

# Books

## The Education of Lev Navrozov: A Life in the Closed World Once Called Russia by Lev Navrozov

(Harper's Magazine Press; 628 pp.; \$12.95)

Jeri Laber

I first came across Lev Navrozov when I read his article, "On Soviet Dissidence," in the November, 1973, issue of *Commentary*, a memorable vignette describing a visit with a friend at a *dacha* outside of Moscow. Although I have been concerned with the Soviet dissident world for many years, that piece offered new dimensions to my perception of Soviet intellectual life; it suggested nuances so fine that I became aware of their absence for the first time. Navrozov has been "there" and conveys it. He evokes the Chekhovian scent of a fall evening in the Russian countryside and imbues it with detail distinctively Soviet. His characters—their anxieties, ambitions, cynicism, humor, and resignation—are vividly portrayed; we are sharply reminded that people in the Soviet Union, like the rest of us, are infinitely complex and defy simple classification as "pro-" or "antiestablishment."

Lev Navrozov was a successful translator in the Soviet Union before coming to the United States in 1972. Almost unbelievably, *The Education of Lev Navrozov*, like his articles, was written in *English*, Navrozov's second language, long before he crossed the Soviet border. Like Nabokov, with whose linguistic virtuosity his is bound to be compared, he is fascinated with language and, in turn, is fascinating as he plays with the sounds and meanings of words:

"The *state*. Masterdom. What a word in Russian: the adjective has fifteen letters—the very word is leviathan, its armorlike scales dully glimmering as it uncoils its five crustaceous syllables."

*The Education of Lev Navrozov*—an ambitious, exciting, but ultimately disappointing book—is the first of a projected seven volumes that will describe successive stages of the author's life in "the closed world once called Russia." This volume deals primarily with the period from 1928 (the end of Lenin's New Economic Policy) to 1935, the first seven years of Navrozov's life. The author attempts to weave autobiographical reminiscences, political history, and social commentary into an intricate literary tapestry, which, when successful, renders a subtly hued portrayal of early Soviet life.

Navrozov was six in 1934, when Serge Kirov was assassinated and the "terror" began. His mother was a Jewish doctor from a bourgeois family in Vitebsk; his father was pure Russian, part-writer and part-alcoholic. They lived in the drawing room of a six-story Moscow house that had belonged to a Dutchman named Bloom until he fled Russia in 1918. Having that room made Navrozov "perhaps luckier than if I had been born a count...a century before," particularly because his family was among the first to move into Bloom's house, and "whatever little remained of Bloom's furniture was finally assembled in our room and was cherished like priceless family relics." Navrozov's description of the room-by-room division of Bloom's house and the wryly amusing ways in which disparate families managed to coexist there in communal fashion is more graphic than hundreds of statistics on the Soviet housing shortage of the 1920's.

Bloom's drawing room boasted a

balcony under which Kirov's funeral procession was going to pass. Navrozov's childish excitement over an event he barely understood ("Everyone shouted: Kirov's funeral, Kirov's funeral. The combination of the two words promised a unique spectacle") was chastened by his father's declaration: "Now there will be a real Jewish pogrom at the top," to which his mother rejoined, "in different keys but in diminuendo: 'What nonsense. What nonsense. What nonsense.'"

"Today I view the event more soberly," Navrozov says, analyzing the assassination in minute detail and referring to newspaper accounts of the time, all the while interspersing his observations with his child's-eye view of the holiday atmosphere surrounding a state funeral that passed directly under the balcony of Bloom's "pseudo-Moresque" house.

This is exciting, multidimensional historical writing. Events are researched, probed, and infused with life, the author's own life he brings to history. Unfortunately, however, Navrozov does not fulfill the promise of this early section. Instead of continuing an artful intermingling of facts and experience, the book degenerates into an anti-Soviet diatribe that will intrigue some, anger a few, and, I fear, bore most of Navrozov's readers. Personal reminiscences *do* reappear from time to time, refreshing and charming the reader into turning a few more pages, but they are not as well integrated as they might be, nor are there enough of them to sustain the effort.

Navrozov sets up some diverse and formidable figures as his antagonists and subjects them to varying degrees of deprecation: Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Tolstoy, Mayakovsky, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Professor E.H. Carr, Winston Churchill, and Ambassador Joseph Davies are but a few that come under his fire. He attacks many Western politicians and scholars for being taken in by the false image of a Soviet utopia. He finds evil and deception in all aspects of Soviet policy: foreign affairs, the economy, medicine, education, industrialization, collectivization, wages, and prices. He is often original, even brilliant, but his exposition is frequently elliptical. He has obviously done extensive research, but his footnoted quotations often have only a tenuous bearing on the case that

he seeks to develop. His esoteric references to obscure people and events will limit his audience to those thoroughly familiar with Soviet history. His gratingly sarcastic debating style will restrict his audience still further.

