The Iron or Rustproof Felix?

Felix Dzerzhinsky as a Symbol of Revolutionary Fanaticism, Trivialization of Injustice and Dubious Democracy in Soviet and Post-Soviet Era Russia

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The following text describes the development of the cult surrounding Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, a revolutionary and founder of the political police in the Soviet Union, as well as the changes in the cult’s meaning during the different phases of the history of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. Dzerzhinsky stood at the head of Soviet state security in the first two periods of its existence immediately after the USSR became the first state where the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and state terror under the rule of one political party started to be applied. In that period, Dzerzhinsky’s organization bore the names of VChK (“the Cheka”), GPU and OGPU.1

Dzerzhinsky therefore made a substantial contribution first to the constitution of the Soviet communist system in the era of Vladimir Ilich Lenin, and later, after Lenin’s death in 1924, also to the transfer of this power into the hands of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. Lenin was undoubtedly the main architect of the regime of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. Nevertheless, it was thanks to Felix Dzerzhinsky at the head of the most important repressive apparatus that Soviet state terror acquired a very specific institutionalized form. Dzerzhinsky, also

1 VChK is the abbreviation of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Fighting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage under the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR (Vserossiiskaia chrezvychainiaia komissiia po borbe s kontrevoliutsiei i sabotazhem pri Sovete narodnykh komissarov RSFSR), which existed from 1917 to 1922. Its successor organization between 1922 and 1923 was the State Political Directorate under the Council of Peoples Commissars of the USSR (Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie pri Sovete narodnykh komissarov SSSR), abbreviated as GPU. This organization transformed into the Joint State Political Directorate under the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR (Obedinionnoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie pri Sovete narodnykh komissarov SSSR), which operated with the abbreviation OGPU from 1923 to 1934.
known as “Iron Felix”, was born on 11 September 1877 as Feliks Dzierżyński at the family estate of Dzerzhinovo in today’s Belarus (then in the territory of the Russian Empire) into an impoverished Polish aristocratic family. From his youth, he participated in the illegal revolutionary activities of the Lithuanian, or rather Polish-Lithuanian, Social Democratic Party (Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy, SDKPiL). He took part in the Warsaw uprising and was imprisoned several times (spending a total of 11 years in prison). After the February revolution in 1917, he joined Lenin’s Bolsheviks, soon rising to the top. Apart from the leadership of the political police and state security in the period of 1917–1926, he was also the People’s Commissary (Minister) for Internal Affairs and Transport between 1923 and 1924, the chairman of the Supreme Council of the National Economy of the USSR (Vysshii sovet narodnogo khoziaistva SSSR) between 1924 and 1926, and the chairman of the state Commission for the Improvement of the Life of Children (Komissiia po uluchsheniiu zhizni detei) between 1921 and 1926. Furthermore, in the period 1924–1926, he was a candidate for membership of the Politburo of the Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaiia partiia (bolshevikov) or VKS[b]), its supreme body. He died on 20 July 1926 of a heart attack at the relatively young age of 47, before the terror unleashed by Stalin in the USSR reached its most destructive phase.

The image of Dzerzhinsky as a basis for mythologizing the Soviet political police became very useful in all stages of the development of the Soviet system. The most important for the development of the cult was the period after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) (Komunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza, KPSS) in 1956 until the death of the head of the Committee for State Security (Komitet gosudarstvenoi bezopasnosti – KGB) and later the general secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Iurii Vladimirovich Andropov, in 1983. However, despite numerous revelations concerning the crimes of communism, the glorification of Dzerzhinsky and the trivialization of the terror he unleashed did not disappear completely even later – neither during the time of perestroika in the era of Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev (1985–1991)

nor later, after the disintegration of the USSR, or under the rule of the first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, and his successor, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. To this day, the members of the state security in Russia call themselves “Chekists”, in reference to the VChK/Cheka.

Although the myth of the Cheka’s founder remained very similar or virtually unchanged in all these periods, its functions gradually changed. This did not relate only to the fact that Dzerzhinsky held positions in the Soviet security leadership as well as other (for example, economic) roles. The interpretation of the meaning of Dzerzhinsky’s legacy was determined mainly by the changing views of the role and activity of the internal political police in the Soviet Union, and later of the role of centralized state power and the work of VChK’s successor organizations in post-Soviet Russia. Given that the myth of Dzerzhinsky \textit{de facto} survived without any interruptions and substantial change in all the periods since Dzerzhinsky’s death, I argue that the cult of this man became more applicable and in the long term more useful for state power in the Kremlin than the cults of other leaders of the Soviet era, including those of Lenin and Stalin.

Dzerzhinsky’s Cult between Stalinism and the Early Cold War

The image of Felix Dzerzhinsky as the founder of the Cheka and an incorruptible, uncompromising, but also humane defender of the revolution began to be built by the Soviet communist propaganda machine almost immediately after Dzerzhinsky’s death. In the same year, the square in front of the headquarters of the Soviet state security in Moscow was renamed after Dzerzhinsky, as was one of the neighbouring streets, the former \textit{Bolshaia Lubianka}. The poet Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovsky glorified Dzerzhinsky in his poems twice in 1927: firstly, in the poem \textit{Khorosho!} [Good!], dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, and secondly, in the poem \textit{Soldaty Dzerzhinskogo} [Dzerzhinsky’s Soldiers] on the tenth anniversary of VChK’s founding.

In 1929, the town of Rastiapino in the Nizhegorod province, less than 400 kilometres east of Moscow, was renamed Dzerzhinsk. Two more towns with the same name were added in the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics in the 1930s. The Belorussian Dzerzhinsk (Dzyarzhynsk) replaced the original Koidanava on the map in 1932, and the Ukrainian town of Toretsk received its new name in 1938. In contrast to the first two places, which still bear the name of Dzerzhinsky, the Ukrainian Dzerzhinsk regained its original name in 2016.

