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# IN THE MARGIN

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## Of Pilgrims & Dupes

### 1917 & All That By Melvin J. Lasky



the spot on the Kremlin wall where his grave is still (barely) memorialised.

But my friends the Kremlinologists hasten to tell me that “Joseph *Who?*” is now beginning to make something of a come-back. For years the once omnipotent Soviet dictator was unmentioned in the whole Eastern press, but he is now being quoted rather more often. For example, after a recent article praising him in the official S.E.D. Party organ, *Neues Deutschland*, the East Berlin evening newspaper, *BZ am Abend*, now refers to him as “Stalin, that outstanding and far-sighted observer. . . .” Does it make any difference? Does anybody but Kremlinological observers pay any serious attention to such Orwellian twists-and-turns? Indeed it was George Orwell who said—it must have been, as best as I can recall, in 1946—“In five years it may be as dangerous to praise Stalin as it was to attack him two years ago. But I should not regard this as an advance. Nothing is gained by teaching the parrot a new word. . . .”

But are the parrots only giving forth meaningless jabber? Do they have memories to recall the

sounds of yesterday? The 40th anniversary of the Russo-German Non-Aggression pact of 23 August 1939 was recently marked; and I note how squawkingly ultra-sensitive the Kremlin has been to all the Western articles of observance. “Monstrous lies” are being fabricated about the Nazi-Communist “friendship sealed in blood”, to which Stalin, elated with the work of Molotov and Ribbentrop, had raised his glass in an historic toast.

Yet what is important about all the mechanical noises and silences that emerge from the Muscovite Ministry of Truth is that even if no one believes the propaganda, no one knows what actually took place and therefore history really has been consigned to a memory-hole. When I asked old-time foreign correspondents in Moscow about it I was told that “nobody under the age of 60 has any notion of what happened in 1939 when the Hitler-Stalin pact was the sensation of the day and the actual prelude to war. . . .” In dissident circles they knew, to be sure, of the tragic fate of so many German Communists in Moscow who, like Margarete Buber-Neumann, were handed over by the *NKVD* to the *Gestapo*. But those who have had a chance to talk with members of the younger Soviet generation have drawn almost a complete blank on the subject. Khrushchev made his short-lived attempt to hack away at the image of the *Vozhd* as a great Russian patriot; but as “far-sighted” as Stalin he was not.

BUT HOW DOES IT LOOK on the other side of the “Curtain”? How proud can we be of the kind of history which is, or is not, being served up to our own Common Man?

On these subjects of Russian history we have, to be sure, libraries full of researched studies, and in some of the great Western institutes (Harvard, the Hoover, St Antony’s in Oxford) there are documentary collections of fundamental and invaluable primary sources. I remember the excitement when one Allied officer, taking his career in his hands, refused to return some of the captured World War II documents and saw to it that they were kept in the West. One of the astonishing documents was the Smolensk archive of the *C.P.S.U.(B)* which had first been found by the *Gestapo* in Russia and then by the Americans in post-War Germany; Merle Fainsod used it extensively in his pioneering study of *How Russia is Ruled*. Of course it belonged legally to the Soviet authorities; but, for once, scholarly rights came before property rights.

No doubt about it, we know a good deal about the subject; and from time to time we learn more from Russian historians when they have an opportunity to write openly and to dip into their own archives at least as freely as Khrushchev did when he wanted some hard revealing facts for his “Secret Speech” of 1956.<sup>1</sup> If we have on this level any serious shortcomings, it is, in Mark Twain’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Merle Fainsod’s article in the March 1962 ENCOUNTER: “Soviet-Russian Historians: L’Affaire Burdzhalov.”

distinction, not because we are ignorant but because we “know so many things that ain’t so. . . .” I think of the vast distortions which still remain, at least in part, in my own mind as a result of an enthusiastic boyhood reading of Leon Trotsky’s marvellously written *History of the Russian Revolution*. One looks forward to the new work on this period by Professor Richard Pipes whose research, as he tells me, has uncovered important and surprisingly unread documents here in London, at the British Museum.

