

# War, Peace, and Dissent

## The Seven Days of Creation

by Vladimir Maximov  
Knopf, 448 pp., \$10.00

Reviewed by Susan Jacoby

Western critics tend to yearn for a rare conjunction of political courage and literary genius in every new book by a dissident Russian writer. Vladimir Maximov's novel is filled with courage, but it is not a work of genius.

Maximov, a 42-year-old writer who was exiled from his Russian homeland last year, has an honorable history not only of political dissent but also of simple human decency. Without the protection afforded by international fame, he took public and private risks on behalf of his principles and his friends, and he

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took them at a time when the international intellectual community was much less sensitive to issues of human rights in Communist countries than it has become in recent years.

*The Seven Days of Creation* attempts to explore the social cataclysms of twentieth-century Russia through several generations of the same family, and through individuals whose lives span all of the generations. Fiction in which characters are developed as psychologically complex individuals rather than as symbols has rarely been produced by writers who grew up under Soviet rule. This is true of most *samizdat* literature that has made its way to the West during the past two decades, including many of the towering works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It is no denigration of Solzhenitsyn's stature to say that his writings do not and cannot by themselves constitute a total literature that equals the greatness of the Russian language and Russian literary traditions. There is a void in modern Russian literature—a void created by systematic attempts to destroy genuine culture. The gap is partly one of style and partly one of substance; Soviet concepts of "socialist realism" have left their aesthetic mark on many writers who oppose the political values of the regime.

Unfortunately, Maximov's novel does little to fill this void. It does not prove the author to be "one of the most important writers in the world today" (as Heinrich Böll has already hailed him). It is a minor novel of some political and literary interest despite its clumsy craftsmanship. It is a better book in Russian than in English, but that is true of nearly every piece of writing translated from the Russian. (The English-language edition was so much a collaborative effort that the publisher chose not to identify the translators. Anonymity for translators, singly or collectively, strikes me as undesirable; it lets everyone—including publishers—off the hook too easily.) In any event, *The Seven Days of Creation* displays many of the same strengths and weaknesses in both English and the original Russian.

The book has moments of poignant, subtle beauty. In one vignette, soldiers on their way to the front realize their vulnerability only when they make suggestive remarks to women by the roadside and are greeted with indulgent silence instead of tart retorts. Maximov's portrait of Antonina, the daughter of one of the novel's patriarchs, is an extraordinary accomplishment. Her sexuality, female tenderness, and moral strength develop in the crude company of free workers building a prison camp. Antonina is one of the most memorable and believable female characters to appear in the recent literature of any country.

But these parts do not add up to a whole novel. The book covers an immense amount of time in separate segments and flashbacks—the civil war after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Stalin purges of the Thirties, World War II, the post-Stalin period. It attempts to be an epic, moving from a cattle drive at the beginning of the war to an apartment courtyard in Moscow during the purges to a mental institution where non-conformist intellectuals are confined today. The time element and transitions, so important in a novel of this scope, are handled with an amateurishness that bewilders the reader. Dreams are used to facilitate flashbacks; preachy parables provide the periods for conversations. Some foreigners will see these parables as proof of the "truly Russian" qualities of the novel. Nonsense. Stories about men who get lost in the woods and who bravely try to find their way out even though they do not know the route are clichés in many cultures.

In one particularly inexplicable pas-



"May I have my allowance in gold bullion?"

sage, Maximov fictionalizes the austere preface to Anna Akhmatova's poem "Requiem" and turns it into an encounter in a line outside a prison between the poet and a shrewish woman who envies her dress. The use of this incident would be appropriate only in a *roman à clef*. Any educated Russian reader, and Americans who have read the recent translations of Akhmatova's poetry (*SR/W*, January 26, 1974), will recognize the incident immediately. Why would a novelist take the grandeur of a poet's description and twist it into a passage at once too banal and too pompous? What would a critic say about an American novelist with a fondness for Yeats who inserted a scene in which a man says to a woman, "Now that you're old and your hair is getting gray, think a little bit about what you used to look like and how crazy I was about you"?

It is extraordinarily difficult to criticize the writings of Russian dissenters who have paid so dearly for the right of free speech. But it is patronizing, and does no service to Russian literature, and to hail every minor new work by a dissident as a successor to *The Brothers Karamazov* or *War and Peace*. □

## New Books

### The Witness and I

by O. Edmund Clubb

Columbia University Press, 314 pp.,

\$9.95

O. Edmund Clubb had been a member of the U.S. Foreign Service for 22 years when he was appointed director of the State Department's Office of Chinese Affairs in July 1950. It was precisely at this time that the State Department and the Foreign Service were coming under attack from those who saw, in the loss of China to the Communists, evidence of high treason on the part of those who made and executed foreign policy. To be sure, it was not the loss of China alone that exercised congressmen, senators, and various politically ambitious members of investigating committees who saw traitors behind every failure of U.S. policy and every victory of communism. Mr. Clubb, who had reason to believe that his record of loyalty was impeccable, was served with a list of questions, allegations really, that required him to explain certain political attitudes he was supposed to have held over the years. It

appeared that Whittaker Chambers had a recollection of Clubb visiting the offices of *New Masses* almost 20 years earlier and delivering a sealed envelope to one of the editors there. It was clearly alleged that the sealed envelope was a secret message. (The sealed envelope turned out to be a letter of introduction; the visit, a casual and meaningless one.) There were other charges as well, all of them more or less the vague sort that ruined so many lives during the McCarthy era. Mr. Clubb was suspended from his post as a security risk, though some months later the Loyalty Security Board cleared him, at which point he chose to retire. Clearance or not, the damage to morale and career was irreversible, Mr. Clubb believed. He has written a stinging, and often eloquent, memoir of those years and its effects, and to read these pages is to have the taste and feeling of that bitter time given back to one. Doubtless, too, it is a book to make one remember that there were worse periods in America than Watergate.

### The Evening Colonnade

by Cyril Connolly

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 496 pp.,

\$15

This collection of essays written over the last 10 years is, it turns out, the last publication in a long literary life. Mr. Connolly, editor of the British journal

*Horizon*, author of *Enemies of Promise* and *The Unquiet Grave*, and a weekly reviewer for *The Sunday Times*, died in November 1974. The collection shows the Connolly style, the warmth, the lack of timorousness, the wide range of his mind. He could be a generous critic, but never a smarmy one. He wrote of his friends with affection, but he was primarily a critic, and so he wrote of them critically, with a cool, evaluating eye. Among the best in these essays are the portraits of George Orwell, his friend from their earliest days at St. Cyprians, and of Ezra Pound. In the first, Connolly doubts that Orwell ever understood what a quantity of words he had wasted on socialism, which, after all, had become respectable in the Britain of 1945. Orwell was a political animal. He could not, observes Connolly, blow his nose without moralizing on conditions in the handkerchief industry. It was this ruling passion that was the strength of Orwell's best work, but also the reason for some of his worst. It had to be, he concludes about Orwell, that there were too many words (though nothing he wrote was without value), too many arguments without action and politics without power. "My idea of Hell is a place where one is made to listen to everything one has ever said," Mr. Connolly opines.

The portrait of Pound is of a wholly different sort from the one of Orwell. The encounter with Pound is mysterious, rich in unspoken feeling (which is not



"I finished my report on the dynamics of collective survival in global depression. Now can I have my WIN button?"