In relation to the claim of the humane character of the future communist system, emphasis was placed on Dzerzhinsky’s activities for the care of children who had lost their parents during the post-revolutionary civil war. However, no reference was made to the fact that, to a great extent, this war was caused by the
Bolshevik party’s unfulfilled promises of 1917 and the subsequent “Red Terror”, also headed by Dzerzhinsky. Dzerzhinsky’s name was given, for example, to children’s camps, and to books and films for young readers and viewers. One of the camps for children, which also contributed to the development of the post-revolutionary economy, later produced cameras that were Soviet copies of the German Leica. They were given the name FED in the USSR, after the initials of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky. These camps for children were also praised by one of the founders of Soviet pedagogy, Anton Semionovich Makarenko, in his work *Pedagogicheskaia poema* [Pedagogical Poem] (1935).

However, it is also known that the development of Dzerzhinsky’s cult was not equally intensive in subsequent decades. In the 1930s and 1940s, it remained admissible only to the extent that it did not compete with the cult of the highest leader, Joseph Stalin. Most of Dzerzhinsky’s former collaborators were even executed during the “Great Terror” of 1937–1938. Regardless of this, the year 1938 saw a first plan to make a feature film about Dzerzhinsky’s life. As I discuss later, however, the film was only made under different conditions just before Stalin’s death. In 1940, a competition was held for a monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky in Moscow. The participants of the competition included, for example, Vera Ignatevna Mukhina, the creator of a well-known constructivist monument of 1937 with the title *Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa* [Worker and Kolkhoz Woman], which is still standing at the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy (Vystavka dostizhenii narodnogo khoziaistva) complex in Moscow. The competition was won by another sculptor, Sarra Dmitrievna Lebedeva, but the project was not implemented in the end. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Dzerzhinsky’s portrait was allegedly removed from the KGB officers’ club, together with his post-mortem mask and tunic. Nonetheless, a bust was placed on his tomb behind Lenin’s Mausoleum on Red Square, although this tribute was not paid exclusively to Dzerzhinsky, but also to three other communist leaders.

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7 These were Mikhail Vasilevich Frunze, Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin and Iakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov (see GILL, Graeme: *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2011, p. 160).
A new stage in the development of Dzerzhinsky’s cult began with the birth of the Cold War in the last years of Stalin’s life. The heroic myth of the Cheka and its founder started to be actively used for the creation of the political police in the service of new communist dictatorships in the countries of “the socialist camp”. For the new communist regimes, the Cheka was to become an example of the struggle against counter-revolution. For example, on the initiative of Klement Gottwald, the first Czechoslovak communist president, a school where intelligence officers were trained was named after Dzerzhinsky. As the Ministry of National Security of Czechoslovakia later explained, Dzerzhinsky proved to be an untiring fighter against counter-revolution in an allegedly critical period for the young Soviet state. The work of the post-revolutionary Cheka was therefore identical to the tasks faced by the Ministry – namely, to enforce the “victory” of the new system by all possible means, despite not having the support of the majority of the population. The new name of the school was also meant to emphasize the close links between the Czechoslovak secret services and its Soviet model.

Similar reasons led to the renaming of one of the squares in the centre of Warsaw, in Poland in the summer of 1951. Its original name of Plac Bankowy [Bank Square] was changed to Plac Feliksa Dzierźnińskiego [Felix Dzerzhinsky Square].

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and Dzerzhinsky's monument was also erected on the square, where it remained until 1989. It was the first “revolutionary” monument built in the Polish capital after the Second World War, that is, after the USSR liberated Poland from German Nazism to subsequently subject it to Soviet power ambitions. These ambitions mainly lay in legitimizing the legacy of the anti-Polish Soviet-German pact of 1939 and in exporting the Stalinist political system to Poland. Dzerzhinsky here not only symbolized devotion to revolution, but through his ethnic origin also personified alleged ties between the Polish and Soviet nations.9 Interestingly, Dzerzhinsky’s brother Wrzyszlaw, a neurologist and military doctor, in contrast, clearly identified with Poland and was not even a communist. As a member of the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa), which was connected to the Polish government-in-exile in London, he was killed by the Germans in 1942.10

Ironically, the Soviet delegation present at the unveiling of the monument, which was dedicated to “the fraternity of both nations”, included the former USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs, Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov. The very person who, after the signing of the Soviet-German pact of 1939 and its secret protocol defining the spheres of influence in Central Europe between these two dictatorships, became a symbol of not fraternity, but betrayal and aggression for the majority of Poles. Apart from Molotov, the ceremony was also attended by the then most famous Soviet marshal, Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov. Dzerzhinsky, Molotov and Zhukov together in the centre of Warsaw therefore symbolized the ideological, political and military dominance of the Soviet Union and the communist system of the Soviet type, which was relevant in this period. The cult of Dzerzhinsky and the Cheka was therefore carried over from the context of the post-revolutionary era in the Soviet Union to the context of the early Cold War in Central Europe.

In the field of literature and art, this cult was promoted by, for example, the books of G. M. Liubarov and Jurij Pavlovich German.11 A special case was the film I previously mentioned about Dzerzhinsky, directed by Mikhail Konstantinovich

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9 Dzerzhinsky came from a Polish Catholic family, but given that Poland as a state did not exist between 1795 and 1918 and that its territory was divided between the neighbouring powers, Dzerzhinsky’s birthplace near Minsk formed part of the Russian Empire.