What is infuriating is not inevitable Eastern unawareness nor occasional Western misinterpretations, but wilful twisting among our own media popularisers who should know better but allow their ideological prejudices to dictate how the story is told to the people in simple forms. We all recall the now out-dated frauds, put on prime-time TV screens and between covers of best-sellers, about the peaceful happy New China under Chairman Mao and his stalwart band of sterling advisers (now exposed as the nefarious “Gang of Four”).

I SEE THAT a scandal is already developing over the collaborative American-Soviet film documentary recording the history of the Eastern Front during World War II. Reports of various compromises sound foul enough; and the West Germans with their special national sensitivities on how the Hitler-Stalin slaughters are presented have already announced they would not be showing it on their television channels.

But is what they have been showing on their own screens anything like a model of fair and scrupulous historical documentation? In Bonn recently I caught some instalments of the German Television’s ambitious 5-hour account of the “Inheritance of Red October.” One was almost driven frantic by the thought that obviously most of the authoritative historians of Europe and America had been writing in vain. The terror and violence of Lenin’s *putsch* to establish Bolshevik power was played down and almost omitted, for after all the whole “progressive” affair was basically “an attempt to take Russia out of the middle ages into the modern era. . . .” Any acknowledgement of real Russian progress (and it was substantial) in the decades before 1914, when Count Witte and his reformers began to push through industrialisation and modernisation, escaped my eye and ear. “White terror” there was, but no sign of “Red terror” (which began the liquidation of all liberal and democratic parties, and decimated the ranks of even the Mensheviks and the Anarchists). One

didn’t have to take the word of Leonard Schapiro or William Henry Chamberlin, whose critical works may be considered “hostile”; surely the chronicle of those days by Maxim Gorky is vivid and persuasive enough.<sup>2</sup> But evidently the West German TV historians placed more reliance on Soviet textbooks, and from these they were falsely instructed that the “small farmers” fought on the side of the Communist revolutionaries (they didn’t, trying as best they could to keep free of all fronts); that the subsequent liquidation of the “Kulaks” merely meant the end of an exploitative class of “capitalist farmers” (they weren’t the large land-owning class but the “middle peasantry”, and the elimination of some 5 million peasant households reduced Russia from its front position in European agricultural production to a poverty-stricken countryside).

And when the going gets rough—Stalin’s purge trials, the growing network of the Gulag Archipelago—the TV-film historians, always on the lookout for a black-and-white formula to match a bit of dramatic black-and-white footage, abandon one set of clichés and turn to another. Finally, all the inhumane disasters of Soviet history are wildly put down to “the heritage of old bloody barbaric Russia. . . .”

Russian history may well have its wonted Churchillian riddles, mysteries and enigmas, but their unravelling is badly served by our prevailing mass-media mixture of “a little knowledge” (always a dangerous point of departure) and a lot of wilful mindless gullibility.

NOR IS THIS mishmash a simple special case of popular distortion. The new gobbledygook can also be found in scholarly works, as if nonsense becomes more palatable if seasoned by footnotes and bibliography. I have been reading the new edition of Merle Fainsod’s classic study of Soviet totalitarianism, recently published by the Harvard University Press and as “edited” (actually extensively rewritten) by Jerry F. Hough;<sup>3</sup> and what is striking is that nowadays nothing is left of the old sense of mystery, or enigma, or paradox—we know everything in transparent clarity, we have finally comprehended the nature of the system. All the old difficulties seem to have disappeared. What Kenneth Burke used to call “exorcism by misnomer” runs wild here. Hough sees in the new Soviet governing circles “the combination of conservative style and moderate liberalism.” As under some Slavic Harding and Coolidge there has been a “Return to Normalcy” (ch. 7). “Pluralism” is emerging and flowering, as “far-reaching dissent may be tolerated” and commissars now “freely acknowledge diversity of interests.” Indeed, “the network of institutions to which a citizen can complain or appeal is extremely large—larger than in a

<sup>2</sup> See: M. J. Lasky, “Maxim Gorky: The Shame and the Glory”, *ENCOUNTER*, March 1972.

