

*The resurgence of a tradition unmatched even
in the lands of free speech and xeroxing*

Russia's Critical Intelligentsia

BY WALTER C. CLEMENS, JR.

What happens to a country's genetic/cultural pool when more than fifty million of its citizens—over a fifth of its present population—die unnatural deaths or emigrate over sixty years? What happens when many of these people are among the country's most talented individuals—entrepreneurs, army officers, party leaders, successful farmers, leading writers, and the intelligentsia? And what happens to a country's capacity for critical analysis when, in addition to physical disasters on the scale indicated, it has been sealed off from the rest of the world and severe limits have been placed on discussion within the country?

Such questions struck me as early as 1958 when, as a student at Moscow University, a Soviet history major asked me what Toynbee was all about. She could not obtain his *Study of History* in the original, yet she was assigned to write a term paper about him. How could critical scholarship develop under such conditions? My meetings with leading Soviet scientists at several Pugwash conferences on science and world affairs in the early 1960s did little to dispel such anxieties. Overlooking the Party hacks appearing at such conferences, one could see that some Soviet natural scientists were deeply concerned about the social consequences of scientific and technological developments. But these experiences did not alter my impression from Moscow University days that social sciences and history were virtually dead in the USSR and that those who concentrated in these subjects were at the bottom of the heap intellectually, with specialists in Marxism-Leninism relegated to the lowest ring of a Dante-esque deep freeze.

The appearance in 1968 of Andrei Sakharov's manifesto *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom* fundamentally challenged any notion that the capacity for social criticism in the USSR was altogether dead. Here was the man who had played the leading role in developing Russia's hydrogen bomb not only criticizing his country's domestic and foreign policies but proposing a thirty-year plan for Soviet-American cooperation to prevent war and rebuild the planet! With his intellectual gifts Sakharov could immediately grasp the implications of Western social science writings on arms

control, problems of world hunger, and the need for international cooperation. He challenged official Soviet orthodoxy on many points, contending that antimissile defenses could only accelerate arms racing and that world population growth could not be viewed with equanimity. Sakharov's comments on Soviet domestic society also revealed an ability to assimilate and evaluate some of the unofficial history then being produced on, for example, the purges. He explicitly endorsed the principle of convergence, blending the best of Soviet and Western systems—an idea that was and remains taboo for Kremlin ideologists.

Though Sakharov was clearly brave and idealistic, he gathered protection from the fact that he was the most decorated man in the USSR (a testament to his scientific contributions) and a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Other Soviet citizens in the late 1960s took far greater risks to show that they disagreed with basic Kremlin policies at home and abroad. Some months after Sakharov's manifesto circulated in mimeograph, other Soviet citizens demonstrated openly in Red Square to protest the invasion of Czechoslovakia. They were dealt with harshly, but voices of protest continued to criticize regime policies on many fronts.

Throughout the 1960s the creative arts provided a vehicle for social criticism in the USSR. Solzhenitsyn, for example, was able to publish exposés not only of *gulag* but of other features of Soviet life persisting after Stalin. Evtushenko and Voznesensky were in the forefront of younger poets whose satires about the West were double-edged, cutting away at Soviet hypocrisy as well. Indeed, some of their work was explicitly directed at contemporary Soviet targets even when presented as an attack on the Stalinist past. Similarly, I found on several visits to Moscow in the late 1960s that official cant could be lampooned and fresh ideals presented the Soviet stage. The avant-garde "Taganka Theatre" took works by Brecht, Mayakovsky, Arthur Miller, Voznesensky, and others and made them highly relevant to contemporary Soviet life. Scrawled on the wall of the director's office was Arthur Miller's apt comment: "You have revived my faith in the theatre."

LIKE PRINCE ANDREI AT AUSTERLITZ

Despite these portents, it was not until the initial trickle of *samizdat* became a flood in the 1970s that the outside observer could be sure that the capacity for

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historical, social, and political criticism was pulsating strongly in the USSR. Sakharov's 1968 manifesto was followed by others—some by him alone, some by Sakharov with others, some by his critics. *The Chronicle of Current Events*, published surreptitiously in different parts of the USSR, kept tabs on the words and deeds of many dissidents; *samizdat* continued and was supplemented by *tamizdat*—works by Soviet authors published abroad (*tam*—“over there”). Both the variety and quantity of dissident expressions confounded outsiders accustomed to thinking of the USSR as one gray monolith.

What unofficial Soviet writers have lacked in methodology and access to data, they have compensated by their determination to get to the bottom of things. Many have sought what Thoreau called in *Walden* “a point d'appui, below freshlet and frost and fire, a place where you might find a wall or state, or set a lamppost safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshlet of shams and appearance had gathered from time to time.”

