

The Past in Russia's Present

Herbert J. Ellison

It is not easy to choose a small group of books on the Soviet Union for the general reader. Yet this random sampling of recent works would do remarkably well, for it covers an impressive range of topics, contemporary and historical, and approaches those topics in a wide range of literary and scholarly styles, from Slavized *Geistgeschichte* posing the large questions of Russian history to an efficient survey of contemporary Soviet society; from a moving personal memoir of imprisonment under Stalin and the forced return of Soviet citizens to their homeland at the end of World War II to a sociological study of contemporary Soviet religious belief and practice. For good measure the mix includes a superb short history of U.S.-Russian/Soviet relations.

Boris Shragin's *The Challenge of the Spirit* reveals broad knowledge of the history of Russian culture and impressive insight into the revival of intellectual life in the post-Stalin era. Shragin finds a widespread tendency among Russian dissenters to trace the negative features of Soviet communism chiefly to Communist doctrine and to recommend, Solzhenitsyn style, a return to traditional Russian religion and culture as a means of national rebirth. Shragin's evaluation of the negative features of contemporary Soviet life—the suppression of individual freedom and cultural creativity in particular—is no less negative than Solzhenitsyn's, but he finds that many of the negative aspects of Soviet communism are really a continuation of elements of traditional Russian culture. Borrowing from Berdyaev, he feels that Communist messianism repeats the notion of Holy Russia, that suppression of the individual by the community and indifference to real freedom were parts of the Russian cultural tradition that were reinterpreted and reapplied within the framework of Communist ideology. He quotes repeatedly from foreign descriptions of Russia in earlier centuries, and from such literary figures as Saltykov-Shchedrin, Gogol, and Dostoevski, to portray negative features of Russian life that can be found almost unchanged today.

Shragin finds two central elements in the Russian

tradition. One is the enormous power of the state over the individual. He borrows heavily from the observations of the great Russian historians on the power of the Muscovite state and its successors. He feels that the Soviet state, particularly by its monopoly of property, has returned to and expanded the traditional Russian autocratic authority, depriving the individual of all independence from state power. The second theme, that of

The Challenge of the Spirit, by Boris Shragin. (Alfred A. Knopf; 262 pp.; \$10.00)

The Secret Betrayal, by Nicolai Tolstoy. (Scribners; 503 pp.; \$14.95)

I Don't Want to Be Brave Anymore, by Ruth Turkow Kaminska. (New Republic Books; 255 pp.; \$10.95)

Christian Religion in the Soviet Union. A Sociological Study, by Christel Lane. (State University of New York Press; 256 pp.; \$29.00)

Politics and Society in the USSR, 2d ed., by David Lane. (New York University Press; xvii + 622 pp.; \$25.00/10.95)

Russia, The Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History, by John Lewis Gaddis. (John Wiley & Sons; 309 pp.; \$12.95/6.95)

the peculiar characteristics of Russian Christianity, emphasizes the cultural parochialism generated in Russia by the isolation from Greek culture. Shragin describes Russian Christianity as "a weak and superficial form of religious faith," and is particularly struck by the lack of a sense of personal responsibility in Russian religious life, which he feels explains the slowness of Russian culture "to discover individualism and its corollaries—philosophy, art, and self-examination in general."

Shragin provides a very effective historical sketch of the origins and role of the Russian intelligentsia, that

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small segment of the Westernized, educated class that concerned itself with social and political questions and sought to direct the course of Russian reform. He expresses great admiration for the intelligentsia's courage and moral commitment, and much pleasure at the revival of the intelligentsia that followed the Stalin era. Yet, like other distinguished critics of the intelligentsia earlier in this century, he comments upon its negative traditions, one of which explains much of the Communist impulse to politicize culture. The intelligentsia, like their Soviet successors, failed to understand what Gershenzon described as "the primacy both in theory and in practice of spiritual life over the outward forms of society...[that] the individual is the sole creative force of human existence, and that it, and not the...political order, is the only solid basis for every social structure."

Shragin's message is a serious and important one. It is clear enough, as he notes, that communism in Russia has been profoundly influenced by national traditions and popular attitudes, that a handful of political leaders could not have imposed the whole system unaided. His message for the Russian dissidents is that they must beware of unconscious continuation of cultural attitudes deriving from their Russian past:

Having cast out "Soviet man," the dissidents have to exorcise other, less clear-cut forms of the same entity. The faults of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia...are present today in an exaggerated and repulsive form.