<sup>3</sup> *How the Soviet Union Is Governed*. By JERRY F. HOUGH and MERLE FAINSDOD. Harvard University Press, \$18.50, £12.95.

western country. . . ." (p. 316). All in all (as is suggested on p. 555),

"unwritten constitutional restraints of the type found in Great Britain are slowly beginning to develop in the Soviet Union."

If Jerry Hough can believe that he can believe anything, and evidently he does. In such an onset of benevolent gullibility Stalin emerges again in all his old wonted far-sightedness. Stalin is quoted as saying in the year 1931:

"We lag from the advanced countries by 50 to 100 years. We must make up this distance in 10 years. Either we do this or they crush us."

Our author then notes:

"Hitler's attack came ten years and three months after this speech, and many who questioned the pace of industrial development must have wondered whether the outcome would have been the same with a slower rate of industrial growth—and, therefore, without something like collectivization. . . ."

The "three months" is, after all, an excusable margin of error. As for the other margins of error, these are glossed over with nice non-statistical vagueness. The Stalinist methods of "catching up" and "national strength" resulted in a "substantial" decline in grain and livestock; and, he is forced to concede, "the human costs of collectivization were also extremely high. . . ." (p. 151).

"*Many* peasants died during the formation of the kolkhozes, and others were sent to camps or to exile in Siberia or the north where *a number* failed to survive." (Italics added.)

The far-sighted Stalin saw it all so clearly; too bad it never occurred to him that all those perished peasants might have made good living soldiers, and whole armies could have been better fed by all those missing animals and foodstuffs.

But why rake over old arguments? What matters is now, and "the Brezhnev era", we are instructed, "would be best understood if we ascribed to the General Secretary the type of motivations that we attribute to most politicians in the West. . . ." We are, then, not so very far from those putatively enlightened days when Westerners were delighted to find in Joseph Stalin "a wily politician who could well grace a seat in our US Senate" (Cordell Hull), or, at the very least (Averell Harriman), "a strong party political boss who could run a Tammany machine like Mayor Hague. . . ."

<sup>4</sup> See: Paul Hollander, "The Ideological Pilgrim: Looking for Utopia, Then & Now", *ENCOUNTER*, November 1973; George Watson, "Were the Intellectuals Duped? The 1930s Revisited", *ENCOUNTER*, December 1973.

I HOPE I DO NOT SEEM to be indulging in easy bouts of second-guessing, for I am genuinely puzzled by the repetitive patterns of ignorance in our 20th-century political opinion-making. Surely the grotesque misunderstandings and their endless variations cannot be due simply to some innocent unawareness of a few obvious and elementary facts. Think of all those generations of Ideological Pilgrims and Ideological Dupes (those malefic types so clinically described by Paul Hollander and George Watson in memorable articles which, alas, re-pay re-reading every five years or so).<sup>4</sup> I suspect it would be the pathos of a rationalistic fallacy to feel that they might have caught sight of more reality, and spared themselves much subsequent anguish and breast-beating, had they tried to look at things a bit more sharply and to ponder them just a shade more reflectively.

Writing of her visit to Mao's China in these pages, Barbara Wootton (*ENCOUNTER*, June 1973) confessed:

". . . to anyone coming from a world which threatens to strangle itself in its own complications it is the apparent simplicity of Chinese life which makes an irresistible appeal."

Surely it is an appeal that should be resisted, if for no other reason than that the apparent simplicity—why should it be otherwise?—is a snare and a delusion and always hides (as Lady Wootton now knows) grievous problems of real complexity. Similarly, when Mme de Beauvoir travelled through Maoist China, she was quick to observe:

"What is so winning about the Chinese leaders is that not one of them plays a part; they are dressed like anyone else . . . their faces are just faces, plainly and wholly human. . . . Their visage manifests an uncommon personality. . . . They inspire respect."

Those plain and human faces only disguised, as we now know, "lustful and criminal love of power" (at least among the Gang of Four), "fear of being arrested, purged, tortured, eliminated" (at least in the circles of the late Comrades Lin and Liu and the imprisoned Comrade Teng).