Kalatozov – who later also directed famous films such as *Letiat zhuravli* [The Cranes are Flying] and *Krasnaia palatka* [The Red Tent] – the shooting of which was finished towards the end of Stalin’s life in 1952. However, it was eventually screened under the title *Vikhri vrazhdebnye* [Hostile Whirlwinds] only several years later, in 1957, when the process of de-Stalinization had already begun in the Soviet Union. Whereas in the 1952 version, the Soviet heroes featured in the film together with Dzerzhinsky included Stalin, five years later, when the film was shown to Soviet viewers, the former “big leader” and the “leader of nations” had been removed from the story.\(^{12}\)

**The Inner Consolidation of the KGB**

The period between 1954 and 1962 saw another massive expansion of Dzerzhinsky’s cult. This began with the transformation of the former Soviet Ministry of State Security (*Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, or MGB) into the Committee for State Security under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. The birth of this institution in 1954, one year after Stalin’s death, was intended to reduce the former “omnipotent” status of the political police (instead of a ministry, it became a council) and increase the communist party’s control over it. The year 1962 was marked by an attempt at the second wave of de-Stalinization after the Twenty-Second Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. In late 1961, during the Congress, Stalin’s body was finally moved from the mausoleum, where it had until then been exhibited side-by-side with Lenin, and taken to a tomb near the Kremlin wall.

In this period, the cult of Dzerzhinsky and the Cheka no longer served for the development of an identity for the special services in the countries of the socialist camp, but to form a “new” image of the Soviet political police itself, an image that would tie the “new” KGB not with terror, but with the “people”. Until 1962, this new course applied mainly to the top political decisions, but it *de facto* started to be propagated “among the people” only in the subsequent period.

The general tone of this new trend was already set at the meeting of the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee on 8 February 1954, where the decision was made to appoint Ivan Aleksandrovich Serov as chairman of the newly created Council for State Security. In his speech to the future first chairman of the KGB,

\(^{12}\) For more information see CHERNIAVSKAIA Iuliia: *Felix Dzerzhinskii v sovetskoi politike pamiati* [Felix Dzerzhinsky in Soviet Politics of Memory]. Sankt-Peterburg, Evropeiskii universitet v Sankt-Peterburge 2017. Masters dissertation. I would like to thank Iuliia Cherniaevskaia for providing me with her text.
the then new chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (par-
liament), Marshal Kliment Efremovich Voroshilov, emphasized that the “special
services” should follow the example of Dzerzhinsky, that is, capture enemies
and build a new organization.\textsuperscript{13} On 7 June 1954, after the official
foundation of the Council for State Security, the new Soviet leader, Nikita Sergeevich
Khrushchev, gave a long speech to the participants of the All-Union Conference of KGB
officers, in which he outlined the qualities and moral character of a real Chek-
ist of a non-Stalinist type. The qualities described by Khrushchev corresponded
exactly to the qualities that the Soviet propaganda machine attributed to Felix
Dzerzhinsky. By contrast, Khrushchev criticized practically all Dzerzhinsky’s suc-
cessors at the head of the Soviet security services. Even though he only named
Lavrentii Pavlovich Beriia, Viktor Semionovich Abakumov, Genrikh Grigorevich
Iagoda and Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov in his speech, he also added that the party
had already started to notice problems with the leadership of the security ser-
vices in the immediate aftermath of Dzerzhinsky’s death. This implied that not
even Viacheslav Rudolfovich Menzhinskii’s work between 1926 and 1934 was
considered satisfactory by Khrushchev.\textsuperscript{14} In his direct references to Dzerzhinsky,
Khrushchev appreciated the role of the “sharp sword of the Cheka” in dealing
with enemies, as well as Dzerzhinsky’s alleged capacity to acknowledge his mis-
takes and release those who had been unjustly arrested. According to Khrush-
chev, if any such arrests occurred during Dzerzhinsky’s era, they were made only
with Dzerzhinsky’s good intentions.

In this context, I should also note one ironical statement ascribed to Dzerzhin-
sky, his allegedly most famous quotation. According to this, a Chekist should have
primarily a “cold head, fiery heart and clean hands”. However, since the exact
source of this famous quotation is unknown, it is disputable whether Dzerzhin-
sky ever said anything like this. It was probably first quoted in Nikolai Zubov’s
brief biography of Dzerzhinsky published in 1941.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1956, Khrushchev delivered his milestone “secret speech” at the Twenti-
eith Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, which contained previously un-
heard of criticism of Stalinism as well as of Stalin personally. In the same year,

\textsuperscript{13} See FURSENKO, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich (ed.): \textit{Prezidium TsK KPSS 1954–1964: Chorno-
vye protokolnye zapisи zasedanii. Stenogrammy, postanovleniia} [Presidium of the CPSU Cent-
ral Committee 1954–1964: Draft Minutes of Meetings. Transcripts, Resolutions], Vol. 1. Mos-

\textsuperscript{14} KHRUSHCHEV, Nikita Sergeevich: \textit{Dva tsventa vremenii: Dokumenty iz lichnogo fonda N. S.
Khrushcheva} [Two Colours of Time: Documents from N. S. Khrushchev’s Personal Collection],

\textsuperscript{15} ZUBOV, Nikolai I.: \textit{Felix Edmundoovich Dzerzhinskii: Kratkaia biografiiia} [Felix Edmundo-
vich Dzerzhinsky: A Brief Biography]. Moskva, Gospolitizdat 1941.
the campaign against Stalin’s cult of personality was complemented by the publication of a new biography of the Cheka founder entitled *Stranitsy iz zhizni F. E. Dzerzhinskogo* [Pages from the Life of F. E. Dzerzhinsky] from the pen of the writer Pavel Georgievich Sofinov.\(^\text{16}\)

