correspondence

"THE SOLZHENITSYN AFFAIR"

Eugene, Ore.

Dear Sir: Paul W. Blackstock's article, "The Solzhenitsyn Affair: A Minority View" (*worldview*, November, 1970) raises many more questions than it attempts to answer, including a number that *worldview* has never aired and that perhaps many of its readers and contributors would as soon not face. I cannot evade the responsibility of at least attempting to bring them out here.

The first half of Blackstock's article briefly reviews the Solzhenitsyn affair, acknowledging Solzhenitsyn's greatness with strained reluctance, speaking of his anti-Stalinism as an "obsession," and calling the effect of his writing "hallucinogenic" in that "only the past seems real and the present a dream."

The second half of the article is in effect a call to action: Blackstock informs his readers that "the effort must be made" to divest "the man in the street" of "cold-war stereotypes" and "the worst possible" image of the USSR, which are perniciously reinforced in the Western reader by Solzhenitsyn's novels about Stalin's time. In place of this "worst possible image," we are to accept and promote the "growing consensus among such 'revisionist' Soviet experts as William Mandel, Peter Viereck and Richard Lowenthal that the present Soviet regime is . . . post-totalitarian"; the remainder of the article casts about for evidence in support of the feeling that a more liberal attitude toward literary protests will be adopted in the future, to match the progress of the USSR in science and technology.

One hardly knows where to begin to respond.

In the first place, Blackstock has carefully chosen his gallery of "Soviet experts." Mandel, for example, has been turning out academic whitewashes of the USSR for decades, spiced with just enough criticism to give the appearance of objectivity without the substance. . . . It is hard to detect any change of approach between his *Guide to the Soviet Union* of 1949 (still well within the Stalin era), in which he devoted some pages to the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states without ever mentioning the mass murders and deportations and the guerrilla wars of resistance that were still going on, and the second edition of his *Russia Re-Examined* (1968), where he has to acknowledge some of the facts that have become better known since, but cleverly words his account to give the impression that all of that is past, and quotes all sorts of persons to the effect that everything is fine now (Mandel characteristically prefers quoting the prevarications of others to making a statement on his own authority). Blackstock's authorities are "hallucinogenic," not in the sense that they make the past live but in the sense that they are determined to present "the best possible image" of the USSR, which happens to be even farther from Soviet realities than the "worst possible image" of "cold war stereotypes."

One wonders whether the attitude of the public is more determined by cold war stereotypes or by the revisionist stereotypes so often presented in news media. Renewed oppression of tens of millions of members of religious communities is now documented as a major development of the past twelve years or so by a number of admirable books. How much of this does the man in the street know? How much do the readers of *worldview* know? Imagine the reaction of *worldview*, or *Christianity and Crisis* or *Christian Century*, if waves of arrests, secret trials, etc. comparable to those that took place in the USSR in the sixties, were to occur in Spain. (I do not include the Jewish press because, in sharp contrast to the Christian press, it has recognized its responsibility to Soviet Jewry and shows some signs of recognizing a responsibility to all the religious and national communities now threatened by Soviet cultural genocide; I doubt that any responsible Jewish journal would have published Mr. Blackstock's piece.) Compare their attitude toward torture in Brazil and Greece with their attitude toward the *present* (not back in Stalin's days) conditions in Soviet concentration camps, as detailed in A. Marchenko's *My Testimony* (1969), hardly differing from those described by Solzhenitsyn except in the reduction of the total number of prisoners. If 85-year-old Fricis Menders had been sentenced to five years' imprisonment for the crime of giving an American historian documents pertaining to events of 1905 by South Africa, can anyone doubt that these journals would have made an issue of it? Menders has the misfortune of being a Latvian; "Judeo-Christian ethics" applies in the Third World, not in Latvia. If Simas Kudirka had been beaten senseless and returned to Portuguese authorities, would the progressive Christian press have been so silent?

If I had to generalize, I would say that among university students what is influential is not cold war stereotypes but the theory that cold war stereotypes dominate almost everyone's image of the USSR and that all serious evils there died with Stalin. If an effort is going to be made to correct stereotypes, it must be based on truth, not on "worst" or "best possible images," not on Fred Schwarz or William Mandel, not on the *Dan Smoot Report* or the *New World Review*. The truth is much less pretty than Mr. Blackstock seems to think, and it imposses responsibilities to very large numbers of real oppressed persons which, so far, our experts on religion and international affairs have refused to acknowledge. . . .

Stephen C. Reynolds

The Author Replies:

It was not by accident that my article on the Solzhenitsyn Affair was subtitled "A Minority View," and a critical reaction from some readers was expected. . . .