Many dissident historians have been reluctant to advance grand theories, preferring to let the facts—already eloquent—speak for themselves. In the best spirit of scientific construction, many *samizdat* writers have sought to build a cumulative fund of knowledge relating their limited contributions to existing published accounts, both in the USSR and abroad. The most notable of these has been Roy Medvedev, a Marxist historian who still hopes for internal reform to return the Soviet regime to Leninist ideals. His two-volume *Political Diary*, published in Amsterdam, testifies to the way in which some if not all Soviet dissident scholars have labored, aware that they have had only limited access to the facts and that it is not yet time for generalization from isolated particulars.

Constructive criticism and creative reforms have also been pushed within the USSR, sometimes with patronage reaching into the Politburo. Writing between the lines of the censored press and sometimes directly, Alexander Yanov in the late 1960s and early 1970s managed to advocate progressive reform whether discussing collective farms, Slavophiles, the cinema, or philosophy. His aspirations were summed up in his review of a new book on Hegel:

All, or almost all of us, at some time...suddenly perceive through the intricately woven scheme of everyday affairs...some inexorable and terrifying connection between things....At these moments we too become independent thinkers...like Prince Andrei on the battlefield of Austerlitz....But, alas, the moment passes, for to think independently and originally is an art, a science.

Like Sakharov, Yanov contended that independent thought and initiative are necessary if the Soviet system is ever to become more efficient. Humane ideals, he suggested, can be pragmatically justified.

This lust for intellectual freedom is by no means confined to philosophers, historians, and journalists; I have seen it in all kinds of sensitive and thinking persons now free to drink in the information and ideas

circulating in the world at large. Their searching, to be sure, is usually goal-oriented. Soviets of Jewish extraction often seek to know more about anti-Semitic movements in the USSR; Estonians want to know more about the subjection of their homeland; anthropologists want to buttress their knowledge of ethnic minorities in Siberia with the theoretical and comparative insights of Western science. Some ex-Soviets want to ascertain to what extent the West has sold out to the Kremlin, appeasing Moscow's imperial appetites by sacrificing individual or national rights in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Their quest is by no means “detached,” but it is intense and represents an effort to continue and refine the information and critical skills they had sought to develop in the USSR.

A MUTUAL HOSTAGE RELATIONSHIP

My respect for the capacity for criticism within the Soviet Union today has been strengthened by a year's research on Soviet views of global interdependence carried out at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in Washington, D.C. This study led to many conversations with Soviet officials and scholars visiting the United States, with recent Soviet émigrés to the West, and to a wider and deeper look at the official Soviet press as well as *sam-* and *tamizdat*.

One visitor to Washington was Grigory Sviatov, a naval officer who has become one of Moscow's defense intellectuals, like those cultivated in U.S. think tanks. Sviatov was quite unlike most of the Soviet disarmament specialists I had met before, even at Pugwash. Not only did he know the Western literature on arms control, but he seemed to understand its assumptions and to have internalized them to such a point that he could propose compromise solutions for disputed problems in SALT II, empathetic to U.S. as well as Soviet perspectives.

Talking with Sviatov and other Soviet visitors, including the directors of two Moscow research institutes, I was struck by how often they granted that certain problems of today are “complex” (*slozhno*). In context this usually meant that old answers, including those fostered by Leninism, were no longer adequate. Reality is multifaceted and often contradictory, making it futile to count on simple, one-factor explanations or solutions.

Reading various Soviet publications, I found that, even in print, Soviet authors often characterize present realities within the USSR and worldwide as “complex” or even “contradictory.” By 1976-77 Soviet authors were holding that there is a “genuine” interdependence of states cultivated by the USSR with its allies and friends, and a “sham” interdependence foisted off on others by Western neoimperialists. Beyond such polemics, however, was Moscow's recognition, in the official press and in East-West dialogues, that the USSR has long been interdependent with the West in a mutual hostage relationship and that it is becoming so in other realms as well: economics, technology, and environmental protection.

Testifying to the greater suppleness of Soviet official thought, the official press speaks not only of interdependence but of many other processes characterized by

interaction and reciprocity. "mutual gain," "mutual complementarity," "mutual penetration," "reciprocal coordination."

Soviets who admit complexity and are not afraid of interdependence are also more likely to borrow Western terminology and methodology, even in the social sciences. In the era of détente they tend to use *lider*, *biznesmen*, and *finansist* rather than more traditional, pejorative terms such as *kapitalist*. Some engage in *futurologiia* and study Herman Kahn and the Club of Rome.

