

Queens College CARP: Human Rights Violations in Communist Countries

Brian Gruber
April 28, 1977
The World Student Times



Students and professors from colleges throughout the New York City area gathered at the Queens College Student Union last April 28 for a unique international forum on "Human Rights Violations in Communist Countries." The participants had a rare opportunity to meet and hear dissidents from the Soviet Union, Cuba, Rumania and Tibet.

The program began with a short explanation of the purpose and goal of the forum. "For most of us human rights is a concept confined to books and classrooms. CARP wants to give you tonight a chance to hear those who have actually suffered in political prisons and suffered under oppressive regimes." The first speaker was Dr. Enrique J. Leon, a lawyer and professor at Pace University who was a professor and Dean of the School of Business at Havana University in Cuba. Dr. Leon spoke at length of the misery of Cuba's well-populated political prisons, documented his talk with quotes and statistics. While Castro puts the number of political prisoners in Cuba at 10,000, Leon believed the actual number to be closer to 50,000.

Cuba's Economic Decay

While Castro's sympathizers justify his dictatorship by claiming that there are better working conditions as a result, Dr. Leon provided documents which showed that Cuban workers before the revolution had more labor benefits than those of workers in the United States. Also, before the institution of Castro's policies, Cuba excelled Mexico economically in such areas as salary and wages, medical care and newspaper circulation. Now Cuba, Dr. Leon says, is in economic decay.

"I interviewed in Europe a technician who was a delegate of the Castro government," Dr. Leon told the audience, "and I asked him what percentage of the population was against Castro. He told me 95 percent. I told him 'impossible.' And he told me you only say impossible because you don't know the situation there."

The next speaker was from Tibet, a nation whose plight is rarely known to the general public, yet has been the victim of cultural genocide and political oppression for decades. Mr. Tsering Dorje Kashi of the Office of Tibet explained the history and situation of his country in the struggle for human rights.



Mr. Tsering Dorje Kashi describes conditions in Tibet after the Communist takeover

Chinese campaign of chaos

"In 1950 the Chinese Communists invaded eastern Tibet with a huge military force. The Governor General of eastern Tibet was forced to sign a 17-point agreement surrendering the sovereignty of Tibet to the Chinese. For the next two years, the Chinese built massive military installations and conducted a political campaign to cause chaos in the country. The old Tibetan government was allowed to keep its administrative powers and was promised that it could continue its self-rule.



Famous "stupa" (site of religious relics) in Gyangtse, third largest city in Tibet

"At the end of nine years, Tibetan people had developed more and more resistance and dissatisfaction with the Chinese. The people lived under the constant threat of what the Chinese called the 'armed liberation' of Tibet -- a dictatorial and systematic military restructuring of the whole social system. The Chinese warned this would happen unless the people did exactly what they were told."

Kashi continued: "Chinese claim after what they call total liberation of Tibet from the old evil system, Tibet has made tremendous progress. It did in some cases. It has more roads, even though they are mainly used for military purposes, and Tibet is now cultivating more areas of land than before. But all these things have not brought the standard of living higher from the accounts of thousands of refugees fleeing from Tibet. Otherwise, if it was much better than before, we wouldn't see a mass exodus of people coming out of Tibet. We would instead see people rushing into Tibet."

According to Chinese sources, 95 percent of the Tibetan population has been communized. "When you live in these communes, it is like living life without any sense of freedom, any sense of belonging, any sense of trust among people or anything beyond this life. You think like an animal or robot."

"The first tactic is to destroy trust among people," Kashi said. Because of this lack of trust, the Tibetan people live in constant fear.

"You cannot trust the next person, he may be a Party member who will speak against you at the next meeting. After that, you might be sent to a concentration camp," Kashi explained. He said that even members of the same family cannot trust each other and that "even in the small day care centers three-year-old children are indoctrinated."

Religion is also censored in Tibet, Kashi said. "The biggest monastery in the world which housed 10,000 monks and Buddhist scholars has 30 now who perform custodial duties to keep the monastery beautiful, to keep a showpiece to show that there is freedom of religion in 'liberated' Tibet."

Or. Dimitrie Apostaliu, a Rumanian author who spent thirteen years in slave labor camps as a political prisoner, also gave his testimony of oppression in Communist Rumania. He was a former candidate for the Nobel Prize.

"In Communist Rumania," Apostaliu said, "There is no freedom or concern. There is only one political party -- the Communist one. All other political parties were abolished. There are elections from time to time. But how can there be elections when there is only one political party and one candidate?, Nicolae Ceausescu, the Rumanian Communist president, has founded after the example of Brezhnev's terrorist system the mental hospitals where many political prisoners serve their terms in the worst, most inhumane prison conditions in history.