No, I am afraid it is not merely simple-mindedness that is culpable. Nor is it, at the other extreme, a sinister propaganda plot to enlist the foolish and the gullible in some devious Operation Whitewash. The one decisive factor which must impress itself on any observer of these unedifying intellectual tergiversations in our time is *the will to believe* or, more accurately, *the will to be deceived*. Somewhere among all our endowed natural instincts, between (say) primordial curiosity and the so-called death-wish, there is a deep-seated desire to be gulled, hoaxed, hoodwinked, or otherwise cozened and cheated. Our species loves the specious. Dark corners of the psyche long for the

fraudulent. Bamboozlement is part of *la condition humaine*.

"What was it in 1972", writes one Anglo-American historian who has just returned from his second visit to China, "that made visitors like myself so easy to gull?" Jonathan Mirsky saw everybody and everything, and came back seven years ago full of praise for the magnificent Cultural Revolution, offering as eloquent proof "the repeated assertions by famous intellectuals with whom I was often in private, that they had never had it so good." But: "many of them now reveal they had been exiled, disgraced, and humiliated; each can offer examples of beatings, killings, and suicides. . . ."

Had they simply been lying? and why couldn't he see through (at least a little bit) the dissimulation? Some told him frankly: "We deceived you." Others explained: "We couldn't dare to tell you the whole truth." But couldn't he, a trained observer and student of affairs, have glimpsed a portion of the true reality all by himself? As Mirsky himself wonders (in *The Observer*, 28 October 1979, p. 9).

"It cannot be wholly simple to hoodwink Chinese-speaking specialists in the country for five weeks, who peer closely at everything and, notebooks open, interrogate their hosts about the size of their salaries and the nature of their premarital sex lives."

One leading Chinese Communist now provided him with "the simple answer."

"We wanted to deceive you. But *you* wanted to be deceived."

Our ideological pilgrim and dupe conceded that he had somehow "sheathed" his "critical faculties" and "helped to insert the rings in our own noses."

ONE LAST CASE in our law of self-deception, for in these days of ideological illusionism we must be serious about the spurious.

Why should I ever have been sceptical of the many-splendoured messages which the charming and beautiful Mme Han Suyin brought back to us from her Chinese homeland? She was no outside

<sup>5</sup> See: Han Suyin, "Fallen Woman: the File on Mrs Mao", *Radio Times* (BBC, 14 April 1977), pp. 10-11.

tourist; she *belonged*; she *knew*. She had cousins who taught physics at Peking University; she had uncles who were distinguished painters; her very own family and relations kept her informed about art and science and all the other facets of the happy new social order being constructed under Chairman Mao. Here, evidently, was (in David Riesman's phrase) an authentic "inside-dopester." She wrote histories, biographies, novels. And I didn't believe a word of them.

Then, even for Han Suyin, came the moment of truth, the day of rude awakening.<sup>5</sup> The painter Huang Yung-yu had not simply "gone away somewhere" when he could no longer be found in his Peking studio. He and his family had been evicted, spent years in prison, for like Lin Feng-mien and Li Ke-jan and Kuan Shan-yue, he had been blacklisted as a "capitalist-roader." Her cousin, the physicist, now tells not of "some research complications" but of a wholesale purge of the scientists with the closing of their laboratories and the destruction of their files and documents. Her cousin, the musician, had liked Beethoven, a decadent taste; he had not just been "lost sight of" but had now "emerged from jail after three years."

Why, she cries, "but why did you not tell me what was happening since 1974, when I was in China in 1974 and 1975?"

Her family and friends replied: "We were frightened."

"Such was the fear, the terror, that Chiang had managed to inspire.

Nobody trusted anyone else, not even one's own family. . . . All the young children had been told to report anyone who spoke ill of Chiang Ching [Mme Mao Tse-tung].

My family's reticence I can now understand.

'We knew that you would denounce her if you knew these things, and then we would all have gone to jail, or worse.'

They tell me now."

