

# The Apparatchik in Blue: Bureaucracy, Obedience, and the Myth of Protection

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## Abstract

This essay examines the police as the apparatchik of the administrative state—functionaries whose allegiance lies with institutional power rather than moral law. It argues that policing operates as an instrument of coercion, bureaucracy, and ideological manufacture. Incorporating Erwin Chemerinsky’s critique in *The Case Against the Supreme Court* and Mikhail Bakunin’s 19th-century prediction that the apparatchik would evolve into a new ruling class of bureaucrats, administrators, and police, it exposes how both theory and practice converge in a system where power reproduces itself through impunity. The modern state’s police are not protectors of justice but guardians of hierarchy, operating through doctrines and institutions designed to preserve control while denying accountability.

## Introduction

The myth of the police as public guardians conceals their true role as apparatchiks of state power—the administrative agents of coercion, hierarchy, and obedience.<sup>1</sup> The term apparatchik, born in Soviet bureaucratic language,

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originally referred to a loyal party official.<sup>2</sup> . The term was used within Soviet bureaucratic language to denote a loyal functionary of the Communist Party apparatus. But the role it describes transcends ideology: it signifies the bureaucrat who serves the system, not the people. The term *apparatchik* historically described a bureaucratic loyalist within a totalitarian regime.

In the 19th century, Mikhail Bakunin foresaw this transformation with striking accuracy. In his critique of Marxism and state socialism, Bakunin (1873/1973) warned that even a “people’s government” would inevitably produce a new ruling class of bureaucrats, administrators, and police, who, claiming to represent the people, would instead dominate them.<sup>3</sup> He predicted that once centralized authority is established, “a new hierarchy of real and counterfeit savants, and the new governing class of officials” would arise to manage society through surveillance and repression. The police, in this sense, embody Bakunin’s prophecy: a technocratic elite enforcing obedience under the illusion of protection.

Bakunin’s opposition to the very idea of the *apparatchik* can be found in his writings. In his seminal work *God and the State*, Bakunin contends that all forms of governmental authority, whether secular or religious, are fundamentally incompatible with human freedom and dignity. For Bakunin, obedience to institutional power extinguishes individual autonomy and moral self-determination. This stands in direct contrast to the essence of the *apparatchik*, whose identity is defined by loyalty, hierarchy, and the suppression of personal conscience in service of bureaucratic control.<sup>4</sup>

Today, this hierarchy is not theoretical—it is institutional. The Supreme Court of the United States, as Erwin Chemerinsky (2014) demonstrates, has fortified police impunity by repeatedly ruling that citizens have no enforceable right to protection, and that officers who violate rights are shielded from accountability. The result is a bureaucratic symbiosis between the judiciary and the enforcer class—a modern realization of Bakunin’s warning about the state’s evolution into an administrative tyranny of officials.<sup>5</sup>

## The Apparatus of Control

Louis Althusser (1971) identified the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) as the twin engines of state power.<sup>6</sup> The police perform both roles: they repress through force and legitimize through image. Yet their authority is not neutral; it exists to maintain the social and economic order that benefits the ruling class. Cases like *Warren v. District of Columbia* (1981) and *Castle Rock v. Gonzales* (2005) confirm this in legal form. In both, courts ruled that police have no constitutional duty to protect individuals, even in the face of imminent harm. These decisions codify what Bakunin warned of 150 years earlier: the separation of authority from responsibility. The apparatus protects the structure, not the citizen. The police, as the state’s apparatchiks, are instruments of discipline whose power is legitimized precisely because it is bureaucratic, not personal.<sup>7</sup>

## Bureaucracy and Obedience

Hannah Arendt (1963) described the “banality of evil” as the moral vacuum that emerges when individuals obey orders without reflection.<sup>8</sup> Bakunin anticipated this same pathology, describing bureaucrats as “the most servile worshippers of authority,” who, once empowered, would enforce obedience as an end in itself.<sup>9</sup> Modern policing embodies that condition. Officers are trained to privilege command over conscience, policy over ethics. When police stand idle during massacres, as in Parkland (2018), or kill unarmed civilians citing “protocol,” they act as bureaucratic instruments, not moral agents.<sup>10</sup>

Chemerinsky (2014) exposes how the Supreme Court has institutionalized this detachment. Through doctrines like qualified immunity—first articulated in *Harlow v. Fitzgerald* (1982) and broadened in *Kisela v. Hughes* (2018)—the Court has rendered accountability practically impossible. Unless a prior case is identical in fact pattern, police cannot be held liable for

violating rights. This creates a jurisprudence of impunity, in which the rule of law is rewritten to protect those who enforce it. Thus, the police are the perfected apparatchiks Bakunin foresaw—functionaries bound to hierarchy, sanctioned by law, and morally insulated from the consequences of their obedience.

## Protection of Power, Not People

Policing in the United States was never designed as a system of collective protection.<sup>11</sup> Its historical roots lie in the defense of property and the control of labor, not in public safety (Hadden, 2001; Vitale, 2017). As Mikhail Bakunin warned, every centralized state—whether capitalist or socialist—ultimately defends property and privilege under the guise of maintaining order. Within bureaucracy, he saw the seed of a new ruling class that would exploit the populace through regulation, surveillance, and coercion masquerading as governance.

