know, X-ray scans. And as they were mobile, they used to imprint vinyls on them, and these were called "bones." The Soviet man was ingenious in the way how he basically

smuggled in everything and we really, really appreciated all of the crazy stuff that we saw, because it became really apparent that you guys over there lived way better than we did here, and we wanted this – we liked the taste of the freedom burger, you know?

And it was really crazy, was really expensive and weird here, because my grandfather, who managed to become one of the – he was one of the top engineers of Latvia. He managed to become – he wasn't in the party, but he managed to be quite high up. He once went to Japan with the Soviet delegation. He was included there. And he brought back from Japan to us one small can of Coca-Cola, like the 0.3 liter can, the small can of Coca-Cola. And then he just invited every family member with him to his home, and then we kind of all got a small taste of Coke from shot glasses. And then he left the open Coke can kind of on the shelf, and that was the luxury item, and everyone who came to visit him was just looking at this and it was like a luxus symbol, even.

WOODS: What about the role of Ronald Reagan? Because a lot of people in America think that Reagan played a role in pressuring the Soviets because of his Strategic Defense Initiative, his so-called Star Wars plan. What do you make of that?

ANDREJSONS: Yeah, he's also responsible. I mean, we liked all this stuff. And you know, at least in all the republics which weren't directly Russia, we were huge fans of Reagan. We were huge fans of America. We listened to the Radio Free Europe and Voice of America all the time. And some of us had relatives abroad who had escaped during World War II, and they also set some materials in. And Reagan was viewed in a very positive light. He was viewed as the guy who finally pushes back to the Soviet Union, because the Soviets lived on their own self-image, basically. They had to always prove that they were the strongest and that they were the best, and a lot of people here believe and also think that Reagan saw through the guise of this Soviet international bravado and really pushed on, because he knew, as I think, that the Soviet Union just couldn't keep up the arms race and our economy was just very stagnant and terrible. So I don't know. He's seen as sort of the good guy here. Who we don't like, by the way, is Harry Truman and FDR. We don't like those presidents here at all.

WOODS: Huh, interesting. Well, what was the opinion of Gorbachev among the general public?

ANDREJSONS: See, even though he's gotten the Peace Prize he's also one of the people who tried to institute prohibition in the Soviet Union.

WOODS: I didn't know that. I don't know how I didn't know that. Was this a productivity measure?

ANDREJSONS: Yeah, he just – See, he was a really, truly idealistic communist. He really looked back at Stalin's era and thought, well, this was wrong – and he essentially thought that communism could work and that people wanted the communism to work; he just thought the bureaucracy were just too selfish and that corruption was – that the corruption was not a product of the socialist government, but the corruption had come because of ineffective leadership and all that. So he honestly thought that by giving more liberties, he would make people

happier and that he actually honestly thought that people wanted to live in the Soviet Union, which is crazy.

He still committed a lot of crimes. I mean, he's the guy who ordered — You remember the Chernobyl catastrophe, right, in 1986?

WOODS: Yeah, of course, yeah.

ANDREJSONS: Gorbachev tried to really deny anything and he really tried to keep everything in control and stop people from panicking, and he only admitted it to the West when someone from Sweden had contacted him and ask him, Hey, what's going on? The radiation levels are getting higher. And what he did personally, what he did personally — he ordered the Communist children's mass demonstrations and mass parties would be held very near in the radiation zone next to Chernobyl and the other kind of centers in the region, in the major towns, because he wanted to show in public to television that everything was okay, guys, and so he basically dragged like tens of thousands of kids, of school kids to massively radiated areas and forced them to just walk around in these childhood Communist Party celebration meetings too. And they did this, and they did this just a day after this happened. He just really, really tried to do this the sneaky way.

WOODS: In the West he was held in very, very high regard, so that's why I'm curious about what public opinion in his own country believed about him.

