

Anne Crutcher

AFTER EASTERN LIVES

Soviet dissidents in the capitalists' paradise.

It seems a long time ago that Boris Pasternak's dubious masterpiece, *Dr. Zhivago*, was all most Americans knew about an indigenous Soviet literature differing from the official view of life in the Soviet Union. These days, the word "dissident" is in every decently sophisticated vocabulary and the reading list is already long enough to keep a generation of Ph.D. candidates busy.

Dissident writing is understandably popular with hawks who find it useful for beefing up the case against SALT II. And Solzhenitsyn for one gives hero-worshipping natures an icon in a period conspicuously short on noble qualities. But it is easy to see the wider attraction of dissident writing as well. Is it not reminiscent of the kind of thing that came out of Hitler Europe on the Holocaust and the other Nazi horrors? Certainly Auschwitz and the Gulag camps offer the same opportunities for observing the human spirit put to supreme tests. And certainly the art fashioned from this awesome experience is as wonderful and terrible as ever.

There are differences this time around though. There was, during and immediately after the Hitler period, a surprisingly broad international consensus about how fascism had come into being and what the remedies and preventives were. Even those who were skeptical about all-out socialism were inclined to make many concessions to the idea that fascism represented a kind of demented capitalism, to be obviated by hefty doses of liberalism, chiefly in the form of decolonization, elections, and new state controls over economic life. With regard to the Soviet regime, however, there is much less conviction, about the remedy or even about the diagnosis. Thus, although the dissidents do not doubt that there is something hideously wrong in their native country, they are by no means in agreement about what it is, and they are even less able to say what to do about it.

It is both their strength and their weak-

ness that they have been so cut off from the rest of the world. On the one hand, being untouched by the sophistries of Western political thought, they bring a special purity to their judgments of what they see around them. On the other hand, their ignorance of what has gone on in Western intellectual circles forces them to reinvent a certain number of wheels.

It also puts limits on their imaginative reach. As Georgie Anne Geyer pointed out in her extraordinarily perceptive and sadly neglected book, *The Young Russians*, many, if not most, Soviet dissidents, no matter how clear they are about the evils of socialism, cannot imagine a non-socialist society. Beyond getting rid of what they have, their objectives are vague.

Thus we have Roy Medvedev, who so brilliantly dissected the Stalin regime in *Let History Judge*. Medvedev is still in Moscow, trying one tactic after another to arrive at "socialism with a human face." Toward this end, he has worked with samizdat, the individually typed, personally distributed underground publications by which dissidents communicate in the Soviet Union, and has attempted, so far without success, to start above-ground

publications with some truthfulness in their contents.

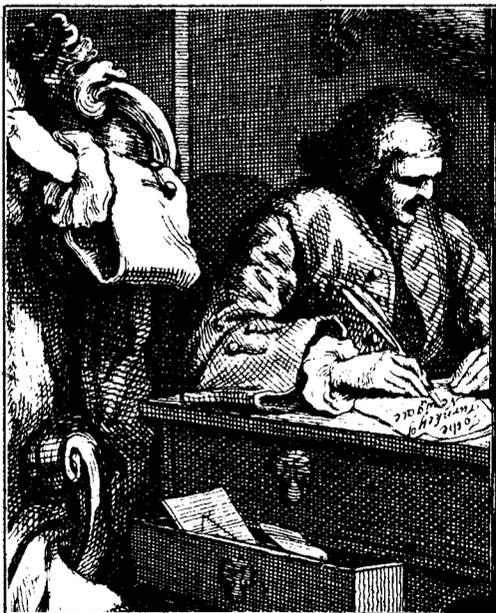
In *Let History Judge*, Medvedev described what he called the "enabling circumstances in the Soviet social structure" that permitted Stalin's reign of terror to occur. He is unwilling to call it cause and effect. The farthest he will go is to say that "socialism does not generate lawlessness as its enemies say, but it is no guarantee against lawlessness and the abuse of power."

Many dissidents, like Medvedev, are unwilling to blame the theory of the system for the way the system has turned out, but they differ over where to assign the blame. Excepting the outright apologists who, like the American enthusiast Anna Louise Strong, are willing to believe that Stalinism happened because Nazis penetrated the GPU, they offer a range of explanations: revolution betrayed, Stalin's private psychopathology, tradition of Asiatic despotism, price of rapid industrialization under conditions of external threat—pick one.

At the other end of the spectrum is Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who regards Marxism as intellectually contemptible as well as horrendous in practice and who feels that the only alternative is a Christian state. Many of the most intellectually gifted and personally impressive figures in the Soviet dissident movement are, if not with him all the way in his faith, at least convinced that socialism is an active evil and the key to the Gulag syndrome.

