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# AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS

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## LOST IN TRANSLATION

by David Gurevich

Fifteen years ago in Moscow I worked as an interpreter at receptions for Western cultural luminaries, where the Ministry of Culture would spread out its largesse—caviar, smoked fish, meat, and champagne and cognac flowing freely to endless toasts to peace and friendship—over long banquet tables and snow-white linens. On the Soviet side would be the officials (always introduced as “critics”) and a handful of carefully screened artists—the woman, the Tatar, the “young writer.” This crew would grin politely, trying not to say too much—a few receptions like this, and you had a shot at joining a delegation to go *abroad!* Was it worth forfeiting such a prize for a word in support of Sakharov? The Western visitors, safely cocooned by their hosts, always looked like dolts to me. It was only later, when I met some of them in the West, that I realized that few had been fooled. It was just that they were having such a good time and were so determined to be gracious guests and not to play into the hands of . . . in short, decorum reigned.

Translating this spring at “Glasnost in Two Cultures: Soviet Russian/North American Women’s Writing,” a conference sponsored by the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU, reminded me of the good old days. The Planning Committee was chaired by (Dr.) Domna Stanton, professor of French and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan. Also battling on the feminist side were such heavy hitters as (Dr.) Catharine R. Stimpson, our Minister of Culture without portfolio from Rutgers University. The Soviets, primarily women traveling on the booming fellowship/scholarship circuit, were led by the poet and critic Zoya Boguslavskaya; Tatyana Tolstaya, whose short-story collection *On the Golden Porch* has been acclaimed by American critics; and Nina Belyayeva, a lawyer-turned-journalist from *Moscow News*. American Slavists, such as Marina Astman,

professor of Russian at Barnard, “had one foot in each culture” and were there to “help bridge the gap between the other two groups” (i.e., American feminists and Russian writers).

The beauty of glasnost is that no public event, whether a parliamentary session or a philatelists’ convention, ever comes off quite as planned. This time the spanner in the works was the obscure Soviet women’s group Transfiguration, ten shy-looking ladies who fully expected to be given the floor. Although the group’s program was unclear, they met every Soviet speech with howls of derision. But that was later; decorum was maintained for some time. The high point in the introductory speeches came when author Grace Paley offered to take the Soviet guests on an unofficial tour of the Lower East Side—junkies, beggars, and all—and did. Unfortunately the day was cold, and few panhandlers were to be seen.

Two presentations discussed Tolstaya’s work, but a whole panel was devoted to the critic Bakhtin, who spent his life in party-imposed obscurity. And when critic Natalya Adzhikhina spoke of jet-tisoning the old canon, she meant the

old *party* canon: not merely Sholokhov but also such female stalwarts of socialist realism as Maryetta Shaginyan and Galina Nikolayeva. Furthermore, one Soviet speaker after another made the hostesses squirm with their blasphemy: “There’s only good and bad literature—not male and female.”

In her presentation “Ending the Cold War at Home,” Ms. Linda Kauffman of the University of Maryland countered with the American position: “I don’t want to sound like I’m from California—which actually I am—but this is, like, heavy-duty denial.” (This was the only point in her speech that caused me a translation problem; the rest of her clichés have perfect Russian equivalents, finessed over the past seventy years.) Kauffman rounded up the usual suspects (the NEA, the FBI, Jesse Helms) and keened over the usual martyrs (Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz). Bombarded by the revelations that “MacNeil/Lehrer is *fund-ed by AT&T*,” “homelessness is a human rights violation,” and something about the “women’s Gulag,” the guests started filing out to the ladies’ room, where they could smoke, in violation of NYU policy. There, with Tatyana Tolstaya holding court, they were oblivious to the

“deep applause, turning into an ovation” (as *Pravda*’s accounts of official speeches used to put it) that followed the presentation. Passing by on my way to the men’s room, I heard gales of laughter inside. I felt, to use conference lingo, marginalized.

No presentation upset the hostesses as much as the Moscow poet Olesya Nikolayeva’s “Russian Religious Tradition and the Problems of Feminism.” Socialism deprived women of their femininity, Nikolayeva said, and broke the tradition of moral, spiritual women in Russian literature; more importantly, it broke the *Christian* tradition, without which Russian literature after Pushkin is unthinkable. Per se, this is obvious: you don’t need a Ph.D. to see that the transition from Dostoevsky’s Nastassya Filipovna to Trenev’s Lyubov Yarovaya (who kills her husband for Socialist ideals) is rooted in changed reality. But instead of staying within the safe confines of literary criticism, Nikolayeva concluded with some shocking statistics about juvenile crime in the USSR—due, she thinks, to mothers’ having to work—and exhorted her listeners to return to their traditional roles as keepers of the hearth.

Whether or not one agrees with Nikolayeva (I, for one, was disturbed by her heavy emphasis on “Christian tradition,” which can be an explosive locution in Russia), her speech woke a few people up. Stimpson could not let the blasphemy pass, and voiced her concern with the “new totalitarianism” and the “return to pre-ordained roles.” Working mothers responsible for millions of runaways? The state should build more day-care centers. Stanton chimed in with “white male morality.” Nikolayeva was flustered. She had obviously not expected to touch a nerve—which should tell us something, for better or for worse, about the continuing cultural isolation of the Soviet Union.

Nikolayeva and Tolstaya read from their work, and Georgian filmmaker Lana Gogoberidze showed *A Few Inter-*



*David Gurevich's most recent book is From Lenin to Lennon: A Memoir of Russia in the Sixties (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).*

views on *Personal Issues*, her bittersweet account of a journalist torn between her career and her family. Although touching and sincere, the film was stylistically dated, with a jazz soundtrack suggesting that Gogoberidze had watched too much Claude Lelouch. Stimpson, normally a study in steely composure, admitted she had cried throughout the show. I felt like asking if she taped "All My Children," too.