He feels concern for the continuing effects of "relics of inner enslavement or disrespect for other's freedom," but still feels that the dissidents have achieved their most important aim: "There is now a moral potential in our society that even the state cannot ignore."

The brutalities of the Stalin era will not down; Khrushchev's effort to exorcise the dictator's ghost by controlled "de-Stalinization" failed to contain the flood of revulsion among the Soviet intelligentsia. Only the Brezhnev policies of harassment, imprisonment, and forced deportation could (almost) do the job. But the most illustrious deportee, Solzhenitsyn, has also pricked the Western conscience by recalling the fate of the two million Russians forcibly returned to the Soviet Union to face death and imprisonment at the end of World War II by the terms of the agreement negotiated between Eden and Molotov in 1944 and confirmed by Churchill and Stalin at Yalta in 1945.

Nikolai Tolstoy uses new Foreign Office documents to tell this appalling story in *The Secret Betrayal* and to explore the question of official responsibility for it. The policy was based on a complete misapprehension of the nature of the Stalin system and its postwar policy objectives. Exploring the implementation of that policy reveals many problems in concealing it from the British public, though the task was made simpler by the fact that "British reporters, with or without editorial prompting, were reluctant to print news unfavourable to the Soviet system..." It is sad to learn that the British Foreign Office had no obligation under the official agreement to use force to compel

return of former Soviet citizens. As a senior Foreign Office official explained it, "the basis of our policy is one of expediency."

There is little doubt that the behavior of the Foreign Office in this matter was profoundly reprehensible. There is some relief in the discovery that resistance to the policy was strong in the U.S. State Department, and in learning that some states (e.g., Liechtenstein) behaved splendidly in protecting displaced Soviet citizens. But the consistent concealment and poor judgment of the British Foreign Office, and the appalling behavior of Swedish authorities toward their Soviet refugees, leave the reader feeling that governments of free countries were impressively stupid and callow in dealing with refugees from a totalitarian society. Nor does it provide comfort to learn that the Eden-Molotov agreement had much the same consequences for Soviet citizens abroad as the agreement between Hitler and Stalin for repatriation of their respective political opponents. At least in the latter case there was the practical argument of reciprocity. Every argument presented by the British Government in defense of the policy, from the security of British POWs in Soviet hands to the terms of the Geneva Convention, is wholly discredited by Tolstoy.

There is an impressive number of personal memoirs by people who experienced arrest and imprisonment on political charges in Stalin's time. Somehow the reading of such memoirs, however difficult, still has immense value. Indeed, because of the difficulty of understanding the Stalin nightmare in mere statistics, one might wish that memoirs such as Ruth Turkow Kaminska's *I Don't Want to Be Brave Anymore* were more widely read.

Ruth Kaminska first entered the Soviet Union as a refugee from the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and enjoyed the best that Soviet life could offer through much of the war as she and her husband, a famous trumpeter and band leader, were given every opportunity to pursue their careers as entertainers. Their experience is an impressive testimony to the ability of the Soviet state to provide privileges for the élite in a time of unbelievable hardship for the many. What is astonishing is the degree to which features of Soviet life in those times—the black market in scarce goods, the shortages of housing, medical care, etc.—persist today. Ruth Kaminska's long period of imprisonment and exile was borne with a fortitude and imagination that are an inspiration. Her descriptions of places—especially wartime Siberia and Central Asia—are tremendously vivid, as are the details of life in prison and in exile.

The book tells much about the persecution of Yiddish culture after the war, including the arrests of Yiddish leaders, the closing of schools, and the limitations on the use of the Yiddish language. Coming from Poland, with its large Yiddish-speaking community, Ruth Kaminska felt the full tragedy of Stalin's effort to eradicate Russian Yiddish culture. There are two episodes in the book that have special significance. The first occurred when, after the end of her exile, Ruth Kaminska visited the Peter and Paul Fortress in Leningrad and was shown the "terrible" conditions in which the czarist prisoners of

the nineteenth century were held. To her, the neat cells with their beds, tables, and lamps looked like luxury compared to Soviet prisons, a powerful irony that caused her almost to erupt in hysterical laughter. The second episode concerned her long effort to gain the right to reside in Moscow near her only child, from whom she had been separated for years. Though there was no defensible charge against her, the mere fact of having been a prisoner isolated her from Soviet life and from her child. Her experience with the Russian bureaucracy as she pursued her Moscow residence permit tells one how much did not change after Stalin.