Affirmation of complexity extends also to the arts, even the most mass art of all, the cinema. Seeking to explain why many recent Soviet films no longer extol some "socialist hero," a professor at the USSR Academy of Social Sciences told me that Soviet cinema now seeks to portray the complexity of the individual psyche as well as society. Thus, a recent film explains why a young man goes berzerk when he returns from military service, where he had been given up for lost in Siberia, to find his sweetheart has married someone else.

ROOTS

A young historian from Leningrad, Vladimir Brovkin, assisted my research at the Kennan Institute. Reflecting on the forces that shaped and opened his mind while in the USSR, Brovkin recalled that many classic Russian writers of the past are not banned. Increasingly, as Soviet scholars examine their own "roots," writers such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Pavel Miliukov are added to the ranks of those whom one can read and perhaps, in time, cite. A Leningrad student might also be able to read Alexis de Tocqueville if not Raymond Aron. "Anything banned or difficult to obtain is more interesting," Brovkin adds. "Oppression may stimulate some writers, but it also goads some readers, especially when there is a glaring gap between official realities and personal observation." Individual searching might have led to sudden or slow death in Stalin's time; the penalties today are not as severe.

Contemporary Soviet historians have also benefited from conversations with survivors of climactic events, stimulating chroniclers today as they once did medieval monks. The acquaintance of a few scholars with actual documents preserved in archives has also contributed to a healthy respect for historical reality as contrasted to Party line. Some receive permission to read works otherwise kept in library vaults.

James Billington, author of *The Icon and the Axe*, notes that many Soviet scholars survived the purges by retreating to some quiet niche as archivists, publishing in an obscure serial such as *Kniga (The Book)*, and eventually having some influence in the many institutions of higher learning that mushroomed throughout the USSR after World War II. Still, as I could see in my own academic advisor at Moscow University, Professor Boris E. Shtein, a colleague of Maxim Litvinov in the interwar diplomatic service, some survivors from the earlier intelligentsia were quite subdued by their long tribulations. Shtein, having been rehabilitated in the 1950s, was in his sixties when he emerged as a professor and was nervous lest I get us both in trouble by finding inconvenient quotes in Engels or Lenin.

Though personal contact between the carriers of the older tradition and the voices of the new criticism may often have been important, a number of the fresh voices developed and broke through on their own. Western scholars can barely imagine the conditions in which a Solzhenitsyn or a Yanov had to work and produce. Deprived of the critical mass that Karl Deutsch reports has been essential for social science innovators in the West, without xerox machines or even a working space where papers could be left undisturbed through meal times, writing not just for substantive/stylistic quality but also to get by the censors, in fear of KGB sweeps of manuscripts despoised in drawers or even underground—such writers have needed a tremendous drive to surmount obstacles much more compelling than, say, those that Eldridge Cleaver faced when writing from a California jail.

I suspect that the driving force behind much contemporary Soviet writing has been a personal experience or set of experiences so searing that it gave direction to the author's life and a determination to find that very *point d'appui* of which Thoreau wrote. Thus, Solzhenitsyn felt a debt to his fellow *gulag*-mates who entrusted their experiences and memories to him but did not survive; Sakharov has probably wanted to use for peace and freedom the same mind and talents that once helped perfect the hydrogen bomb; others, such as Pavel Litvinov (grandson of Stalin's commissar of foreign affairs in the 1930s), may be deeply aware of wrongs done to their progenitors as well as to themselves by the regime.

DILIGENCE, COURAGE, BRILLIANCE, AND BLINDSPOTS

The fact is that Russia's mass society, governed by almost faceless bureaucrats, has yielded individuals whose creative brilliance is not excelled even in the lands of free speech and xeroxing. Tempered in the crucibles of intense personal suffering—one's own or that of others—critical thought in Russia has bloomed later than in the West, making up in quality what it has lacked in precocity or numbers. The quality of individual Russian minds, active first in natural science and then in social criticism, has been unexcelled from the turn of the century to the present day. The same holds true in many fields of natural science and mathematics, as well as in literature, dance, and music. Though Russia's greatest minds have often emigrated to permit their creativity to blossom unfettered by czarist or Communist repression, their talents took shape and usually neared peak performance in Russia. While the names of Russia's artistic luminaries leap quickly to mind, some social scientists of world renown also emigrated from the USSR in the 1920s, including Pitirim Sorokin and Nobel economics laureate Wassily Leontief. Russia's riches thus became the world's gain.

It is true that official historians have not taken advantage of recurrent "thaws" (for example, in the Khrushchev decade) to expose the excesses of Stalinism. Nor has the Party seen fit to release material to fill the gaps and correct the imbalances left by Khrushchev's 1956 "secret speech" on the Stalin era. But many aspects of Stalinism have been ventilated in official Soviet novels and poetry, while unofficial historians—led by Sol-

zhenitsyn and Medvedev—have diligently and courageously uncovered and analyzed *gulag* and the great terror.