In December 1957, on the occasion of the 40\(^{th}\) anniversary of the founding of the Soviet political police, KGB chairman Ivan Serov published an article in the prominent *Pravda* [The Truth], the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party. In this, he commended Dzerzhinsky as “one of the best sons of the party”, a hero “whose image will live on in the hearts of the Soviet people forever”. The positive continuity between “Dzerzhinsky’s” Cheka and “Serov’s” KGB was supported by claims that from the first day of the Cheka’s work, the state security bodies “acted as an armed division of the working class and the communist party, as a unit standing in the front line of the struggle against the enemies of the Soviet state”. The article justified the crimes of the Stalinist system as a combination of Stalin’s cult of personality, abuse of power by certain individuals and pressure from abroad by evil imperialists attempting to undermine the existence of the Soviet Union.\(^\text{17}\)

The first stage of building the post-Stalinist cult of Dzerzhinsky culminated in December 1958 with the erection of Dzerzhinsky’s monument directly in front of the KGB headquarters in Moscow. The unveiling of the construction, 5.7 metres tall and weighing 11 tons, was timed to coincide with the forty-first anniversary of the Cheka’s founding. The ceremony was personally attended by Khrushchev, as well as by his subsequent successor Leonid Ilich Brezhnev, together with Dzerzhinsky’s widow Sofia and son Jan.\(^\text{18}\)

In that period, the square on which the statue was placed as well as the nearby metro station had already been named after Dzerzhinsky. From that moment, all KGB leaders inevitably looked down upon the back of “Iron Felix” from their offices on the third floor. Moreover, under the leadership of Vladimir Efimovich Semichastnyi (1961–1967), the office of the KGB chairman was decorated with Dzerzhinsky’s bust, created, like the monument, by the sculptor Evgenii Viktorovich Vuchetich. According to Semichastnyi’s recollections in the 1990s, the bust remained in the office even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.\(^\text{19}\)


Dzerzhinsky’s monument not only stood next to the KGB headquarters, but also next to the Children’s World (Detskii mir) department store, which became the biggest department store for children’s goods in the Soviet Union after its opening in 1957. In the period of de-Stalinization, this proximity gave the Lubianka, which during Stalinism was also one of the most feared prisons in the Soviet capital and the entire country, a certain “human face”. The vicinity of the Children’s World and the Lubianka again symbolically highlighted the myth of Dzerzhinsky’s love for children. In the summer of 1962, that is, in the last phase of the consolidation of the Soviet state security system, a Higher School of the KGB, also named after Felix Dzerzhinsky, was founded (Vyshhaia shkola KGB im. F. E. Dzerzhinskogo).

An Attempt to “Charm” Soviet Society

The conclusions of the Twenty-Second Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1961 laid the foundations for the subsequent period, according to which the state security services were declared to be the “bodies of the all-people’s socialist state”. A new programme of the Soviet Communist Party was also adopted at the Congress.

At this highest communist forum, Khrushchev, intoxicated by the Soviet success in sending the first human, Iurii Alekseevich Gagarin, into space only half a year earlier, compared his country to the third stage of a Soviet spaceship. The party programme then stated that the Soviet Union would finish the construction of the communist system in the following twenty years. After the stages of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the “all-people’s democracy” according to Marxist theory, the Soviet system was to move to another stage of development, because “after the exploiting classes had been eliminated, the function of suppressing their resistance disappeared”. Having brought about a complete and final victory of socialism – the first stage of communism – and the transition of society to the full-scale construction of communism, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would fulfil its historical mission and ceased to be indispensable in the USSR from the point of view of the tasks of internal development, the document stated. In this respect, the emphasis on propaganda (mainly in the area of literature, theatre and film) shifted towards promoting the idea of unity between the Committee for State Security and the “Soviet people”.

The former symbolic designation of the KGB as “the shield and sword” of the Soviet system was to be, at least officially, toned down to being “the eyes and ears” of Soviet communism. In other words, the state security did no longer exist just “for the people”, but it was to be based on the people – and hence on their “trust” and reports – in preventing “anti-Soviet activity”. As early as the late 1950s, this change was called prophylaxis or prevention (profilaktika). In his article published on 20 December 1962, on the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the VChK, the then KGB chairman, Vladimir Semichastnyi, illustrated this with Dzerzhinsky’s quote that “only the trust of workers and peasants gave the VChK the power to fulfil the task assigned to it by revolution: to defeat the internal counter-revolution and uncover all conspiracies of deposed landowners, capitalists and their henchmen”.

In order to promote the “all people” character, the Soviet police services, whose basic repressive nature changed only little, needed to present their “positive” image to the broader Soviet public. In the summer of 1963, Semichastnyi therefore approved a detailed plan aimed at influencing the media, literature and theatre. The plan envisaged the creation of very specific artistic works that would convey the required message and indicated which members of the KGB should influence the process and how this should be done. It included older as well as very topical themes: for example, Vadim Mikhailovich Kozhevnikov’s novel about the activity of a Cheka communist who for a long time fulfilled an extremely important task for his home country abroad. The novel Shchit i mech [Shield and Sword] was based on the story of an intelligence officer, Rudolf Abel, who in 1962 was exchanged on the “Bridge of Spies” in Potsdam for the American pilot Gary Powers, who had been shot down during a reconnaissance flight over the Soviet Union in 1960. The dramatist Anatoli Andreevich Barianov was to write a play based on the story of the officer of the Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoe razvedyvatelnoe upravlenie, or GRU), Oleg Vladimirovich Penkovskii, who worked simultaneously for the Soviet military intelligence and for American and British intelligence. Penkovskii, who had provided the Americans with, among other things, the plans of the Soviet launching sites in Cuba during the Cuban Missile

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21 See, for example, SNIEGON, Tomas: Getting Ready to Fight the Dissidents: New Evidence about the KGB and the “Enemies of the People” During the Late Khrushchev Era. In: Journal of Cold War Studies (Accepted/In press as to December 2022).


