

## Trust and Compliance

In Lydia Chukovskaya's novel, *Sofia Petrovna*, the titular Soviet citizen in the 1930s pledges her allegiance to the Stalinist state.<sup>1</sup> As a mother who held a job in a publishing office, Petrovna was neither a member of the elite nor was she a member of the Soviet Union's lower classes. Ironically, Bolshevik ideals aimed to abolish class as a concept. Yet, class and the ideologies that came along with them never ceased to exist in the Soviet Union. Petrovna was a former member of the bourgeoisie in the pre-revolutionary period. She was not politically engaged but her willingness to support the Soviet state and believe in its integrity, contributed to the growth of the government's hegemonic authority. Petrovna's experiences in the Soviet Union during Stalin's Terror, when millions were arrested and confined to labor camps, speaks to the consequences of blindly trusting the government to act in the best interests of its citizens.

Petrovna attributed mass incarcerations to high levels of crime or acts of treason. Later in the novel, Petrovna's own son, Kolya, a brilliant engineer and a patriotic citizen, is arrested as a traitor to the state. Kolya blindly believes in the modernizing goals of the State and was featured in a government-sponsored magazine as a Soviet hero whose political behavior others should emulate. Although Petrovna is shattered by the news of Kolya's arrest, the catastrophic event fails to shake her faith in the Soviet government. Petrovna, like many other mothers, constantly appeals to different bureaucratic offices to find out about Kolya's condition and the reasons for his arrest. She suffers thinking about the conditions of his imprisonment in a labor camp. She finally receives a secret letter from Kolya detailing the arbitrary torture that he has been subject to. But Petrovna, in abject terror, burns the letter, casting off the tie connecting the mother and son. This important symbolic action defines Petrovna's life and character. Although Petrovna may have been conscious of her government's actions and wrongdoings, her trust and compliance allowed the Stalinist state to gain more power. Authoritarianism develops and grows when ordinary people refrain from political activity and display overt allegiance to the state. Petrovna, like many other Soviet citizens, and people all over the world, upheld authoritarian rule because she was unwilling to ask for accountability from her own leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Lydia Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, trans. by Aline Werth, rpt. Edition (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).