In her closing remarks, Stimpson miraculously managed to get to the left of every speaker. Praising the last one, the black critic Hortense Spillers, she stressed that in this country African culture had largely preceded the European; she found it hypocritical that the U.S. had supported the Soviet dissidents

while crushing the opposition at home; she affirmed the need to balance group rights and individual rights (leaning strongly to the former). The Soviets looked perplexed. Too bad she did not equate sex with rape (this time); that would have led them to turn their heads to my translator's booth and mutter, "He must be overworked."

Amid smiles and sisterly hugs, the conference was about to close with a luncheon at NYU's Deutsches Haus, where the audience could unwind. It did not work out that way. Stanton, ever the gracious hostess, acceded to the Transfigurationists' demands and gave them the floor. I am not quite sure how that

started a free-for-all. Perhaps it was a mistake to serve wine with Russians in attendance. In any event, Valerya Narbikova, a young novelist whose style is a cross between James Joyce and Henry Miller, decided to speak, too—about her women writers' group The New Amazons. "It's just a name," she said. "We have nothing to do with feminism."

"Nothing at all?" Spillers inquired politely.

Wine glass in hand, Valerya was pure *artiste*: "Nope." Within minutes, the place was the verbal equivalent of a Western saloon, with the talk coming down to one issue: Is it harder to be published if you are a woman? *Of course*, said the Americans. *No way*, said the Russians.

Ladylike pretenses were dropped. The women were tearing the mike from each others' hands, and I was racing around like Phil Donahue on speed. Stanton was left alone, all alone—her faction, including Stimpson, had fled quietly—and she was actually wringing her hands.

Tatyana thundered along. "You guys keep coming to Russia and we keep telling you these things! Why do you never listen to us? Why do you think you know more about our life than we do?"

"It's really time to go," said Stanton, all hope of being heard gone from her voice.

Tatyana turned and asked me to get another bottle from the bar. □

## THE PUBLIC POLICY



### RETURN TO SPENDER

by Doug Bandow

Conventional wisdom holds that last fall's budget agreement between President Bush and Congress effectively blocks the systematic raiding of the Treasury that has characterized the last several decades. The *Los Angeles Times* recently headlined one article: "Budget Agreement Having Positive Effect on Congress." In it, Senate Budget Committee chairman James Sasser (D-Tenn.) claims the pact is "the most demanding fiscal discipline Congress has ever imposed on itself." Meanwhile, Richard Darman, director of the Office of Management and Budget, calls it "the toughest federal budget enforcement ever."

If only that were so. The agreement's most important provision—that spending increases in any of three areas (defense, domestic, international) must be counterbalanced by cuts in the same area—is a laudable one. But "emergency" spending is not covered by the provision, and last spring, when legislators tried to use an "emergency" bill to push through a passel of the usual pork, it was the threat of a presidential veto, not the budget pact, that caused Congress to back down.

Moreover, because the law allows spending to expand in response to

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changing economic conditions, the budget levels should be considered floors rather than ceilings, as analyst Stephen Moore has argued. The "cap" on domestic spending increases—9.5 percent this year, 6.1 percent the next—is hardly a cap at all. According to Rudolph Penner, former head of the Congressional Budget Office, "The new process treats discretionary spending generously. Consequently, appropriators for civilian discretionary programs will have more flexibility to spend than at any time since the 1970s." The "changing economic conditions" loophole was used earlier this year to revise the cost of entitlement programs upward by \$183 billion through 1995—in effect swallowing up all of last fall's tax hike.

The budget agreement discourages cutting taxes unless there is a countervailing increase elsewhere. The Senate recently refused to cut Social Security tax rates, even though most Americans pay more in payroll tax than in income tax. Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.) has abandoned his attempt to restore the full deductibility of IRAs: "If we can't pay for them, they're not going to be seen in this budget." Worst of all, the agreement pumped up spending to outrageous levels before imposing any controls. Not one agency was killed by an agreement that included roughly \$195

billion in tax hikes.<sup>1</sup> The President and Congress actually established several *new* programs, including childcare subsidies and an expansion of Medicaid, before taking the pledge of fiscal sobriety.

Between January 1989, when Reagan left office, and 1992, total federal expenditures will jump 27 percent—from \$1.14 trillion to \$1.45 trillion—with domestic ("discretionary" and "entitlement") spending accounting for \$300 billion, virtually all of the rise. In the first two years of the Bush Administration, domestic outlays rose ten percent a year, higher than those of any President since Franklin D. Roosevelt, including Lyndon Johnson. Even leaving aside the S&L bailout, Bush is a bigger spender than Carter, Johnson, and Truman. And under the budget agreement, domestic spending will rise through 1995 by 7.6 percent annually, far above the expected inflation rate of 4.2 percent.

Bush is happily pumping money into a variety of domestic programs that Reagan successfully squeezed: Head Start, job-training, land acquisition, health and social programs, and research and development for just about everything. The budget itself lauds the President's proposals for record spending by the Department of Education

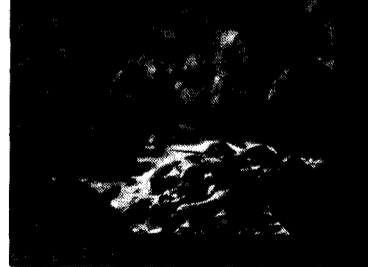
<sup>1</sup>The official figure is \$167 billion, but Congress and the administration count some tax increases as spending cuts.

and Head Start as "investing in the future." Between 1989 and 1991, spending for agriculture rose 12 percent, for energy 13 percent, interior 18 percent, transportation 20 percent, Congress and edu-

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