The memoirs of Soviet marshals and admirals, anxious to explain World War II setbacks, have ripped from Stalin's shoulders the mantle of military genius. Less ostentatiously, Soviet economic historians have begun to examine the costs of forced collectivization from 1928 to the present. But the greatest memoir of all is that of Nikita Sergeevich, dictated after his 1964 retirement. *Khrushchev Remembers* casts a critical look not only at the Stalinist years but at their continuing legacy. Though self-righteous and distorted (like most autobiographies), Khrushchev's are perhaps the only true memoirs of any modern head of state—not ghosted or polished by teams of assistants.

Several factors limit critical analysis in the USSR today. The political climate remains unfavorable, information is hard to come by, and training facilities in universities are still dominated by ideological considerations, though graduate research in such policy-oriented institutes as the Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada, Institute of World Economics and International Relations, and Institute of the International Workers' Movement offers freer study conditions. Many Soviets—dissidents as well as officially supported scholars—suffer from ideological blindspots, sometimes unconscious acceptance of economic determinism, wishful thinking that economic development will necessarily produce social progress, and racist attitudes toward non-white inhabitants of the USSR and the world generally.

On the other hand, critical analysis in the USSR has benefited from traditional strengths in natural science and mathematics and the Russian genius for operating at the interface between literary criticism and history. But those assets have also spawned certain shortcomings in Russian social analysis. The first tradition exalts the mechanical and objective; the second, the mystical and subjective. Good social science requires both inspiration and systematization, but a synthesis has rarely occurred in the USSR, either in *samizdat* or official publications.

The luminaries of Western social science, by contrast, have managed to harness idealistic motives with vast erudition, poetic vision with scientific validity checks, quantitative analysis with literate expression, scholarly detachment with policy-relevance. What these Westerners share is the freedom to exchange and express ideas, combined with affluent research conditions. What they lack, generally, is the *adversity* that has honed the Russian soul, motivating titans of the spirit to overcome all material and political obstacles to tell their tales. Western social scientists, typically, have seen war, poverty, and repression but have suffered very little personally from man's inhumanity to man. They have seen enough to want deeply to overcome these phenomena, but have not been seriously restrained or crippled by them. For Russians, generally, the reverse is true. They have suffered directly, while knowing social science only at a distance.

But what of the future? What if, as Yanov warns, the Brezhnev regime is succeeded by neo-Stalinists who

clamp down at home and try to supplant East-West interdependence with an inward-looking neo-Byzantine empire? If a cold war overshadows détente, anti-establishment elements within the USSR and Eastern Europe would likely become more radical. I fear, however, that such conditions would hold back the growth of objective, reform-oriented social analysis in official circles as well as in the *samizdat* underground. Both factions would be radicalized, destroying the conditions needed to bring critical thought in Russia to a higher stage. Dissidents' pain might increase, but not the contacts and tolerance cultivated in the years of détente. Ironically, a flowering of détente could weaken the intensity of dissident thought within the USSR; eroding the passion that has sustained it for over a decade. Détente or no, dissident movements in non-Russian republics are likely to become more critical of Kremlin theory and practice.

LESS PASSION, MORE SYSTEM

It is important to increase mutual comprehension and dialogue between the Kremlin and its critics; cold war conflicts tend to polarize them, threatening again to extinguish the critical flame. It is important also for dissident and official Soviet analysts to receive from and contribute to the global fund of data and ideas on ways to cope with contemporary problems and improve the quality of life worldwide. Surely Soviet scholars should contribute to the environmental studies of the Club of Rome and the international arms control research conducted in Stockholm and London, rather than be reduced to cavils-at-a-distance.

Sustained movement toward greater interdependence between Moscow and the West, on balance, may be counted on to strengthen the Soviet regime's appreciation of the "complexities" and "reciprocities" inherent in today's world. Recognition that reality is multifaceted and that the great chain of being is interdependent will make diplomacy more realistic and critical analysis more trenchant—in the West as well as in the USSR.

Dissent has helped keep the mind as well as the soul alive in the USSR. But for critical analysis to reach higher levels of quality and quantity, Soviet intellectual life now needs less passion and more system; less commitment and more information; less conspiracy and more openness; less confrontation and more collaborative dialogue between policymakers and social scientists; less ideological struggle with the West and more sharing of experiences. Which course prevails depends mainly on forces within the Soviet Union, but scholars and statesmen in the West can help tilt the balance.

