

Williams was not a religious man, but he understood the force of religion—better, perhaps, than any other historian except his own mentor, Herbert Butterfield. In that 1962 *tour de force* he used a metaphor that Butterfield was, later, himself to deploy. “You cannot understand”, he said, “the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation without understanding the power of religion. Imagine walking up to a modern house and seeing it lit up, seeing the lights on in every room. Why should it be lit in this way? What gives the light? We know it is electricity. But what is electricity? It is potent, but it cannot be seen. It is in the circuits of that house. Thus was religion in the circuits of Europe in the 16th century. . . .” To a vast learning, Williams added a homeliness of style which made the subject live, as he talked about it.

Homeliness is not the word which comes most readily to hand when one remembers him. He was, as I have said, untidy to extremes. He was riotously unpunctual. I recall a splendid occasion in the early '60s when he summoned three of his students to the Kildare Street Club for drinks. He was to go on to the American Embassy to lunch with President Kennedy. As time rolled by we were, one after another, instructed to go to the telephone to tell the Embassy that Professor Williams was unavoidably delayed. We were awestruck by his casual defiance of power. But he was not grandstanding. “He has a dull mind”, said Williams, “and I want to spend as little time with him as possible.” You may call that bad manners—as it certainly was—but there was a certain undeniable grandeur about it. The President, I should add, waited.

A similar defiance of conventional behaviour was evident throughout his career. When told at Peterhouse that the then Master forbade smoking on his lawn, Williams, day after day, ensconced himself under the Master's favourite oak tree and smoked and read. When, at the age of 28, it was suggested to him that he apply for a junior teaching post at University College, Dublin (one of the then three constituent colleges of the National University of Ireland), he replied by telegram: “WILL ACCEPT CHAIR. WILLIAMS.” Whether outfaced by this effrontery, or wise beyond imagining, the powers that were made him Professor of Modern History.

Whether by intention or not the outcome was dramatic. Williams immediately formed an alliance with the Professor of Modern Irish History, Robin Dudley Edwards. Together they introduced tutorial teaching to the National University. Between them they cultivated a passion for archives, and inculcated into the minds of their students an aptitude for rigorous scrutiny of those archives. Edwards, it is fair to say, did much more work on this than did Williams; but it was the partnership that was vital.

**A**ND, YET AND ALAS, William wrote very little. What he did write had to be forced out of him. There was, for example, a brilliant series of lectures on the balance of power after World War I. The origin of the series lay in a short paper he had written for Rohan Butler when, just after World War II, he was working in the Foreign Office, helping

Butler with the magisterial volume of the *Official History* on the origins of the 1939-45 conflict. His thesis—unacceptable in 1946, but truistic now—was that 1918 ushered in a new balance, in which the vital elements were the “peripheral powers”—the United States and the USSR. Later, that considerable German scholar Ludwig Dehio wrote, with Williams's guidance, a work of force expounding the argument.

While Williams said he had actually written down his view of the balance of power (as he said he had written down his account of the partition of Poland—which, he claimed, had been lost in the post—his *Life* of Hitler and his assessment of the Council of Trent), I was sufficiently sceptical as I watched him declaim on diplomatic history to preserve, not only my own notes, but those of three fellow students. Four years later, when he was visiting me in Cambridge, I told him I had done this. “Well”, he replied, “I've just finished the book, but I would be grateful if you would, pppray, let me have the notes, so that I can refresh my memory.” I gave him a photocopy; and that remains the only occasion on which I can say I outmanoeuvred Desmond Williams.

There was something deep in him that refused to publish. He was a first-class journalist—he even edited a magazine in Dublin for a time—and his radio scripts are memorable. I now wish, however, that we had had tape recorders at his lectures. For I cannot convey at second hand the beauty and concision of his use of English (one, by the way, of the nine languages he spoke), the scope of his mind, the profundity of his thought. He and Dudley Edwards built a great (and I use the word advisedly) History department. Both of these distinguished men are dead. Williams died in 1987; Edwards in 1988. I have written elsewhere about Edwards. I still have the Williams notes, and I can hear him say, “Pppray, Pppatrick, let me just check them over”, I will, Desmond, I will.

## Stalin's Revolution

By O. L. Smaryl



**I**N 1924, AFTER Lenin's death, the Politburo—the highest organ of the Soviet Communist Party—consisted of seven members. By 1940, only one of them survived. What had happened to the rest? One was murdered with a pickaxe, one was driven to suicide; four of them were shot after trials in which they confessed to the most horrible crimes.