Vladimir Maximov, a novelist of Tolstoyan sweep, who is currently editor of *Kontinent*, the Paris-based magazine specializing in dissident writing for clandestine distribution in the Soviet Union and some circulation elsewhere, is one. He is a devout Christian who goes all the way in rejecting Marxism with his rejection of Stalin. Vladimir Bukovsky, who came to the West three years ago, exchanged for a Chilean Communist, is less explicitly religious but equally convinced that Lenin and socialist theory are as much to blame as Stalin for what has gone wrong in the USSR.

The disenchanting who do not go from



Anne Crutcher is an editorial writer for the Washington Star.

their negation of one faith to the affirmation of another find themselves in an existential wilderness best illustrated by that peculiarly fervid French confessional, Bernard-Henri Levy's *Barbarism with a Human Face*. Levy, rejecting socialism as an untenable ideal rather than merely a flawed reality, indulges himself in a good deal of histrionic despair before coming to rest in the high stoicism celebrated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which affirms the need for pushing moral stones up metaphorical hills no matter how inevitably they roll down again.

Essentially, this is Bukovsky's position, without the hand-wringing. Bukovsky, who may be the most remarkable of the younger generation of dissidents, is particularly unusual for the way the political astuteness in him combines with a sense of where politics leaves off. He was the first dissident to protest the Soviet regime by demanding that it adhere to Soviet law. And he is keenly aware of the psychic vulnerabilities of totalitarian power wielders. (They can't, for example, permit suicides or hunger strikes—their claim to omnipotence demands that they be the ones to decide when and how their prisoners die.) But at the same time, Bukovsky opposes fighting totalitarian evils with counterterrorism because counterterrorism would set up the same kind of regime it overthrew. Change, he believes, must begin in the individual where, in the ultimate weighing of things, its real importance is. He explicitly regards his own protests and incarcerations as spiritual necessities first and not necessarily political acts at all.

Needless to say, this is not the same thing as having a blueprint for transforming the Soviet Union into a capitalist democracy. Neither is it the outline of some as yet untried economic and social system. But it does suggest that the Soviet Union is today the catalyst for a good deal of important thinking about the nature of human beings and the societies in which they live.

This reassessment of basics owes its vitality, first of all, to the immediacy of experience fueling it. During the thirties and forties, much of what was said about fascism and the socialist panacea rested on interpretations of the plights of others. A Soviet dissident passing judgment on Marxism-Leninism is reacting to personally felt circumstances. Being the real thing, or being in touch with the real thing, in no way guarantees the quality of what is being said, but there is more than one instance where closeness to the marrow of things has given Soviet dissident writing the incandescence of art.

There are flashes of it in Maximov's fictionalized autobiography, *Return from Nowhere*, which came out last year. The story of a boy on his own from the age of 12, in and out of prisons and hobo camps all over the Soviet Union, it is a sort of

grim Huck Finn saga, wherein moments of camaraderie and youthful discovery are set alongside scenes offering plenty of evidence that Huck Finn and Tom and Nigger Jim didn't know how lucky they were.

Return from Nowhere also invites comparison with another American work that created considerable stir when it came out in the 1950s: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. This time the likeness emphasizes the contrast—and it's embarrassing. Next to Maximov's book, Kerouac's is reduced to juvenilia. Kerouac's cultivation of criminal and derelict friends because "a writer ought to have new experiences" is different from Maximov's relationships with the criminals and derelicts life threw in with him. The slumming impulse that prompted Kerouac's Skid Row tour of the United States is as different from the life-and-death imperatives of the Maximov odyssey through the Soviet Union as the "repressive" bourgeois culture of Kerouac's contempt is from the real repression of the Soviet regime. Kerouac emerges as a trivial bohemian, Maximov as an explorer of spiritual and artistic frontiers.

If a dissident is a native-born critic, discerning and articulately appalled, of life in the Soviet Union, the phenomenon is considerably older than the label. Actually, some of the earliest out of old Russia as it was turning into its revolutionary succes-

sor have written most eloquently about it. Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, applied his extraordinarily non-proletarian imagination to the Soviet phenomenon in *Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Pale Fire*, and a remarkable short story called "Tyrants Destroyed."

Although what is generally thought of as the dissident movement was first noticed in the United States in the mid-1960s, there were dissident writings of a sort coming out of the Soviet Union in the Stalin era, writings that would not have been permitted during the balmy days of the Khrushchev thaw, and certainly would not be permitted today.

