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Reviews

Dissidents Among Dissidents

- Reviews section -

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In his important book a must read for the left *Dissidents Among Dissidents*, Ilya Budraitskis, who teaches at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and the Institute of Contemporary Art Moscow, writes,

This 'geopoliticization' of Russia, which serves to obscure social conflicts within the country and above all, class antagonisms has unfortunately also influenced parts of the Western left, who have all too often been ready to excuse the actions of the contemporary Russian regime on grounds of its 'anti-imperialist' character. (1)

With that opening, Budraitskis raises some fundamental questions about how the Western left understands developments in Russia, and how it relates to the new socialist left there. These are actually old questions in new guise. For most of the Soviet period, Stalinism both in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and among Western Marxists blocked dialogue between socialists on each side of the iron curtain. Convinced that the Soviet government, even if problematic, represented a socialist camp, many leftists in the United States imposed on themselves an ignorance of what "really existing socialism" meant for working people, for intellectuals, and for left-wing dissidents within Soviet society. Of course, Soviet censors restricted information, making ignorance an easier option.

Dissidents Among Dissidents opens with a collection of short essays on Putin's worldview and the ideological underpinnings of modern elite Russian politics. The works of Ivan Ilyin, the early twentieth century Russian conservative philosopher, have influenced the thinking of modern Russian officials. Decontextualized quotations from Ilyin appear frequently in Putin's speeches. Ilyin believed that a strong state willing to use violence against opponents was necessary to protect the "Good" against an evil he associated with Western individualism and personal freedom.

According to Ilyin's doctrine, every participant in the ruling system, regardless of personal motives, is involved in the substantial Good, the divine 'power of obviousness', whether they be prison wardens, police officers, prosecutors or FSB [Federal Security Service] generals... (64).

Ilyin had supported the White armies in the Russian civil war, hoping that the triumphant counter-revolution would renew the political authority of the Orthodox Church. After his deportation in 1921, he became a strong supporter of Italian and German fascism. Of course, state bureaucrats likely haven't read Ilyin, and Putin's reflections on the philosopher's work may have been authored entirely by speech writers, but the rediscovery of Ilyin's ideas seems to provide justification for the increased use of police torture to extract false confessions.

Putin's growing adherence to ultra-conservatism did not correspond to a mounting political threat from within twenty-first century Russia but to alarm signals from outside Russia's border and the Kremlin's fear that domestic unrest could lead to a "color revolution." After the first Maidan revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Moscow passed a series of anti-revolutionary laws in the name of protecting the public against dangerous influences.

[O]n the anti-revolutionary map of the world, which finds its roots in the age of monarchies, the people are completely infantilized: these 'children' cannot understand their real desires and needs, and fatherly authority figures must both punish them and protect them from seduction. (38)

As his third term began in 2012, Putin committed himself to the defense of economic neoliberalism and an alliance

between an increasingly repressive state and the Orthodox Church. Vladimir Medinsky, minister of culture until 2020, led the crusade to withdraw state funding from cultural work he considered unpatriotic or which promoted transgender or gay rights. Conservative political groups strongly supported a cultural crackdown, warning that unpatriotic art "would produce the future participants of a Russian Maidan." (54) This was the background to the arrest of Pussy Riot, the feminist punk rock group that held an unauthorized performance within Moscow's Christ the Savior cathedral in 2012.

The Russian culture war also dominated the official narrative of the meaning of the Russian Revolution. The Organizing Committee for the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution brought together conservative academics and journalists who denounced the Bolsheviks as promulgators of a dangerous utopian mythology. Yet, borrowing from nineteenth and twentieth century French conservatism, they reinterpreted the revolution as ultimately reinvigorating the Russian empire. In this retelling, Lenin played the role of pernicious mythologizer and Stalin that of the redeemer.

Dissidents among dissidents

The second half of Budraitskis' work reviews the history of mostly underground leftists during the post-war period and the reemergence of a left in the post-Soviet years. This history is not well-known outside of Russia. Soviet repression restricted the circulation of left-wing ideas, while most of the Western left was uninterested in knowing about these dissidents during the Cold War.

In the USSR's final decades, the most widespread form of dissent was a social critique based on the mismatch between declared Soviet principles and Soviet reality, and against this backdrop, it was anti-communism that appeared extremely marginal. (104-5)

Budraitskis begins with a review of the efforts of socialist dissidents during the Nikita Khrushchev "Thaw" period (1956-64). Influenced by growing opposition to corruption and inequality, the Hungarian and Polish uprisings of 1956-57, and the brutal suppression of the 1962 strike in Novocherkassk, Russia, opposition socialists launched a variety of protests during the Thaw. "During this time youth groups emerged in large cities and regional centres that focused on an independent analysis of society from a Marxist perspective, and on the search for a strategy of socialist reform from below through the development of industrial democracy and workers' self-management." (108)

Some of these dissident youth groups believed they could work for change within the Communist Party. Others believed the system could be reformed but also tried to mount pressure from outside official circles. Some began gathering at Mayakovsky Square in Moscow in 1958.