The sociological study of religion in the USSR is a recent enterprise, and *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union* is a pioneering work in the field that reviews both published and unpublished reports of religious bodies and believers, seeking to determine the impact of the Soviet environment and Soviet policy upon the Christian religion. The study covers the Russian Orthodox Church and other major denominations, deals with a variety of sects, and finally treats the special problems of the various "national" churches—Lutheran, Mennonite, and Lithuanian Catholic.

Dr. Lane notes that many of the changes of the Soviet period, particularly urbanization and industrialization, are similar to those that have affected religion in non-Communist societies. However, the harshness of the measures of economic, social, and cultural change, and the official policy of persecution of religion, have had special effects on Soviet life. She notes the persistence of an extraordinarily wide spectrum of religious groups, and the "archaic character of these religious collectivities." She attributes this to the policy of a government that assured itself that these "groups were completely untouched by any modernizing or ecumenical ideas," and whose "aspiration to total ideological control coupled with a ruthless political style has called forth sects equally totalitarian and hostile in their worldly responses..." She holds that it is impossible to find a parallel situation in Western societies since the late Middle Ages, when sectarian groups challenged the monopoly of the Catholic Church.

The study finds a wide regional variety in the prevalence of religious belief. Information on the Russian Orthodox Church and the Old Believers indicates that about 25 per cent of the population of Russia proper appears still to profess belief, though the proportion is much higher in rural than in urban areas. The Ukraine shows a much higher level of religiosity, with about 40 per cent, though the highest level is in Lithuania, with 50 to 60 per cent.

Dr. Lane's statistics confirm the visual impression that among both Orthodox and sectarians in the Soviet Union a very high proportion is elderly (50 per cent over sixty years of age). She notes, however, the "discrimination in career advancement because of religious commitment" that discourages younger people from open identification with religion. The question that arises in the study of religion in a society with great religious diversi-

ty, but where an antireligious policy has prevailed, is why the reactions to that pressure vary greatly among religious groups. The Orthodox Church compares poorly with the Catholic Church in resisting pressure because of "the underdevelopment of the ideological determination in Orthodox religion [that]...leaves believers with no theoretical position...." Even unusual religious practices such as the Adventists' sabbath or the Pentecostals' glossolalia "are....effective in maintaining barriers between the religious collectivity and socialist society."

There is much else of interest in this fine book. The paradox that emerges from it is that a regime that professes to believe that all religion is backward and obscurantist has followed policies that have greatly increased the element of obscurantism in religious life. This is not to affirm that persecution has had only negative consequences; the heroism and devotion of religious leaders and followers in the face of persecution are admirable. But the negative consequences of the official policy are almost overwhelming.

David Lane has written a comprehensive and informative survey of *Politics and Society in the USSR*. The book begins, appropriately, with a survey of the content and origins of Communist ideology, and then moves to a history of Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution and an historical treatment of major developments since 1917. These chapters are followed by topical chapters on political institutions, theories of Soviet society, the economy, the family, social classes, nationality, religion, and the educational system. The book also includes texts of a number of very useful documents; it is a good introduction to Soviet life and institutions.

For all its virtues, and they are many, the book tends to understate many of the negative elements of Soviet life and institutions. This feature results in part from the effort to treat Soviet and Western institutions comparatively, in part from a somewhat strained fairmindedness in commenting on Soviet affairs, and in part from a penchant for a Marxist interpretation of Western society and institutions. Thus, the comparative commentary on Soviet and British trade unions gives the impression that the latter have become "more like their Soviet counterparts." Commenting on the labor camps, Dr. Lane writes that "the conditions in the camps have caused much indignation in some circles." (Does he find such indignation misguided?) In the commentary on theories of Soviet society, the totalitarian theory is quietly dismissed as irrelevant because it stresses "the more horrendous and illiberal aspects of Soviet rule" and because it exaggerates the similarity between Fascist and Communist ideology. At times this discussion approaches the inane, as when it is asserted that "the rates of economic growth and change were much lower than in Germany."