23 Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford (CA), collection Lithuanian KGB, K-1, copy 10, reel 110, file 323.

Crisis, was later sentenced as a traitor to the USSR and executed in the spring of 1963. The list also included 12 films, among them Vystrel v tumane [A Shot in the Fog] of 1963, directed by Aleksandr Ivanovich Seryi and Anatolii Alekseevich Bobrovskii, about the KGB’s struggle against scientific and technical espionage, and Ekho chornogo lesa [Echoes of Black Forest], based on the novel by Vladimir Pavlovich Beliaev and Illarion Vasilevich Podolianin, about the struggle against Western spies among Ukrainian nationalists. Apart from the theme of the Cold War, a key role was assigned to the demonstration of heroism by Chekists during the Great Patriotic War, as well as after the Bolshevik revolution under the leadership of Felix Dzerzhinsky. Not all the plans mentioned in this document were eventually implemented.

The participation of the Committee for State Security in the process of organizing propaganda was not limited merely to bureaucratic control. The KGB consultants participated in all the preparatory work. Even though, their participation had a certain positive effect (the KGB officers revealed some unknown details about the stories on which the films were based), at the same time, however, these “experts” exercised strict control to ensure that the employees of the state security services should be presented exclusively in a positive light as intelligent and well-educated people. The negative aspects of the work of Chekists and their successors were still strictly taboo. This contributed to the preservation and reinforcement of the myth, as built from the centre, of the “honest and just” state security services that serve the people and are closely connected to them.

In the newer themes, references to Dzerzhinsky’s model were indirect, but in the glorification of the entire post-revolutionary period, still very clear. This was the case of, for example, Boris Volchek’s film Sotrudnik ChK [Cheka Employee] of 1963. The most famous output of this campaign, building up an image of the heroic and loyal patriotic political police “with a human face”, was a popular TV series in the 1970s, Semnadtsat mgnovenii vesny [Seventeen Moments of Spring], directed by Tatiana Mikhailovna Lioznova. It was based on the novel by Iulian Semionovich Semionov and featured famous Soviet actors, such as Viacheslav Tikhonov and Oleg Tabakov. The plot of the series, inspired by stories of real Soviet spies, took place late in the Second World War. The entire twelve-part series was also successfully distributed to other countries of the then Soviet bloc. Thanks to his popularity, the main protagonist, Otto von Stierlitz, became a Soviet version of the British agent James Bond, otherwise known as 007, who had made his literary appearance nearly twenty years before the publication of Semionov’s books.


and had shot to fame in Western cinemas in the 1960s. However, unlike Stierlitz, James Bond was mainly a fictitious literary character. Stierlitz, who attempted to provide a more realistic picture of the world of the secret services, therefore resembled more closely another British literary spy of the 1960s, George Smiley, the fictional character of writer John le Carré.

The Fall of Communism, the Disintegration of the USSR and Vacillation

With perestroika under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the communist system and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, the meaning attributed to the “symbol of Dzerzhinsky” also underwent a new period of change. For the very first time, it was possible to openly criticize Dzerzhinsky as a historical figure. In 1990, this became evident, for example, with the publication of Sergei Petrovich Melgunov’s book *Krasnyi terror v Rossii (1918–1923)* [The Red Terror in Russia]. The book, written several decades earlier, was the most famous work by a witness, historian and opponent of the Bolshevik revolution, who was initially sentenced to death in 1919 but who managed to leave Russia after the sentence was changed. His book was published in 1924 (in both German and Russian) and then reprinted several times, but, until the end of the Cold War, it was only available in Western countries.

After Dzerzhinsky had formerly served as a symbol of revolution, of the Stalinist Sovietization of the East European secret services as well as of the “popularization” and “patriotization” of the Soviet political police, the attitude towards him and to his “legacy” started to become an important indicator of the Kremlin leaders’ sincerity in their attempts to democratize the late Soviet and later Russian political system.

The place with which this process is most closely linked is the former Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow, which had borne Dzerzhinsky’s name since his death in 1926. However, in 1990, its original name, Lubianka Square, was restored. The neighbouring street – formerly Dzerzhinsky Street – also changed its name.

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27 Bond’s “literary father”, Ian Fleming, created Bond’s character in 1952 and the first film adaptation was *Dr No*, released in 1962.

28 John le Carré shot to fame with the book *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, published in 1963 and made into a film in 1965.


becoming Bolshaia Lubianka again. In the same year, the Solovetskii kamen [Solovetskii Stone], symbolising the suffering of the victims of the Soviet communist system, especially of its most cruel, Stalinist period, was placed next to the KGB headquarters, which dominates the square. The Stone was erected on 30 October 1990, a day proclaimed as the Remembrance Day for the Victims of Political Repression. For this purpose, the stone was brought especially from the Solovetsky Islands, where one of the first concentration camps of the Soviet period was established during Dzerzhinsky’s era. In close proximity to Dzerzhinsky’s statue and the KGB headquarters, the stone was therefore a reminder of a completely different face of “Dzerzhinsky’s heirs” than the Children’s World department store on the opposite side of the same square.

Less than a year later, on 22 August 1991, Dzerzhinsky’s statue was removed from Lubianka Square. This happened immediately after the failed attempt to remove Gorbachev from the post of party and state leader, which involved the KGB leadership headed by Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kriuchkov siding with the conservative opponents of Gorbachev’s reforms. Scenes of a crowd cheering as a crane took Dzerzhinsky’s statue down from its pedestal so that “Iron Felix” would stop dominating the city centre gained at that time a similar symbolic value as the scenes of Germans tearing down the concrete Berlin wall in their divided metropolis less than two years earlier.