With respect to the comments of Stephen Reynolds, I am baffled by his charge that I have acknowledged Solzhenitsyn's greatness only "with strained reluctance." As one of the first Americans to read Solzhenitsyn in *Novy Mir* and to translate his two early novellas, *An*

Incident at Krechetovska Station and *Matryona's House,* I recently shared in a eulogy of his work with Pearl Buck and Thomas Whitney (who translated *The First Circle*)—a eulogy which was broadcast by the Voice of America. (The V.O.A. is not widely known as an agency which projects "the best possible image" of the USSR.) In this regard, I refer Mr. Reynolds to a forthcoming second edition of these two stories with both my original Introductory Essay and a new "Afterword," to be published by the University of South Carolina Press under the title "*We Never Make Mistakes.*" . . .

Mr. Reynold's preoccupation with controversy over Cold War vs Revisionist stereotypes misses the main thrust of my argument, namely that the USSR today is no longer the totalitarian regime about which Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The First Circle*, and that because of his preoccupation with the evils of the Stalinist past, his work has been exploited for Cold War purposes by Western propagandists.

Mr. Reynolds writes of "renewed oppression of tens of millions of members of religious communities," and "waves of arrests, secret trials, etc." taking place in the sixties, and finally of "Soviet cultural genocide" which now threatens "all the religious and national communities" in the USSR, conjuring up an atmosphere identical to that of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia.

I know from personal experience what the atmosphere of a totalitarian regime is like, having spent the first month of World War II in Munich, dodging the Gestapo, and watching, helpless, while friends of friends disappeared in a massive wave of secret arrests. I have seen first hand the hunted, unforgettable look of people who knew that they were marked for extermination. At the end of the war I helped liberate the notorious slave labor camps of Ohrdruf and Buchenwald. It was one of my German friends (who ran an underground escape route while his wife was a secretary at Dachau) who taught me to be wary of black and white stereotypes.

In my last book, *The Secret Road to World War II*, I wrote in detail about a virtually unknown wave of arrests which took place in the USSR in 1927 during Stalin's rise to power, basing my account on captured documents and previously untapped materials from the underground.

Returning to Munich in the fall of 1966, I used as a research source a person who had spent seven years in Soviet concentration camps, bridging the gap between the years of Stalinist repression and the "thaw" which followed the death of the dictator. This same person recently returned to the USSR for a year of post-doctoral academic study and research. Such a return would have been unthinkable if the Soviet Union were in fact the kind of totalitarian state conjured up by such stereotypes as "waves of arrests, secret trials, etc."

As an intelligence analyst assigned to the Soviet area, it was my duty for several years to attempt to evaluate developments with the "stupid, bourgeois objectivity," which is openly scorned by Soviet propagandists and secretly avoided by their anti-Soviet Chinese or Western counterparts. As an "academic" I still try to hold to that standard. At my own expense I spent a month in the USSR in 1966, and updated my acquaintance with the Soviet scene and people during six weeks of unescorted travel last summer, when I was one of the five Americans who since 1935 have been mountain climbing in the Caucasus. It may come as a shock to those who see, hear and speak no good of the USSR that I found no evidence of "waves of arrests," and, in spite of the Vietnam quagmire, little or no anti-American sentiment among the Russian people. This does not mean that "all serious evils" of the Soviet system miraculously disappeared with the death of Stalin, but it does mean that the atmosphere is not that of the totalitarian states which I have known from firsthand experience.

Mr. Reynolds overlooks the fact that one man's paternalism is another man's repression, depending on whether he belongs to a religious or ethnic minority group which has been discriminated against in either Soviet or American society. Any American black or Chicano militant can document this sociological principle which cuts across international boundaries. It is an unfortunate fact of life both here and in the Soviet Union. In the USSR the pendulum of such in-vs-out group repression has swung back and forth within parameters roughly set by the slogan "nationalist in form, socialist in content." Khrushchev publicly acknowledged Stalin's brutal repression of certain minority groups, and the government has attempted to rehabilitate and resettle in their homelands the Chechen-Ingush, Kalmyck and similar survivors of the Stalinist mass deportations. It is my impression that in the postwar period official anti-racist propaganda in the USSR began well before the Black Liberation and New Left movements in the United States. In either case, the Cold War stereotype "cultural genocide" is a grossly exaggerated generalization. Until one has learned the language, visited the scene and talked to a representative sampling of the principal ethnic minority groups in the USSR, I would follow Montaigne's recommendation of "suspended judgment" on the issue . . .

I am pleased that my article stirred up some thinking on problems of freedom and repression which, like racism, cut across national boundaries. As Andrei Sakharov, a leader of the Dissenting Academy in the USSR, observes: "Intellectual freedom is essential to human society." It is seriously threatened not only in the Soviet Union. One of its outstanding literary champions is Solzhenitsyn. My own surmise is that long after the current clamor over his work has been forgotten, Solzhenitsyn himself will remain as a symbol of "the righteous ones" of whom he wrote in the closing lines of *Matryona's House:*

"We all lived beside her and never understood that she was that righteous one without whom, according to the proverb, no village can stand,

Nor any city,

Nor our whole land."

Paul W. Blackstock