Lenin, subjected to an *ad hominem* character assassination, is accused of greed, vanity, cruelty, laziness, and stupidity. Navrozov considers Lenin "the greatest impersonation of self-effacement in human history," and argues against the pro-Leninist bias of Soviet ideology, as well as against "some Western scholars [who] would still say in the 1960's that [Lenin's] genius was so supernatural that no written words could express it."

Marx and Trotsky, although allotted less space, fare no better. Navrozov's indictment is again a petty one: Trotsky, we learn, "kept pedigreed hunting dogs," while Marx had "material interests," a "love of influence and prestige," and a father-in-law who is accused of "love of promotion to the rank of Minister of the Interior in Prussia."

How totally different Navrozov's caustic, humorless acerbities are from the light and delightful ways in which he tells his personal story: the poignant, loving sketches of his parents, for example, or this marvelous description of some highly placed relatives and their provincial worship of things Western:

"With great difficulty a dress 'straight from Fifth Avenue, New York' (the 'Paris' of the moment) was secured for her, and when she put it on, everyone gasped at the sight of something so exquisite. The style was flat in front ('The West, the West!'), but had waves on the back ('The West, the West!'), until someone spoiled it all by saying: 'You've put it on backwards.'"

Navrozov's book, too tightly packed with thoughts, feelings, emotions, and theories, suffers from repetition—of ideas and of words and images. His nonstop eloquence seems out of control. If I had been his editor, I would have penciled out more than half of this lengthy book. Interwoven within its six hundred-odd pages are the outlines of a lovely, lyrical autobiographical novel, set against the harsh backdrop of early Soviet Russia, which Navrozov filters through the

gauze of childhood nostalgia and transforms into a place of joy and pain and wonder. I would have encouraged him to let that delicate story grow, to set it

free from the anti-Soviet polemics that ultimately overwhelm it and the many other virtues of this nevertheless remarkable book.

## Resignation in Protest by Edward Weisband and Thomas M. Franck

(Grossman; 236 pp.; \$10.00)

### Hillel Levine

For the high-level government official personal integrity is important but insufficient. This is the conclusion of Weisband and Franck's study of *Resignation in Protest*. Resignation for reasons of principle may enable officials in a compromising situation to uphold a sense of conviction. But bowing out like a "gentleman" conceals problems that exist in the Administration and, consequently, contributes to their perpetuation. By making known their disagreement with the Administration public officials can stimulate a more open discussion of controverted issues and poorly conceived policies. Inside information can raise the level of discourse and mobilize legitimate political action. Silent resignation cannot.

In view of the significance of public resignation it should be a matter of serious concern, the authors claim, that over 90 per cent of the resigning public officials they studied resigned with public pronouncements that were inane, concealing the real issues that prompted their course of action. The lengths to which some would go in order not to "rock the boat," even in their departure, are illustrated in the detailed case studies.

Weisband and Franck assess the constraints on public resignation. The team has its gentle ways by which internal dissenters can be muffled and shuffled offstage, preventing appearances under the spotlights where they could make statements damaging to the Administration. Further political aspirations of would-be resigners certainly influence their style of departure from the centers of power. Of the 355 silent resigners fully 73 returned to positions

as senior or more senior than the ones from which they resigned. Only one of the 34 who resigned in protest received a similar reappointment. The message is clear.

Both efficacy and personal cost influence the style of resignation among those prepared to take a principled stance. Here the argument for resignation in protest is somewhat ambiguous. The loss of a power base, of visibility, and of access to information is a serious factor in deciding to work for change from within or to become an ungentlemanly outcast. From most positions one can resign but once. This may induce the officeholder to wait for an even more significant issue about which to announce his or her resignation.

The team can also play rough against defectors who cause it embarrassment. One who leaves the team is certain to be cast as an oddball, to be diagnosed in clinical terms, and to have unflattering motives attached to one's actions. "In disarming a rebel the team always prefers to tackle his etiquette rather than his cause." Team play is so pervasive in American society that the quitter is likely to arouse general distrust no matter how worthy the issues that are being politicized. The ensuing careers of those likely to serve in high-level positions may be most damaged by the transfer to the White House "Enemies" list—a further restraint on public resignation.

In considering the influence of the occupational and class background of these officials the authors dispense with the more conspiratorial dimensions of military-industrial complexes. What they suggest is equally insidious,