The removal of the monument was allegedly to prevent any attempts of attacks by angry Muscovites against the headquarters of the “putschist” Committee for State Security. The official instruction to dismantle the monument was signed by the then mayor of Moscow, Gavriil Kharitonovich Popov. The Moscow’s authorities were also to examine if it was appropriate to leave other monuments in place, commemorative plaques and objects that had been placed in the Soviet capital or named in honour of state and party officials of the USSR and other countries. This process was also supported by the last KGB chairman, Vadim Viktorovich Bakatin, who replaced the arrested Kriuchkov in the Lubianka one week after the removal of Dzerzhinsky’s monument. As Bakatin later wrote in his memoirs, during his short leadership of the KGB (from late August to early December of 1991) he attempted to eliminate both the special position of the political police in Soviet society and its related “ideology of Chekism”.

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Nevertheless, Dzerzhinsky’s spirit did not remain out of favour with the Soviet leaders for long. The first president of the post-Soviet Russian Federation, Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, had no desire to be considered a supporter of the KGB or the communist dictatorship. Yet, after another big power clash – the struggle for power between the president and the parliament, which in October 1993 culminated in the army firing at the parliament on the president’s command – he understood that in order to strengthen his power as president he also needed the state security services. Yeltsin’s strategy was to preserve the secret police in a form that did not threaten his position, which meant that no substantial vetting or personnel changes took place. However, Yeltsin’s manoeuvring with respect to the position of KGB in the “new” Russia occurred even before that. In 1991, the

newly established state security that replaced the KGB was divided into a larger number of sections than the KGB had, but the line of succession with the KGB was preserved. Yeltsin’s post-Soviet regime did not make any attempt to establish a completely new, democratically controllable service that would open up its archives, identify its past victims and reveal the network of informers from the period of dictatorship.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1995, Yeltsin even renewed the tradition of the “Chekists’ holiday” on 20 December, that is, on the day when the Cheka was founded under the leadership of Felix Dzerzhinsky 78 years earlier. The holiday, known as “Chekist Day”, officially the Day of the Members of the State Security of the Russian Federation (\textit{Den sotrudnika organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii}), thus emphasized not so much the differences between the Soviet KGB and the Russian post-Soviet “special services”, but rather their historical continuity. The Russian president reinforced this impression by rejecting attacks on Russian “Chekists” as going too far and by calling the members of secret services “genuine patriots” who did “hard and often heroic” work.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Putin’s Period and the Disputes over Whether Dzerzhinsky’s Statue Should Be Returned to its Original Position in front of the Lubianka}

With the arrival of Vladimir Putin in the post of president of the Russian Federation in 2000, Russia had a leader whose career was the most closely linked to the world of “Chekism”, symbolized by the “legacy of Felix Dzerzhinsky”. Putin was not the first highest representative of the state with roots in the Soviet state security. This role had first been filled by Iurii Andropov, the KGB chairman in 1967–1982 and the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU between 1982 and 1984. However, Andropov did not enter the Lubianka as a career “Chekist”, but as a member of the communist party apparatus appointed to the post by Brezhnev, whereas Putin (under Andropov’s leadership) started his career in the KGB and worked there for a full sixteen years (1975–1991). Before his arrival in the highest posts, he had never been active as a politician. During Boris Yeltsin’s second presidency, in 1998–1999, he first led one of the KGB’s successor organizations,

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\textsuperscript{36} For more information on this process, see FEDOR, J.: \textit{Russia and the Cult of State Security}, pp. 124–129.
the Russian Federal Security Service (*Federalnaia sluzhba bezopasnosti*, FSB), to be afterwards promoted by Yeltsin firstly to the post of head of the government and later to the post of president.

Debates on the possibility of returning Dzerzhinsky’s statue to its place in front of the Lubianka building have been taking place practically during the entire period of Putin’s rule. It was considered, for example, in 2002, by the then mayor of Moscow, Iurii Mikhailovich Luzhkov, who took over the leadership of Moscow City Hall after Gavriil Popov ten years earlier. In the beginning, Luzhkov supported the Yeltsin liberals, but shortly after his controversial proposal, he joined the new United Russia (*Edinaia Rossiia*) party, which was founded in 2001 and supported President Putin. Even though the Moscow mayor gave reassurances that his proposal did not mean a “return to the past” and based it on the “artistic value” of the monument, the opposition that his proposal met with finally made the return of the monument impossible. Regardless, Luzhkov reiterated his support for the memorial’s return in 2011.

The fact that the new popularity of Dzerzhinsky’s symbol was not only the result of the viewpoint of one individual but the result of a change in the political climate was also demonstrated by the elections for the State Duma (*Gosudarstvennaia duma*) in 2003, when the United Russia party stood for election with a poster depicting a map of Russia made up of portraits of important figures. Attention was drawn mainly to Stalin and Dzerzhinsky in combination with the slogan “a United Russia is a Strong Russia”. In the same year, the celebrations of the eighty-fifth anniversary of the Cheka’s founding also had a new ceremonial character.

In 2017, when the Russian Federation celebrated the centenary of the October Revolution, there was another attempt to return Dzerzhinsky’s monument to its original place in the centre of Moscow. This time it was supported by the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (*Kommunisticheskaia partiia Rossiiskoi federatsii*, successor of the CPSU), Gennadii Andreevich Ziuganov. In his letter to President Putin, Ziuganov emphasized that Dzerzhinsky stood at the birth

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of the system of state security which, from the VChK to the FSB, represented one of the most important elements of Russian statehood. Ziuganov claimed that Dzerzhinsky was also one of the most successful economic leaders in Russian history, someone who had laid the foundations of the Russian economy. Returning the monument to its original place would therefore help to “set the moral and ethical reference points of Russian society”. Finally, however, this proposal, which was also raised by the communists in parliament, was not approved. This was at the end of Putin’s third presidential period and only shortly before another election campaign.