There is pathos, then, in reading in the preface to a volume of Mikhail Zostchenko's short stories, published in the United States in 1935 under the title *Russia Laughs*, that this "leading Soviet humorist" had millions of readers in his own country. Zostchenko should, of course, have millions of readers anywhere that wry observations on human nature and social custom can raise a laugh. But certainly in recent years any depictions like Zostchenko's, of poverty, squalor, and the persistence of both peasant and bourgeois mores, would never get past the criminal code, where slandering the Soviet system is so broadly interpreted and so strictly forbidden. The one about the landlady who cut the wires after the great electrification



program finally reached her house (it showed up the dirt and bedbugs and broken furniture so badly when there was an electric light on), or the one about the man looking back on the happiest day of his life, when somebody threw a rock through a tavern window and he, a glazier, was able to fix it for what seemed an extraordinary sum of money—no, they would never get by.

Neither would Panteleiman Romanof's 1931 novel, *Three Pairs of Silk Stockings*, which describes the life of the educated class in 1931 Moscow, where families of four or more share a room with other families. The rest of their standard of living is cut to the same measure. The title is one character's estimate of the price of any Russian woman.

A decade after Stalin's death, such living conditions had changed less than the scope for talking about them in the Soviet Union. In the mid-1960s, cultural controls were severe enough to move any serious artist toward a state of open or covert rebellion.

For two middle-aged literary men, the critic Andrei Sinyavsky (Abram Tertz) and a translator named Yuli Daniel, rebellion broke the surface enough to trigger criminal proceedings. They were arrested in February 1965 on charges of anti-Soviet agitation under Article 70 of the criminal code. This was not a civil rights issue of the sort that later dissidents have made known to the West; rather, it was seen as an abridgment of artistic freedom.

The imprisonment of Sinyavsky and Daniel did not at first attract much attention in the United States, although a few hardline anti-Communist organizations tried to publicize it.* But it was different in the Soviet Union. Suddenly, a new genera-

* Sinyavsky got seven years in a strict regime camp, Daniel five. Strict regime means hard labor on few calories, with the rest of the standard of living to match.

tion of protestors arose. The first wave went to prison in 1967, punished for demonstrating in Moscow against the imprisonment of Sinyavsky and Daniel. The next year, there were further waves of public demonstration in Moscow's Pushkin Square or at the statue of the poet Mayakovsky, where young people interested in the arts were accustomed to gather.

Unlike their predecessors, these were young people in their 20s—and they were by no means all artists. And, rather than urging artistic freedom, they demanded rights guaranteed to them by the Soviet constitution. In the last ten years, this body of dissidents has swelled considerably as protests over Sinyavsky and Daniel and over the invasion of Czechoslovakia and over the rights of Jews to emigrate have led to arrests which have in turn led to more arrests and more protests.

The Soviet response to these protests has ranged from prison and labor camps to internal exile (the most recent example of which was the sending of Andrei Sakharov to Gorky) and banishment. One KGB agent was quoted as telling a dissident, "We will break some of you, we will buy others and the rest we will throw to the West." All three techniques have entailed their measures of success. Even banishment, for all the adverse publicity it provokes, gets results in some cases. Solzhenitsyn, for example, finds the United States too soft and hedonistic, while a good many Americans find him too stern and righteous. Certainly the mutual disillusionment doesn't hurt Moscow.

The same sort of thing has happened with other exiles. Some of the Jews have found life in Israel unexpectedly uncongenial, for instance. Other exiles, because of their intense love of their native country, are homesick and unhappy wherever they go. And then there are cultural barriers: Maximov, for example, has yet to master French, although he has lived in Paris for several years.

Moreover, when dissidents come to the West some of the drama goes out of what they represented as prisoners in the Soviet Union, at least by media standards. Magazines and newspapers only continue to discuss the Shcharansky case, for instance, because the beautiful, yearning Avital Shcharansky goes on making the rounds in an effort to get her husband released from his Soviet prison so they can emigrate to Israel.

Even so, the dissidents are not without friends. The AFL-CIO, for instance, brought Solzhenitsyn to speak in Washington soon after he emigrated to the United States. And the constellation of think tanks and academic and media enclaves known as the neoconservative movement has taken an active interest in keeping the dissident movement alive in the American consciousness. The Coalition for a Democratic Majority, the Moynihan-Jackson wing of the Democratic Party, regularly honors dissidents at its functions, in person or in absentia. And the American Enterprise Institute has had Bukovsky and Alexander Ginzburg, among others, addressing seminars and answering questions at press conferences.

The biggest recent roundup of dissidents was the International Sakharov Hearings held in the Senate Office Building in Washington in September. The testimony the dissidents gave there provided a kind of encyclopedia of personal experiences showing how and why the Soviet Union controls its citizens. It was a congress of the protest elite, an assemblage of resonating names: Sinyavsky, whose case launched the present wave of dissidence and who is widely considered its greatest mind and soul; Alexander Ginzburg, still marked by the pallor of an imprisonment only recently ended; Major General Petro Grigorenko, the Soviet military hero who spent four years in a psychiatric hospital for criticizing personality cults after Stalin's death. Mrs. Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered a message for her husband.