The tense social background of the Thaw ensured that key questions whether the USSR was a workers' state, whose interests it defended, what the real social structure of Soviet society was and, finally, whether there was a Socialist alternative to the unlimited power of the bureaucracy were ever more relevant. (110-11)

The young dissidents of the Thaw immersed themselves in the works of Marx and Lenin and were influenced by reformist Communists in Eastern Europe. Despite his denunciations of Stalinism, Khrushchev's government was still repressive. Left-wing dissidents had to meet in small clandestine groups and feared recruiting too many followers. In 1959, the KGB broke up the Mayakovsky Square gatherings and sent several leaders to psychiatric hospitals. Nonetheless, many of the protesters regrouped by 1960.

In Leningrad in 1956-57, the Vail group attracted young left socialists. Like their counterparts in Moscow, many were interested in early socialist debates as they sought alternatives to official communism. They read the works of Mikhail Bakunin and the Workers' Opposition that challenged Lenin from the left in the early 1920s, along with texts by leaders of the nineteenth century terrorist group Narodnaya Volya and the largely peasant Socialist Revolutionary Party. The Vail group published "Theses on the Hungarian Revolution" and "The Truth About Hungary," which emphasized the role of workers' councils. They counterposed the rule of workers' councils to that of the bureaucratic Communist state, which they regarded as state capitalist.

The KGB broke up the Vail group in 1958, but two years later a handful of dissident members of the Komsomol (the Communist youth group) formed the Union of Communards in Leningrad. Their leaders wrote "From the Dictatorship of the Bureaucracy to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" in 1963. They considered themselves Leninists and quoted from his book *State and Revolution*. They identified the bureaucracy as a new form of ruling class, but progressive relative to capitalism. Defining themselves as the "revolutionary communist opposition," they called for equality of pay, the elimination of the KGB, a multi-party system, and the end of the nomenklatura. The leaders were arrested in 1965.

Budraitskis explains,

It is important to understand the unique significance of this work [*State and Revolution*] by Lenin for the generations of the 1950s and 1960s, in developing a critical approach to the reality of Soviet socialism. For example, [one dissident] recalled the Leningrad worker 'who distributed copies of *State and Revolution* ... on the shop floor. In each copy were underlined in red pencil the demands for the election of all officials, for their replaceability and for their salary to be restricted to the pay of an average worker. (130)

After their arrests, many of the young socialists would reconnect in prison and continue circulating ideas.

In the 1960s and 1970s, official data indicate the rise of hundreds of dissident groups, roughly a third of which identified as socialist. Many of them circulated samizdat publications and began to read the works of Western Marxists, including those influenced by Eurocommunism and the Frankfurt School.

Roy Medvedev began to publish his samizdat Political Diary to influence "party-democrats" in the hopes of reforming the regime. He published essays on Western Marxism and the suppression of the Prague Spring. But by the 1970s, Medvedev found himself on the left wing of a growing divide among Russian dissidents. Medvedev and other socialists faced attacks both from Western-oriented liberals such as Andrei Sakharov and from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who hoped for a revival of an Orthodox theocracy and denounced both Marxism and liberalism.

Elkon Gergieveich Leikin, alias Alexander Zimin, was among the few Russian dissident socialists who had direct connections with west European Marxist groups. A veteran of the anti-Stalinist oppositions of the 1920s, his *The Origins of Stalinism* was published by the French Trotskyist League of Revolutionary Communists in the early 1980s. He was one of a handful of remaining Old Bolsheviks who insisted that the Soviet leadership had betrayed the Russian Revolution.

In 1977, the Young Socialists formed at the Moscow State University. Boris Kagarlitsky was among its members. They accessed restricted archives and studied the works of Leon Trotsky and Antonio Gramsci, as well as contemporary Western Marxists and Eurocommunists. They believed that the left intelligentsia would need to spark a new workers' revolution, so they polemicized against the growing liberal wing of the dissident movement. The KGB broke up their group and imprisoned some members. While Kagarlitsky made several attempts to form socialist organizations in the 1980s, others moved rightward during the perestroika period.

Dissidents Among Dissidents

From the Mikhail Gorbachev era to the present, Russian leftists have had less connection to a socialist past than is common among leftists in the United States, Budraitskis observes.

Stalinism severed the historical thread of the Russian revolutionary tradition, and only fragments of this tradition were retained, even by the post-Stalinist Thaw generation of the 1950s and 1960s. (167-68)

In the late 1980s, some anti-Stalinist leftists formed Trotskyist and anarchist currents. Meanwhile a peculiar form of populist Stalinism emerged, both among party leaders opposed to Gorbachev's reforms and workers who were angry about corruption. After 1991, the neo-Stalinists fought against the pro-capitalist "shock therapy" measures of the Boris Yeltsin administration. They formed the core of the supporters of the Russian parliament in its violent clash with the president in 1993 before reuniting with the Communist Party. The party won an increasing number of seats in parliamentary elections over the course of the 1990s before veering toward Orthodox nationalism.