Putin personally did not make any public statement regarding the proposal to return Dzerzhinsky’s statue to its position in front of the Lubianka. This, however, also meant that he never clearly rejected this idea. Although he publicly criticized Lenin, his attitude to Dzerzhinsky was quite different. In 2014, for example, he decided that one of the divisions of the Ministry of Interior’s army should be named after Felix Dzerzhinsky, a name it bore during the Soviet period. And a year earlier, he commented on other discussions regarding the removal and possible return of Dzerzhinsky’s monument and said the following: “This is not about symbols. This is about treating every period of our history with respect. When Dzerzhinsky’s monument was being pulled down, even a person with such democratic beliefs – and he was a genuine democrat – as the former mayor of Saint Petersburg, Anatolii Aleksandrovich Sobchak, said: Revolution yes; but why destroy monuments?”

Nevertheless, this issue polarized Russian society. According to surveys carried out by the independent Levada Centre in 2015, 51 percent of Muscovites supported the return of the monument to its position in front of the Lubianka. On the national scale, the situation was similar (49 percent). About 25 percent of the survey respondents were opposed or strongly opposed.

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The monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky designed by Evgenii Vuchetich in 1958. It was removed from Lubianka Square on 23 August 1991 and, along with other monuments of the communist era, found its new location in Moscow’s Muzeon Park a year later.

The author’s own archive © T. Sniegon

In 2017, Russian State TV dedicated one of the episodes of the series Zabytye vozhdii [Forgotten Leaders] to Felix Dzerzhinsky. The series relativized a number of crimes of communism and also profiled several leaders of the political police. Dzerzhinsky was called a “legend of the state security bodies” and an “extraordinary personality”. The series was created with the support of the Ministry of Culture and the Russian Military Historical Society (Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoе obshchestvo, RVIO), which was led by the then Minister of Culture and a close Putin collaborator, Vladimir Rostislavovich Medinskii. The Society was created by a decree issued by Putin in December 2012 “to consolidate the power of the state and society in learning about the military and historical past of Russia, to support the study of Russian military history and to work against any attempts of its misinterpretation”. Its aims are “to ensure popularization of the successes of military history, to increase the prestige of military service and to inculcate patriotism” in

Russian society.\textsuperscript{45} The evaluation of the past under the control of the Ministry of Culture and RVIO can therefore be understood as the official position of the current Russian leadership on individual historical issues.

The latest heated discussions on the fate of the Dzerzhinsky monument took place in Russia in early 2021 on the initiative of several nationally oriented activists. Mikhail Efimovich Shvydkoi, a Special Envoy of the President of the Russian Federation for International Culture since 2008 and former Minister of Culture under Putin (2000–2004) also joined the discussion. Shvydkoi proposed that a monument on Lubianka Square should be to someone whose personality “will be comprehensible and unifying for the entire society”. Surprisingly, however, it was another former leader of the “Chekists” – Iurii Andropov – that Shvydkoi preferred to see on the pedestal in front of the Lubianka, instead of Dzerzhinsky.\textsuperscript{46}

The fact that it was mainly President Putin who had sympathies for Andropov was already known. For example, at the beginning of Putin’s political career, a plaque commemorating Andropov was returned to the façade of the Lubianka, from which it had been removed, like Dzerzhinsky’s statue, in 1991. The ceremony to unveil the commemorative plaque, which took place in December 1999, was personally attended by Putin, back then in the post of prime minister. Andropov is the only former head of the Chekists commemorated on the walls of the KGB headquarters. In 2003, Putin decided that a monument to Iurii Andropov should be erected in Moscow.\textsuperscript{47} It was to be unveiled a year later, on the occasion of the 90\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Andropov’s birth and the 20\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of his death.\textsuperscript{48} However, the majority of Moscow residents were against such a move.\textsuperscript{49} In the end, the monument, three metres tall, was erected in the metropolis of Karelia.


\textsuperscript{47} Putin rasporiadilsia postavit v Moskve pamiatnik Iuriiu Andropovu [Putin Ordered to Erect a Monument to Iurii Andropov in Moscow]. In: Lenta.ru [online], 06.10.2003. [Accessed 2022-10-24.] Available at: https://lenta.ru/news/2003/10/06/monument/.


\textsuperscript{49} Pamiatnik Andropovu: Narod protiv prezidenta [Monument to Andropov: People versus President]. In: Utro.ru [online], 06.10.2003. [Accessed 2022-12-14.] Available at: https://utro.ru/articles/2003/10/06/238383.shtml.
Petrozavodsk, where Andropov had held the post of first secretary of the Komsomol regional organization before the Second World War.\(^\text{50}\)

However, in the subsequent voting in Moscow, Dzerzhinsky did not compete with Andropov, but with the thirteenth-century Prince Aleksandr Nevsky, who was considered a Russian national hero and was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in the sixteenth century. According to the mayor of Moscow, Sergei Semionovich Sobianin, a small majority of Muscovites gave their support to Aleksandr Nevsky.\(^\text{51}\)

Neither of the two candidates symbolizing the “firm hand” of the state security and “order” through a dictatorship has therefore succeeded so far. However, due to fears for the potential “polarization of society”, the issue of possible changes in respect to the new dominant figure on Lubianka Square has not yet been resolved.\(^\text{52}\)

Nevertheless, the “monument activity” outside Moscow indicates that the tendency for returning a symbol related to Dzerzhinsky enjoys the backing of the country’s leadership. Whereas formerly only those Dzerzhinsky monuments that had been built earlier remained in Russian towns, after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, there were attempts to build new monuments. For example, on the occasion of the 144\(^\text{th}\) anniversary of Dzerzhinsky’s birth, a restored bust of Dzerzhinsky was unveiled with the participation of the Federal Security Service in the centre of Simferopol in Crimea in 2021.\(^\text{53}\)

According to pro-government Russian sources, the bust of Dzerzhinsky also appeared in Krasnodar, on


the initiative of the “collective of school number 32 together with the veterans of the security services”. Since 2017, this school has also borne Dzerzhinsky’s name.