"This Saturday, a former Rumanian professor who was ten years in a Communist jail and was arrested again two years ago, came from Romania. I appealed to Senator (Henry) Jackson and through his strong

intervention the professor, Alexandr Bratu, was released from prison and obtained a visa for the U.S. He told us that after the earthquake when people were invited to church, the Secretary stopped their action and arrested more than 500 priests in Bucharest and 1000 priests all over the country."

Deprivation, and racism

The last panel speaker, Dr. Leonid Tarassuk, a Soviet Jew, was curator of the Hermitage, the national museum in Leningrad. He suffered as a political prisoner in a Soviet concentration camp for three years.

"Whoever is speaking from a nation under Communist rule tells the same story -- arrests, tortures, abolition of human rights, and just every day general deprivation. We who lived there know very well that this is the only way to build up Communism."

Tarassuk spoke about the anti-Semitic campaigns of Stalin and the mass incarceration of Jews in concentration camps. He offered a challenge to liberal politicians and historians who have tried to downplay reports of rampant oppression in the Soviet Union at that time. "When I see liberals here contest what we say, we who have come from communist countries, I want to remind them that the first wave of testimonies came not from us. The dissident movement still didn't exist in the Soviet Union at that time. The first man who told a part of the awful truth was the Secretary General of the Communist Party himself -- Nikita Khrushchev."

He continued, "Let me ask you who were born in freedom and can only theoretically imagine what it is like: Can you imagine 20 million Americans in prison camps? I doubt it. 20 million is three times the population of New York City. Still, according to Soviet Party statistics, between 12 and 50 million (Russians) lived in concentration camps during that time.

"There are various dissident movements in the Soviet Union. Some protest against racial discrimination, which does exist in the Soviet Union. My black friends, don't have any illusions. You will not be liked there. Only while you are here will they like you from there.

"There is racial discrimination and there is national discrimination. Several small peoples in full were taken by the captive wagons overnight to Siberian camps or just to open fields. It's a fact. The most blatant example is that of the Crimean Tartars. There is persecution of religious groups Judaic, Christian and Islamic."



Monks performing religious dance in a monastery. (Photos by Col. Tolstoy, 1944. Courtesy of The Tibet Office.)

People starve in countryside

Tarassuk said that the Russians try to justify the loss of what they call "bourgeois liberties" by saying that they have a higher standard of living as a result. But, Tarassuk pointed out, "they still buy your technology, they must buy your wheat and every year they must justify it by saying there was a drought or a flood, and yet the Soviet Union is 2½ times the size of the United States. No, it is a bad level of economy.

"Recent news from the Soviet Union says that people starve in the countryside for the sake of some showcases like Moscow or Leningrad or Kiev, places that are visited by foreign tourists and diplomats. Outside in the provincial towns and villages it's just starvation."

Tarassuk went on to describe the impoverished conditions of the Soviet working class and the special

privileges enjoyed by the higher Party officials. He concluded his talk with a plea to students and professors to support the administration's drive for the observance of human rights behind the Iron Curtain.

"I think that after a long time of the irrelevant and indecisive positions of the American government, President Carter and the new administration have started on a new way and I think that this new trend must be supported by all people who see beyond the limit of present-day events. Beware if this happens here too, you will be victims. You will not have the human rights of which the Soviet people are now deprived."

Before the four speakers participated in a question and answer session with the students and professors attending the program, Joseph Tully, the national director of CARP, spoke briefly.

"Violations of human rights are occurring daily in a number of nations," he told the audience. "And it is very essential that we oppose these violations, because any time we allow human rights violations to occur without taking a stand against it, we are actually taking a chance that our own rights will be violated."

Tully pointed out that although human rights violations occur in almost every nation, including the United States, they are most widespread in Communist nations. This he attributed to their Marxist ideology, which he described as "intolerant."

Human rights can never be supported, Tully added, by an abstract economic, political or institutional morality. Their focus is not related to real individual human beings. Instead, it is on profit or "getting the good deal" political concepts like the "balance of power" theory and detente, loyalty to "the state" or a political party, and so on. "There has to be a different kind of morality," Tully said.

What a human rights stand really requires, he said, is that "we as individuals have to change our attitude. We have to be willing to do for others and that usually means giving up something for ourselves. And that's tough to deal with. Universities are really the main forums for presenting values. It is important that such a stand for a morality committed to others be initiated."