In contemporary America, this dynamic endures through a dual mechanism of police enforcement and judicial endorsement. The Supreme Court’s decisions in *Tennessee v. Garner* (1985) and *Graham v. Connor* (1989) institutionalized a perspective that evaluates deadly force through the officer’s eyes rather than the victim’s. This inversion transforms fear into legal justification, recasting violence as a procedural act instead of a moral transgression.<sup>12</sup>

The human cost of this bureaucratic order falls on overpoliced communities, the poor, and those who call 911 in vain. The phrase “Dial 911 and Die,” popularized by attorney and civil rights advocate Richard W. Stevens, encapsulates the core deception of American policing: the state pledges protection while legally disavowing any duty to provide it.<sup>13</sup> Stevens demonstrates how this paradox—rooted in cases such as *Warren v. District of Columbia* and *Castle Rock v. Gonzales*—permits police to abandon citizens in danger without consequence. His analysis reveals the

illusion of public safety in an administrative state where law serves hierarchy, not humanity. *Dial 911 and Die* is therefore not a failure of the system but its defining feature. The police protect power from the people, not the people from power.

## **Institutional Impunity**

Bakunin predicted that bureaucrats and police, once granted authority, would become self-perpetuating institutions, accountable only to themselves.<sup>14</sup> Modern policing proves him right. Officers are insulated by collective bargaining agreements, internal review processes, and legal immunity.<sup>15</sup> Chemerinsky (2014) documents how the Supreme Court has repeatedly refused to impose constitutional remedies for police misconduct. In case after case, the Court has favored “order” over accountability, rationalizing its decisions as judicial restraint. Yet restraint, in this context, functions as collaboration: a systematic refusal to check the state’s enforcers. The judiciary becomes the apparatus of legitimization, laundering bureaucratic violence through the language of law.

Bakunin’s prophecy has thus materialized: a new ruling class of officials and police, operating under the color of legality but serving the perpetuation of hierarchy. The Court’s complicity ensures that the apparatchik’s violence is not exceptional but systemic.

## **Ideological Manufacture and Public Illusion**

The apparatchik does not merely enforce; he manufactures consent. Police public relations campaigns, “community policing” narratives, and media portrayals transform coercion into heroism.<sup>16</sup> Bakunin foresaw this ideological capture. He warned that the state, once empowered, would cloak domination in the language of protection, creating a culture of voluntary servitude. Citizens would internalize obedience as civic virtue, mistaking

submission for security. The Supreme Court's decisions amplify this illusion by affirming the legality of the system's failures, ensuring that betrayal appears as inevitability. The ideological function of policing thus completes Bakunin's circle: a bureaucratic caste that enforces authority, justified by courts, and adored by the very citizens it subjugates.

## The Democratic Paradox

A democracy that entrusts coercive power to an unaccountable bureaucracy ceases to be democratic in practice.<sup>17</sup>

The Supreme Court's consistent refusal to impose constraints on police violence has produced a managerial democracy—one that administers control rather than embodies popular sovereignty. As Bakunin predicted, the concentration of power—even under democratic pretenses—inevitably breeds a new aristocracy of office. Today, that aristocracy is composed not of nobles but of judges, administrators, and police—the very functionaries he warned would rise to dominate the people through the mechanisms of governance itself. The police thus embody the culmination of both Bakunin's anarchist prophecy and Chemerinsky's constitutional critique: law as instrument, justice as casualty.

## Conclusion

The police are not the guardians of democracy; they are its apparatchiks—bureaucratic enforcers of a system that worships authority while disclaiming responsibility. Bakunin foresaw their emergence as a new ruling class, and Chemerinsky documents the judiciary's complicity in securing their impunity. Together, their insights expose a continuum of power that stretches from 19th-century theory to 21st-century jurisprudence. The police, judiciary, and administrative state now form a closed triad of control. Citizens may appeal to law, but the law itself has become an instrument

of obedience. Until accountability replaces hierarchy and justice supersedes order, the apparatchik will remain sovereign, and the people will remain unprotected.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 18–29; Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America*, 3rd ed. (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 35–40; David Bayley, *Police for the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7–9. Neocleous and Williams both argue that the ideological depiction of police as public servants masks their structural function as instruments of state authority and coercive order maintenance.

<sup>2</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “apparatchik,” 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); see also Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “apparatchik,” accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apparatchik>

<sup>3</sup>Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, trans. and ed. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 178–182. Originally published in Russian in 1873.

<sup>4</sup>Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State*, trans. Benjamin Tucker (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 28–31; see also “Apparatchik,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, last modified November 7, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apparatchik>.

<sup>5</sup>Erwin Chemerinsky, *The Case Against the Supreme Court* (New York: Viking, 2014), 206–214. See also *DeShaney v. Winnebago County Department of Social Services*, 489 U.S. 189 (1989), holding that the state has no constitutional duty to protect individuals from private violence; and *Harlow v. Fitzgerald*, 457 U.S. 800 (1982), establishing qualified immunity

for government officials, which the Court has since expanded to shield law enforcement from liability.