The 17th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place in 1934. Of the 1,966 delegates, 1,108 were later arrested on charges of counter-revolutionary activities.

How could all this happen? Even the experts were baffled and confused. It is worth quoting from the report of the American Ambassador, Joseph Davies, accredited at the time to the court of Stalin:

“Viewed objectively, and based upon the application of the tests of credibility which past experience had afforded me, I arrived at the reluctant conclusion that the state had established its case, at least to the extent of proving the existence of a widespread conspiracy and plot among the political leaders against the Soviet government . . . There still remains in my mind, however, some reservation based upon the facts, that both the system of enforcement of penalties for the violation of law and the psychology of these people are so widely different from our own that perhaps the tests which I would apply would not be accurate if applied here. Assuming, however, that basically human nature is much the same everywhere, I am still impressed with the many indications of credibility which obtained in the course of the testimony. To have assumed that this proceeding was invented and staged as a project of dramatic political fiction would be to presuppose the creative genius of Shakespeare and the genius of a Belasco in stage production.”

Obviously, the Ambassador had underestimated the stage-management techniques of the *NKVD*, and he certainly could not understand the psychology of the victims. It needed a man endowed with an extraordinary amount of imagination, and possessing some first-hand experience of both Russia and Communism, to offer an explanation. It needed Arthur Koestler. His exegesis took the form of a novel, published in Britain in 1940 under the title *Darkness at Noon*.

It is hardly surprising that the book has never been available in the Soviet Union. What is surprising is that in August last year *Literaturnaya Gazeta* devoted a full-page article to Koestler, and announced the forthcoming serialisation of *Darkness at Noon* in *Neva*, a Leningrad literary magazine. It seems that, having allowed in 1987 the publication of Rybakov's novel, *The Children of the Arbat*, and finding that the Soviet system survived the shock, the authorities are now willing to go further along the same path.

The two books are written on the same topic; yet they are quite different, and that difference is worth exploring.

**R**YBAKOV'S BOOK rose to fame as the first novel published in the Soviet Union to give a realistic—and consequently chilling—account of life in the 1930s. It offers a panoramic picture of Soviet society through the story of half-a-dozen twenty-year-olds who lived at that time in Moscow's fashionable Arbat district. The hero is Sasha Pankratov—tall, dark and handsome, honest beyond any shadow of doubt, a devoted member of the Communist Party, an Engineering student.

Sasha's troubles start when Krivoruchko, once a member of the opposition, is accused of delaying completion of a new students' hostel. “It's sabotage”, says the Party Secretary. “No”, says honest Sasha, “it's lack of building materials.”

Trying to defend an ex-member of the opposition is bad enough, but Sasha gets into even deeper waters by failing to appreciate the general rule that lip service to the cause of Socialism is more important than actually working for it. After some trivial accusations he is arrested, interrogated by the Secret Police, found guilty without any evidence, and sentenced to three years exile in Siberia.

The second hero—or let's say anti-hero—is Stalin himself, whose character is drawn not so much by showing him in action but rather by presenting his thoughts. The best illustrations are probably those where Stalin takes up an innocent remark, toys with it as a child plays with a balloon, and slowly talks himself into believing that a major assault upon the Party is being prepared. It is no less illuminating to follow Stalin's thoughts as they dwell upon his role in the Building of the Socialist State and his plans for the future.

“Stalin paced his study again and stopped at the window. Yes, Lenin had led the October Revolution, and Lenin had carried it out, that had been his historical service . . . But Lenin had died. History is a great director. She had removed Lenin from the scene in good time and provided a new leader who would lead Russia along a genuinely socialist path. More than one revolution was needed to achieve this. Stalin had already carried out one revolution, no smaller in magnitude than the October Revolution itself, when he liquidated individual agriculture, liquidated the kulaks . . . Millions of people had died, but history would forgive him . . . History, however, would not forgive him if he left Russia weak and powerless before her enemies. Now it was time to create a new, special organisation of authority. And it was time to destroy the old one. He must start to liquidate the old organisation by getting rid of those who opposed *him*. Zinoviev and Kamenev were the most vulnerable . . . They would confess to anything.”

The third character of interest is Yuri Sharok, an ex-schoolmate of Sasha—a dissembler, a man without scruples or principles who, after graduating in Law, becomes a member of the Secret Police. He makes good use of these improved chances of practising depravity, recruiting a former mistress as an informer, and entertains his current mistress at one of the “safe” apartments of the *NKVD*.

There are, of course, many other characters (great Russian novels tend to have hundreds of them), but the message of the book can be gleaned from these three.