At least one name resonated out of a more distant past: Pavel Litvinov, grandson of Maxim Litvinov, Stalin's foreign minister and later his popular World War II Ambassador to the United States. The elder Litvinov's success in winning Washington support for the Soviet Union was helped by the enthusiasm of his wife Ivy, who, as an English Communist, had met and married him when he was in London in the late 1920s negotiating arms trade agreements. Their grandson, a scientist who now lives in the West, was at the Sakharov hearings to tell the story of his four years of internal exile working in a mine in Siberia—his sentence for protesting the Sinyavsky-Daniel arrests and sentences.

Among the unfamiliar names that turned up at the Sakharov hearings was that of Aesha Seytmuratova, who told what hap-



pened to her when she was six and the Crimean Tatars were moved to Uzbekistan. The Uzbeks had been told that they were cannibals and had appropriate greetings for the few who survived the journey in the sealed cattle cars. Her story was enough to reduce the audience to tears, but there was nothing about it in the press the next day.

Not every witness reached the listeners' emotions the way this woman did, but all the testimony was as substantial and, in its own way, as horrifying. Besides the revelations about how the system uses internal passports, residence permits, and a com-

bination of firings, expulsions from unions, and arrests for the crime of being unemployed (parasitism) to control dissidents, there were reports on what happens to Soviet workers and peasants. The system is equally hard on people entirely innocent of concern with Czechoslovakia or literature. They too are manipulated by these controls and by the secret courts that keep the record clean.

The three days of hearings brought out any number of such details without much apparent impact on the bustle of Capitol Hill outside. There was that strange echo-chamber inwardness. Everybody may know

Lara's theme from the movie of Dr. Zhivago, but there is a certain imperviousness to what the dissidents have to say. Too many residual loyalties? Too few inspiring alternatives?

Whatever the reasons, it is a little like what happened to that Soviet favorite among American writers, Jack London, when he found himself suddenly taken up by the radical chic millionaires of his day. He expected them to tear off their jewels and divide up their properties once they heard what he had to tell them about the sufferings of the poor. He really thought they would. □

Fred D. Baldwin

NADERISM: COMMERCE ON THE BABYLONIAN MODEL

For Ralph Nader, the business of business is politics,
but with his "Case for a Corporate Democracy Act" he goes too far.

If you cherish a cause but sense that the public does not share your vision, it may occur to you to proclaim a national "day" for spreading your message, something like Earth Day, Sun Day, or Food Day. April 17 has been declared "Big Business Day," but do not look for a national celebration of capitalism's bounty. The festivities are being planned neither by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce nor by the Business Roundtable, but by Ralph Nader's Public Citizen Congress Watch and a coalition of labor unions and other groups.

If their efforts are successful, "Big Business Day" will be marked by "teach-ins and debates, alternatives-to-big-business fairs, . . . 'trials' of corrupt companies, nominations for a 'Corporate Hall of Shame,'" and other pieces of political theater described in a flurry of press releases from the coalition's Washington headquarters. Its purpose will be to build political support for a "Corporate Democracy Act," an attempt to write into law fundamental changes in how large corporations are governed.

Calling themselves Americans Concerned about Corporate Power, the organizers of "Big Business Day" include the United Auto Workers, the United Farm Workers Union, the Coalition of American Public Employees, several large AFL-CIO affiliates, and some 50 liberal academics,

Fred D. Baldwin, a consultant living in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is a frequent contributor to The American Spectator.

politicians, environmentalists, consumer advocates, and clergy. The expected names are present: John Kenneth Galbraith, Michael Harrington, Barry Commoner, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. They are flanked by representatives of a score of liberal organizations that have successfully seized for themselves the question-begging label, "public interest groups."



Their legislative proposals are described in a 127-page booklet entitled, "The Case for a Corporate Democracy Act of 1980." It puts into one package most of the ideas Nader and his associates have been advocating for some time, notably in *Taming the Giant Corporation*, which appeared in 1976. Nader says that the proposed law would "reform the corporation by increasing the accountability of its decision-making process...[and] grant greater rights of access and voice to the various constituencies of the giant corporation—workers, consumers, communities, and shareholders."

The rationale for such legislation is that the largest American corporations are, in effect, private governments, unaccountable to anyone, and that they are run by an elite "handful of homogeneous executives" who are insensitive to democratic values. Americans Concerned about Corporate Power further contends that we are "in the midst of a corporate crime wave" and that state chartering has failed to control corporate excesses. The remedy for these ills is seen to be "federal minimum standards" for corporate governance and conduct. "The Case for a Corporate Democracy Act" contains the draft for a proposed law with seven major sections, which are not related to each other except as they all seek to impose new limits on the exercise of big-business discretion. Their inclusion in one package presumably gives each group within the supporting coalition something it wants. (It also has the