<sup>6</sup>Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–186. In this essay, Althusser distinguishes the Repressive State Apparatus—institutions that function primarily through violence, such as the police, military, and courts—from the Ideological State Apparatus, which operates through education, religion, and culture to secure consent to domination.

<sup>7</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 215–222; Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 18–24; Max Weber, “Bureaucracy,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 196–244. Foucault conceptualizes policing as a disciplinary technology integral to the bureaucratic state; Neocleous argues that police authority derives legitimacy from its administrative form rather than moral content; and Weber defines bureaucracy as the archetype of rational-legal domination, where obedience is rendered to office rather than person.

<sup>8</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 287–289.

<sup>9</sup>Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, trans. and ed. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 178–179. Originally published in Russian in 1873.

<sup>10</sup>Patricia Mazzei and Alan Blinder, “Deputy Who Stayed Outside During Parkland School Shooting Faces Criminal Charges,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/us/parkland-school-shooting-scot-peterson.html>; Rosa Brooks, *Tangled*

*Up in Blue: Policing the American City* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 103–108.

<sup>11</sup>Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017), 27–33; Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America*, 3rd ed. (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 35–41; Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3–10. Vitale and Williams trace the historical evolution of policing from slave patrols, strikebreaking, and the protection of property, arguing that U.S. police forces were never intended to ensure communal safety. Hadden provides the foundational legal history of slave patrols as the earliest form of organized policing in the American South.

<sup>12</sup>*Tennessee v. Garner*, 471 U.S. 1 (1985); *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386 (1989); Erwin Chemerinsky, *The Case Against the Supreme Court* (New York: Viking, 2014), 209–212; Rachel A. Harmon, “When Is Police Violence Justified?,” *Northwestern University Law Review* 102, no. 3 (2008): 1119–1126. In *Garner*, the Court held that deadly force is permissible when an officer has ‘probable cause’ to believe a fleeing suspect poses a significant threat, and in *Graham*, it established the ‘objective reasonableness’ standard—evaluating force from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene. Chemerinsky and Harmon observe that these rulings effectively transform subjective police fear into a constitutional defense, subordinating moral accountability to bureaucratic procedure.

<sup>13</sup>Richard W. Stevens, *Dial 911 and Die*, 2nd ed. (Bellevue, WA: Merril Press, 1999); Ramenda Cyrus, “Police Have No Duty to Protect the Public,” *The American Prospect*, April 18, 2022, <https://prospect.org/2022/04/18/police-have-no-duty-to-protect-the-public/>. Stevens’ book compiles court decisions across all fifty states confirming that citizens cannot hold police legally liable for failing to provide protection, while Cyrus traces this doctrine to Supreme Court precedents such as *DeShaney v. Winnebago County Department of Social Services*, 489 U.S. 189 (1989); *Town of Castle*

*Rock v. Gonzales*, 545 U.S. 748 (2005); and *Warren v. District of Columbia*, 444 A.2d 1 (D.C. Ct. App. 1981). Together, these cases illustrate the paradox of American policing: the state promises protection yet legally renounces any duty to provide it.

<sup>14</sup>Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, trans. and ed. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 178–182. In this passage, Bakunin warns that even a “people’s government” will inevitably produce a new ruling stratum of administrators and police who, under the guise of public service, consolidate power and perpetuate their own authority—foreshadowing modern critiques of bureaucratic autonomy and state self-preservation.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen Rushin, “Police Union Contracts,” *Duke Law Journal* 66, no. 6 (2017): 1191–1266; Rachel A. Harmon, “When Is Police Violence Justified?,” *Northwestern University Law Review* 102, no. 3 (2008): 1119–1130; Joanna C. Schwartz, “How Qualified Immunity Fails,” *Yale Law Journal* 127 (2018): 2–80. Rushin’s empirical study demonstrates that police union contracts routinely restrict oversight and shield misconduct records; Harmon explains how internal review processes and procedural doctrines elevate bureaucratic procedure over accountability; and Schwartz provides a comprehensive critique of qualified immunity, showing how it effectively insulates officers from civil liability.

<sup>16</sup>Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 1–2, 298–303; Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017), 115–124; Peter Kraska and Victor Kappeler, “Militarizing American Police: The Rise and Normalization of Paramilitary Units,” *Social Problems* 44, no. 1 (1997): 1–18. Herman and Chomsky describe how media systems normalize state authority by framing coercion as protection; Vitale analyzes how “community policing” rhetoric masks surveillance and social control; and Kraska and Kappeler trace how police public relations and media imagery

transform militarized force into popular heroism.

<sup>17</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 663–665; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), 244–246; Philip Hamburger, *Is Administrative Law Unlawful?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 323–327. Tocqueville warned that bureaucratic centralization converts free citizens into passive subjects; Arendt traced how administrative structures enable domination through obedience and depersonalization; and Hamburger demonstrates how modern administrative agencies concentrate coercive authority beyond democratic accountability.