Only one source of puzzlement remains—how so sensitive an observer, a novelist of powerful human passions, a native-speaker of Chinese attuned to words and inflections, should have remained so stolidly oblivious to such fearful emotions, to such anxiety-ridden subterfuges on all those "plain and wholly human faces." Can their reticence excuse her hardness of hearing?

Well, "they tell me now", and now it can be told.



## Holes in Time

By John Gribbin

THE IDEA OF “the black hole” as a hole in space, now reinforced by the new Walt Disney film and book-of-the-film, *The Black Hole*—subtitled *A Journey That Begins Where Everything Ends*—has entered popular mythology. The concept probably ranks with Newton’s mythical falling apple and Einstein’s equation  $E = mc^2$  as a bit of science known to everyone who can read. But, as with gravity and relativity, knowledge of the *existence* of a concept does not extend to an *understanding* of what it all means.<sup>1</sup> And the most intriguing fact about the black hole may not be that it is a hole in space at all; for each and every black hole should be seen also as a hole in time.

This is a result of the essential unity of space and time, a concept which lies at the very heart of the Einsteinian revolution in our view of the Universe. Einstein’s work tells us two things of equal importance: that mass and energy are interchangeable, two sides of the same coin, linked by the famous quoted equation; and that space and time are also two aspects of one whole, the continuum of space-time. So we have two components which make up the Universe, each in its turn two-faced—mass-energy and space-time. The interaction between the two, through gravity, accounts for phenomena as diverse as the existence of an

<sup>1</sup> Einstein’s work has been amply described in “popular” works over the years. A flurry of books and articles marked his centenary in 1979: the best is probably Banesh Hoffman and Helen Dukas, *Einstein* (Paladin, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> This was the idea behind the prediction that light from distant stars, “bent” by the Sun, would measurably shift the star images recorded during an eclipse. The success of the 1919 eclipse expeditions in observing this effect made Einstein a household name.

expanding Universe; the bending of light from a distant star as it passes near the Sun; and the bizarre properties of black holes, including their ability to distort time.

Just what is a black hole? Over the past ten years or so, many people have offered their own hand-waving explanations; but the simplest and most easily understood is probably the oldest. This involves imagining our three-dimensional Universe (three-dimensional in space, of course; four if you include time) as compressed into an elastic, two-dimensional sheet of stretched material (it happens that the whole Universe is expanding—the rubber sheet is stretching—although that is of no relevance to the present discussion). Stars and galaxies are then imagined as spots on the two-dimensional fabric.

We can simulate the effect of matter (mass-energy) on the fabric of the Universe (space-time) by dropping small weights on to the rubber sheet, not just in imagination but even in a practical demonstration, where the weights could be marbles or ball-bearings. Each weight makes a dent in the sheet. It “distorts the fabric of space-time”, in a manner very similar to the distortions in space-time produced by the presence of mass-energy in the real Universe.

A small weight distorts the fabric only slightly, as does a large weight spread over a large area. But a large weight concentrated on a small area produces a big distortion, with a sharply dipping curve to the sheet. The amount of curvature on the sheet corresponds to the strength of the gravitational field in real life. A massive, compact star distorts space-time nearby much more than a diffuse object; and this distortion of space-time is what we call gravity.

EXTENDING THE ANALOGY further, once we have a stretched rubber sheet with different weights sitting on it and producing little valleys, we can simulate the behaviour of light beams by rolling marbles across the sheet. Light, we know, travels in straight lines. What that means, Einstein said, is that light rays follow a path of least resistance through space-time, a geodesic. And whereas a marble rolled across a flat sheet does travel in a straight line, if it rolls into the valley created by a weight on the sheet its track is curved slightly and it rolls out at a different angle.<sup>2</sup> This is a precise analogy of the way in which the Sun’s gravity “bends” light rays passing near it, and of the way the same gravity “holds” planets in orbit around the Sun, or the Moon in orbit around the Earth. In curved space-time, the line of least resistance is also curved, and we see the Moon staying in orbit not because some mysterious force (gravity) acts across empty space, but because there is *no* force acting to deflect it from “the path of least resistance” through curved space-time.