This partly reflected the characteristics of the Party's activist and electoral base, which brought together impoverished pensioners, the mass intelligentsia (doctors, teachers, scientific researchers) who lost out as a result of market reforms, lumpenized workers of former Soviet enterprises, the nostalgic middle ranks of the bureaucracy, a sector of the managerial class and army officers. (173)

Over the last twenty-five years, the socialist left has had episodic successes, supporting labor strikes in the 1990s and opposing Putin's austerity measures in the early 2000s. At the same time, a new far right of skinheads and football hooligans arose during the 2000s and targeted minorities, as well as immigrants from central Asia. In response, an antifa movement began and street fights took place between the two sides.

Repression and Putin's response to the Maidan revolt in Ukraine in 2014 divided and weakened the Russian left. Putin was able to cast protesters as Western fifth columnists determined to overturn the traditional values of Russia's silent majority.

The arrest of the members of Pussy Riot, as well as the onset of a homophobic campaign in the state media, contributed to the interpretation of the protest movement in terms of culture wars, with the protesting minority doomed to defeat. (182)

The events in Ukraine in 2014 also split the left. Some leftists believed that the independence movement in Donetsk signaled a coming workers' revolt against a reactionary regime in Kiev. Many Trotskyists, by contrast, believed Ukraine was trapped in an inter-imperialist rivalry between Russia and the West and that the independent leaders of Donetsk and Lugansk represented Russian puppet regimes.

After 2017, the political situation appeared more hopeful. The liberal leader Alexei Navalny called for protests against corruption. While critiquing his pro-market philosophy, most leftists supported the protests. Pension reforms enacted in 2018 substantially increased the number of years Russian workers have to work, sparking growing anger as well.

In addition, a new feminism has emerged since 2010.

An important [feature of] this new wave of Russian feminism is its connection with left-wing anti-capitalist criticism, which manifests itself both at a programmatic level and in practical interaction with left-wing groups. (185)

Budraitskis' work is eye-opening and necessary. Yet it is difficult to read without experiencing a sense of tragedy. The saga of one generation after another of left socialists trying to develop an analysis of the Soviet reality and a

revolutionary democratic alternative is inspiring but raises the inevitable question of why Western leftists knew so little about them and made so few efforts to reach them and engage with them.

Certainly the Soviet state deserves much of the blame. Successive Kremlin regimes arrested socialist activists, forcing them to operate clandestinely and to produce only small numbers of their publications. Censorship also made it difficult to have their works translated or transported outside of the USSR. The history of anti-socialist repression is one of many stories that illustrates that Soviet Communism from Stalin onward, in fact, worked actively to prevent the dissemination of Marxist ideas among the working class, to limit the ability of socialists to interact and utilize Marxism to develop deeper analyses, and to prevent the emergence of genuine internationalism.

Nonetheless, the international left needs to be held to account. From the 1950s through the Gorbachev years, official Communist and other pro-Soviet and Maoist forces dominated global left discourse in most countries. For those on the anti-Stalinist left, convincing social movement activists that the Soviet Union was not a model was made all the more difficult by the majority of leftists who insisted that the USSR was in fact socialist. They reinforced the Cold War narrative that a minority of the left was trying to challenge, making it easier for liberal and right-wing forces to discredit socialism.

Not surprisingly, Stalinists outside the USSR had no interest in knowing about socialist dissidents within the USSR, relating to them, or publicizing their works. Nor were they interested in developing common analyses, common strategies, or a meaningful internationalism. Instead the pro-Soviet left accepted Washington's assessment that the world was divided into hostile camps and chose the Soviet side, with its police and carceral state.

This history is worth recounting as we find today a sizable portion of the international left still identifying with the Russian camp, even if its leadership makes no pretense of being socialist or even vaguely progressive. While the original Cold War forced intellectuals to line up with one of the great powers, there is little compulsion now. As Budraitskis writes,

[C]ontemporary conditions have not forced anyone to write columns against 'Putin's useful idiots' or opposing the supporters of the 'Nazi-Maidan.' In the thrall of some monstrous inertia, intellectuals have been ready to make that false choice for themselves. (29)

Unfortunately, that assessment applies to intellectuals of the modern left as well.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has triggered the growth of a new anti-war movement in Russia and introduced to the world a new generation of Russian feminists and socialists. Budraitskis is an important voice from this new development. It is critical that we not repeat the mistakes of past generations of leftists by aligning ourselves with regimes whose sole virtue is that they oppose our own. Instead we should solidarize with the new left emerging in Russia and Ukraine. As Budraitskis puts it,

Perhaps this is where an internationalist Marxism can regain its significance. It has nothing in common with liberalism's supposed recognition of cultural diversity or the 'illiberal' critique of the unipolar world, instead addressing itself to the unity of the world of the exploited. It is what could be called, following Immanuel Wallerstein, an 'anti-universalist universalism': the rejection of colonial violence, not in favour of particularism and the rhetoric of the 'clash of civilizations' but through the affirmation of authentic equality and solidarity. (18)

Source: [Tempest](#)