ANDREJSONS: Well, it was better than anyone else we have had, but he was still pretty much a criminal who really tried — Like he radiated tens of thousands of kids, you know? And tried to basically fight the massive alcoholism problem in the Soviet Union, but basically what he did was give a lot of money to organized crime, essentially, and people just started brewing their own moonshine at the same time. It wasn't particularly effective. He was better than anyone else, but we still didn't like him.

WOODS: Right, right, yeah, it's not much of a comparison, I suppose. So tell me about your podcast, *The Eastern Border*.

ANDREJSONS: Yeah, my podcast, we're almost two years old now, and essentially it's a podcast where I try to explain to guys like you, guys in the West how it was really like in the Soviet Union. And I not only just use historical sources — mind you, I try to use only sources in Russian or Latvian or our regional sources — but I also as a journalist I have traveled around my region a lot and I have gathered a lot of private, deep, intimate stories about how it was like to live in the Soviet Union. Like all the crazy stories about how it was like to serve in the Red Army, and also during my own episode about Chernobyl, I interviewed a couple of people who were there, were sent there to kind of deal with the consequences and clean the place up. And I deal with all of these really personal stories. One of my biggest influences is Dan Carlin and I learned from him.

And I try to tell the story of my people. That's basically it. I also sometimes comment on modern-day Russian politics too, which has led to me getting a lot of angry emails

and some death threats. And yeah, I just try to explain how it's really like here in this region, how it was, and that we weren't all fanatical communists, and that we were really, really, really hoping to get out of there, if anything.

And what struck me as really odd was I listen to some other podcasts out there, and some of them kind of present their Russian experts, and when I hear someone called a Russian expert – like this person had lived three months in Moscow and then six months in St. Petersburg, which is completely unlike all the other parts of Russia and probably in specially assigned hotels, and basically she saw only what she was supposed to see, and then they call this person an expert on Russia. Then I thought I had to tell the real story of my people, how it was like, how it is now, what's going on so that you would know that we are not all communist scum, so to speak.

WOODS: What's your website?

ANDREJSONS: TheEasternBorder.lv, but we can also be found anywhere where good podcasts are found.

WOODS: Of course, of course, so people can go to iTunes or whatever. So we'll link to that on our show notes page, which I believe is going to be TomWoods.com/914. Well, this was – I'm sorry I put you through this crazy, this insane series of questions, jumping very quickly from one topic to the other, but I thought, first of all, it satisfies my curiosity on a number of topics, but also, it'll give people a sense of the breadth of your podcast and the sorts of things people can learn, because I think people listening to this show would enjoy listening to your podcast. And let me just say I don't remember who it was who wrote to me to suggest that I have you on, but whoever you are, if you're listening, thank you for the suggestion. All right, did you want to say something?

ANDREJSONS: Yeah, I'm sorry if my answers didn't make too much sense. It's like I had a limited time to answer this whole slew of things [laughing].

WOODS: Oh, everyone understands that. Everyone understands that what I was asking of you today was completely unreasonable, but I believe you passed the test successfully. And moreover, it's just enough to whet people's appetites to get them to say, Well, if I want to know more, I guess I'm just going to have to listen to the guy's podcast. So mission accomplished [laughing].

ANDREJSONS: Oh, thank you. I'm very honored to be here. And yeah, I just recently started listening to your show. I've listened only to a couple episodes for now, but so far, I really like it, and I will recommend it to my own listeners as well. Then again, you have way more listeners than I do, so I don't know how that'll work out.

WOODS: Well, who knows? I always refer to it as "the *Tom Woods Show* bump" that people get. I hope you get a little bump from this, because you're doing great, great, important work, and I appreciate your time today. Thanks so much.

ANDREJSONS: Oh, also, I got to comrade, which was fun on its own [laughing].

WOODS: Yeah, no one's ever done that before. In over 900 episodes, that's the first time ever [laughing]. All right, thanks again.

ANDREJSONS: Thank you and have a great day.