At Times Iron, for now Rustproof

On the eve of the centenary of the Cheka’s founding, the director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Aleksandr Vasilevich Bortnikov, gave an unusually extensive interview to the Rossiiskaia Gazeta [Russian Journal] newspaper. The very first question focused on why the FSB of 2017 linked its birth and historical continuity to the Cheka and not to the period before 1917. After all, intelligence and counter-intelligence services had existed in tsarist Russia long before the revolution.

Bortnikov justified the links between the Cheka and the FSB by saying that only after 1917 was a “comprehensive service with a unified leadership” created in Russia. According to Bortnikov, the pre-revolutionary secret services had therefore not been able to control and protect Russia in an equally effective and comprehensive manner. Subsequently, Bortnikov omitted any references in the interview to those cases when the “effectiveness” of such a “comprehensive” service brought about immensely tragic consequences for Soviet society. He also ignored those cases when even the highest Soviet leadership wished to restrict the centralized dominant role of “bodies” and bring them under the party and state control in order to limit the negative impact of their activities.

Despite no direct reference being made to Felix Dzerzhinsky, he again came to the fore as a man who provided “control, and comprehensive and effective protection” for Russia, and not as a man whose radicalism and cruelty brought about enormous harm to Russia.

Thanks to its manifold uses in the Soviet Union and subsequently in the Russian Federation, the symbol of “Iron” Felix Dzerzhinsky seems to be more stable in the long term and more capable of being successful, both in the period of revolutionary ardour and ruthless mass terror, as well as later during the Second World War and the Cold War, in the face of criticism of Stalinism and de-Stalinization, of the new criticism of Stalinism, and finally even in times of failed attempts to establish a plural democracy and increasing nationalism.


In this sense, the attempts to convert Dzerzhinsky into a myth have proved to be more successful than any similar attempts in the cases of other former revolutionaries and Soviet leaders, including the founder of Soviet communism, Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Red Army, Leon Davidovich Trotsky, and finally also the biggest figure and tyrant of Russian history, Joseph Stalin.

The cult of “Lenin’s party” as a driving force of progress disappeared with the collapse of the system and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, and Lenin, as a symbol of revolutionary and not evolutionary development, was no longer considered useful for post-Soviet Russia.

In the case of the cult of the army, the situation is different. However, the glory of the Soviet or Russian military force and its great victory is not associated with the year 1917, but only with the year 1945. If the “army continuity” with today’s Russia started before 1917, its highly controversial founder, Trotsky, would have to be celebrated as well. Moreover, this would also mean the need to commemorate highly problematic military actions that took place before 1945, including aggressions carried out under the Soviet-German pact of 1939 against Poland, Finland, the Baltic countries and part of Romania, after which Soviet foreign policy – in contrast to national policy – has never been reformed in any substantial way. Taking 1945 as the moment of birth allows a focus solely on moments when the Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany, gained control over large parts of Europe and consequently became one of the superpowers. And this is a temptation that very few Russian politicians have been able to resist.

Stalin’s cult was, then, necessarily excluded or, at least, greatly suppressed whenever a debate began about the necessity of the democratization and humanization of the political system. To date, however, Felix Dzerzhinsky’s cult has survived even such periods. With brief interruptions and minor variations, it still survives nearly a century after the death of its protagonist.

References to his cruelty are usually balanced with a positive emotional aspect related to Dzerzhinsky’s alleged love for children and compassion for their suffering. Any criticism of his revolutionary radicalism and fanaticism is relativized by pointing to his patriotic efforts to establish a stable system of government which ruthlessly settled accounts with the enemy and headed towards a “final good” – even though, as a result, this meant eliminating many of those who did not fit into this ideal world. Moreover, in contrast to Stalin, Dzerzhinsky has never, neither during the Soviet nor during the post-Soviet era, been accused of the “cult of personality” or any attempts to misuse power for his own benefit or at the expense of others. On the contrary, he has always been presented as an ascetic devotee to the cause.
As this development indicates, the Dzerzhinsky myth has the capacity to survive whenever Russian leaders find it necessary to legitimize a system of centralized power that is difficult to control or even one that is uncontrollable.

Translated by Blanka Medková

Abstract

The study discusses the cult associated with the personality of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (1877–1926), a revolutionary and the founder of the political police in the Soviet Union, and the changing meanings of this cult in various stages of the history of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. Thanks to Dzerzhinsky, as the head of the most significant repressive component, Soviet state terror acquired a very specific institutionalized form. The image of Dzerzhinsky as the basis for the mythologizing of the Soviet political police became very useful in all stages of the development of the Soviet system, most significantly for the development of the cult being the period after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. Even later, despite many revelations of the crimes of communism, the glorification of Felix Dzerzhinsky and the trivialization of the terror he introduced has not completely disappeared. The myth about the founder of the “Cheka” remained very similar or even identical in its main features in all these periods, but its functions varied in time. State security officials in Russia still call themselves “Chekists” in reference to Dzerzhinsky’s VChK/Cheka. The author therefore concludes that his cult has become more useful for state power in the Kremlin in the long run than the cults of other Soviet-era leaders, including Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin.

Keywords:
Felix Dzerzhinsky; Soviet Union; Russia; security services; communism; post-communism; politics of history; historical memory; historical monuments; commemorations

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