What is Rybakov's thesis? Firstly, that Stalin out of sheer paranoia wanted to destroy anyone who had ever shown the slightest deviation from the Party line set by Stalin himself. Secondly, that anyone who had reservations about the guilt of a deviant was immediately declared guilty. Thirdly, that the best way to show one's innocence was to join the clamour for punishing the “guilty”. Fourthly, that those eager to execute commands from above were mostly careerists devoid of any moral principles. And fifth, that, come what may, an honest Communist like Sasha will not be crushed by adversity.

Can Rybakov make his theses stick? Almost. His Stalin is beautifully done. The vanity, the duplicity and, above all, the paranoia are there for all to see. Sasha is not an unlikely

character either; there must have been quite a few like him around at the time. And all the other children of the Arbat are plausible—with the exception of Yuri Sharok: he is too vile to ring true. Rybakov needs him as a scapegoat for the failings of the *NKVD*. (He will, I expect, play a significant role in the sequel to this novel, reputedly on its way.)

What conclusions are Soviet readers supposed to draw? That the trouble was at the top. Had there been no Stalin among the Politburo members, and had people been more vigilant in preserving socialist legality, everything would have been sweetness and light.

LET US LOOK AT the same period through Koestler's eyes. Koestler is much more economic with his characters. *Darkness at Noon* is essentially a series of essays put into the mouths of Rubashev (a leading member of the old guard), Ivanov (a Secret Police man who will himself perish in the purges), and Gletkin (another Secret Police man who succeeds in extracting the desired confession from Rubashev). The subject of the essays is cause and consequence in Communist theory and practice. If *A* is done, *B* follows. If *B* is done, *C* follows. And so on and on down the lane of historical inevitability.

Rubashev, held in prison, sees the situation clearly:

“Revolutionary theory had frozen to a dogmatic cult with a simplified, easily graspable catechism, and with No. 1 as the high priest celebrating the mass.”

But that recognition does not stop Rubashev from admiring Stalin's ruthlessness:

“It is said that No. 1 has Machiavelli's Prince lying permanently by his bedside. So he should: since then, nothing really important has been said about the rules of political ethics. We were the first to replace the nineteenth century's liberal ethics of ‘fair play’ by the revolutionary ethics of the twentieth century. In that also we were right, a revolution conducted according to the rules of cricket is an

absurdity. Politics can be relatively fair in the breathing spaces of history; at its critical turning points there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means.”

Koestler's views are clear. “The Victory of Socialism in One Country” could be achieved only by using the foulest means—including deceit and duplicity, forgery and falsifications, torture and murder. Stalin won through because he was the only leader ruthless enough to carry through the forced industrialisation. The rest fell by the wayside because they had scruples, because they were willing to go so far, but not beyond.

Rubashev confesses to the most heinous crimes because he realises that this is the last service he can perform for the Revolution. He accepts responsibility for producing the generation of Gletkins (referred to as Neanderthals) and he recognises that the Gletkins' methods are the only ones that were likely to succeed.

WHO IS RIGHT, Rybakov or Koestler? Did Stalin betray the Revolution in order to glorify his own person? Or were his acts the logical extensions of the Bolshevik revolutionary ideal? I tend to side with Koestler, but I do not regard Rybakov's interpretation as completely indefensible.

One more word about *Darkness at Noon*. Ever since its publication it has been regarded as the anti-Communist novel *par excellence*; but that is not necessarily so, as some truly convinced Communists have pointed out. Is it conceivable that a strong faith could be further reinforced by reading *Darkness at Noon*? Such a reader could argue that Communism is bound to win if it can command a loyalty like Rubashev's.

And that raises a third, and rather intriguing, possibility. Perhaps neither Rybakov nor Koestler got it right. Did Stalin perhaps sacrifice his reputation for the survival of the Soviet system? The Rubashevs are now being rehabilitated. They are regaining their places in the Communist Pantheon, while Stalin is cast out into the cold. Did Stalin realise that one day his name would be mud, yet pursue his policies just the same?

Unlikely—but who knows?

## A Little Song On Censorship

You are not that terrible, censorship, not at all  
 No dungeons or drops of salty water  
 Dripping down the sombre, stony walls  
 No wishing whip, nor bloodthirsty spells  
 But the sun in the curtains, ash-wood desk,  
 Kettle whistling merrily, homely smell of coffee  
 Lingering in the corners, and the ripples of laughter  
 Of a lady clerk who is corpulent  
 And holds ordinary scissors in her hand.

Adam Zagajewski

Translated by Tadeusz Jagodzinski