The penchant for a Marxist or quasi-Marxist interpretation (along with a not inconsiderable amount of apology for Soviet policy) is evident in such remarks as the following:

The party acts for the working class and the extraction of surplus by the state is to maintain a high level of investment to ensure all-round industrialisation; while this process has kept down living standards, it is quite different from extracting surplus as a factor source of profit.

The obvious Marxist bias really does weaken the credibility of much of the book, and not only on economic issues.

When the position of the national minorities is discussed, it is asserted that the governments of the Soviet republics are "the equivalent of state governments such as California in the USA." The author's misunderstanding of the significance of the small Jewish population in the Jewish Republic of Birobidzhan is equally startling. Surely the social scientist's concern for comparison and objectivity need not obscure the persistent differences between Soviet and Western societies and institutions.

John Lewis Gaddis's thoughtful and well-written interpretative study, *Russia, the Soviet Union and the United States*, is a very impressive work. Its central theme is the increasing importance of ideology on both sides of the Russian-American relationship, beginning in the late nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. Gaddis states that in the early nineteenth century Russian-American relations were quite good "because both states...gave more weight to interests than ideology in their diplomacy...." It is clear enough from his presentation that American leaders disapproved of Russia's despotic ways. Thus, James Buchanan wrote to President Jackson in 1832 that in Russia there was "no freedom of the Press, no public opinion,...but little political conversation, and that very much guarded." The admiration was reciprocated by the Russian minister who wrote of the United States in 1854 that it was "the principle of anarchy...under the pseudonym of self government."

Clearly, enormous differences in power relations between the infant American republic and the huge Russian empire assured that no major power conflict would develop. Yet, as Gaddis notes, the passions of public opinion that entered American policy toward Russia in the latter nineteenth century, with their focus on human rights, the Jewish question, etc., demonstrate that ideology entered Russian-American relations long before the post-World War II era. But Gaddis clearly disapproves of the tension that ideologically inspired interests and attitudes have imposed upon American-Soviet relations. He concludes that both sides "have little choice but to learn to live with particularism, to learn to live with a different world." 

Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety by John Willett

(Pantheon Books; 272 pp.; \$17.95)

Norris Merchant

John Willett, ex-director of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and something of an authority on Bertolt Brecht, has produced a specialized study of Weimar, supplementing earlier investigations such as Walter Lacqueur's. Where previous analyses tended to be broad cultural inquiries, Willett narrows in on Weimar's revolutionaries. His cast of artistic and political insurgents turns out to be humanists, with innovative minds and styles running to the bracingly tonic. The "metaphysical" Germany of "poets and thinkers," once cited by Madame de Staël, has been pushed into the background. Revolutionary Weimar rejected the Teutonic fanaticisms of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, despised the Third Reich visions of a Moeller van den Bruck, and managed to do without the philosophic

obscurantism of a Martin Heidegger. It wished, in fact, to exorcise the country of such demons, although only a war would finally achieve that.

The words "Art and Politics" in Willett's title may thus be misleading. Much of Weimar's art is missing in this account, as is half or more of its politics. Willett ushers us into a meeting of technicians, experts, and intelligentsia; the walls are lined with revolutionary art—and much of it is magnificent. But there is another Germany outside, whose ideologies are not to be discussed, nor its artwork broached, inside our partisan assembly. We may therefore be deceived about the outer world while inspired by a false security. (One may fancy that something like this actually happened in Weimar itself. The insularity of political sectarians moving only

among their own is nothing unusual.)

Nonetheless, in the early stages of the Weimar Republic *hope* was alive on the Left, and sustained a brilliant outpouring of plays, books, pictures, and architectural experiments. It is just this liberation of creative energy that Willett graphically presents through illustrations accompanied by an instructive and detailed text.

The German revolution that failed in the streets was carried into the epic theatre of Brecht, Piscator, and Max Reinhardt (with Meyerhold coming in for moral support). The Bauhaus school felt its thrust as it moved toward hygienic, functional designs and architectural experiment. The rebellion underpinned novelistic and poetic statements from workers and outcasts—clear and poignant cries of human mis-