
Democratic Dissent in the USSR

WILLIAM G. ROSENBERG

BOOKS REVIEWED:

- Stephen F. Cohen, ed. *An End to Silence*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982.
Roy Medvedev, ed. *The Samizdat Register 1*.
New York: W.W. Norton, 1977.
Roy Medvedev, ed. *The Samizdat Register 2*.
New York: W.W. Norton, 1981
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One third of the way through *An End to Silence*, a remarkable collection of materials skillfully selected and introduced by Stephen F. Cohen from Roy Medvedev's *samizdat* journal *Political Diary*, the reader is transported by a vivid, uncensored transcript to a discussion by party members of the Soviet Writers' Union, held shortly after Khrushchev's "secret speech" in 1956. The meeting is stormy, the impact of the speech clearly profound. The question of Stalinism and its murderous consequences affects everyone in the room, Stalin's defenders not the least. "Where did this huge number of butchers come from?" a writer asks at one point. "From what pit, what kingdom of darkness?" "Everything that happened," a party loyalist answers, "was possible because there had been a retreat from the principles of Party democracy and proletarian democracy. . . . All this must be decisively changed."

The response is jarring to Western sensibilities. How can any person of reasonable intelligence cling to the notions of both communism *and* democracy? What sort of democratic principles are compatible with communist rule, and its implicit propensity toward authoritarianism and the horrors of Stalinism? And how is it possible after more than thirty years of Stalinist terror for reasonable people—indeed in many cases the very victims of this terror—to believe seriously in proletarian democracy or to call themselves, as M. Bogin does in *Samizdat Register 2*, "communist democrats"? The issue is not simply one of semantic confusion. It lies at the heart of struggles within dissident movements all over Eastern Europe, and it needs to be understood in order to comprehend the

democratic movement reflected so brilliantly in the *Samizdat Registers* and *An End to Silence*, as well as to understand its problems and evaluate its potential.

The concept "democracy" itself has a particular meaning in the history of Russian and Soviet politics. It came into popular usage only during the revolution of 1917, when Russia's social order, based on the tsarist estate system, was still deeply fractured into "ordinary" and "privileged" social elements. From this context it acquired two very different meanings. For a tiny minority of the population, Western in outlook as well as culture, and including members of the new Provisional regime and their few supporters, the concept involved participatory politics, civil liberties, and the rule of law characteristic of the Western states they hoped Russia might now emulate. For the vast majority of workers, peasants, and ordinary soldiers, however, as well as a substantial portion of Russia's radical intelligentsia, democracy soon came to signify instead a social order in which the very divisions characterizing Russia's existing social relations were replaced by a state "for the people." It soon became common, in fact, for these groups, led by various councils or soviets, to call themselves "the Democracy," and to insist on defending "the interests of the Democracy" against those of the "bourgeois" state and Russia's privileged groups. Democratic political procedures were seen by many as essential to the process, but they were not the essence of popular concern.

The very extent of Russia's social disparities in 1917, however, made participatory politics inimical to social order. Civil liberties seemed to sanction anarchy, and appeals to the authority of law as a moral restraint on behavior became vacuous. In these circumstances, the democratic commitments of men such as Kerensky soon turned into a defensive liberalism, in which the rule of law became, in fact, the defense of minority elite interests against spontaneous popular assault. The "Democracy," meanwhile, despite the best intentions of many moderate socialist leaders in the soviets, soon discarded even a semblance of concern for Western legal institutions, including those the Provisional government was vainly trying to erect, in favor of massive support for whatever and whomever seemed likely to advance their interests. The concept of democracy as most Westerners understand it thus became thoroughly discredited. It became associated with the special interests of "bourgeois liberals" and the cultural intelligentsia at precisely the moment it took root in the popular mind to signify the interests and welfare of those without privilege, and the responsiveness of state authorities to these interests by whatever means they deemed appropriate.

These divergent meanings had vital practical consequences for the evolution of Soviet politics. The participatory basis of Bolshevik party activities became central not to the task of determining popular interests or needs, which could readily be defined from above, but to determining the most effective ways

of meeting them, and to mobilizing support in the process of implementing decisions. To be "democratic" came to mean simply to be responsive, even if (as was almost always the case) the implementation of decisions and policies was by authoritarian methods. As a definition of political method, it signified at best a resistance to arbitrariness and whimsy—*proizvol* in Russian, a forceful term—not to the concentration of authority or even authoritarianism itself, if the latter was thought to be in the service of mass interests and welfare. And essential to the preservation of democracy in this sense was not the recognition of law (or even party rules) as superordinate authority, and certainly not civil liberties in the Western sense, but the acceptance of scrutiny and criticism as the means of determining a proper (effective) course of action.

The obvious difficulty, of course, and an important paradox of Soviet politics, was to find some way to *assure* this "democratic" component of Bolshevik rule. Many inside the party and out have always appreciated how thin the line between an arbitrary and responsive dictatorship can be, and the weakness of relying on the personal commitment of those in power to sustain a context of discussion and criticism. Their answer has been to insist on strict observance of party rules. For most, however, and particularly for those at high levels of power, even a sanctification of party rules is perilously close to the rule of law. It violates the notion that rules must exist to serve the party, not the other way around, and recalls the idea of law in the Western sense as a guarantee of rights standing above the issues of social interest.

The story is told, for example, of Khrushchev's efforts in the early 1960s to rid the country of shirkers and black marketeers. After a series of exposés, the newspaper *Izvestia* received a flood of letters demanding the execution of the culprits. Khrushchev reportedly was surprised at the intensity of these letters, but agreed with their verdict. When he called in his chief state prosecutor, however, he was told that the criminal law did not allow capital punishment for such offenses. The first secretary was infuriated: "The law must serve us," he reportedly raged. "How can it be that our hands are tied because of the law!"

The incident is instructive not only because it gives some glimpse of popular sentiment, but because it helps suggest why party leaders even in the post-Stalin period have imposed the restraints of collective consensus, rather than formal rules or laws, and adhered by consensual agreement to electoral procedures in the politburo and central committee only on the very gravest issues of power. Ironically, however, this consensual defense, in effect, against the superordinate authority of law, has led rather naturally to conservatism and political entrenchment, and helped make it extremely difficult for the regime to accept any radical changes in economic or social policies.

In these circumstances, and particularly in a society inured to dictatorial

rule and historically unreceptive to the concept of law as an independent moral authority, dissidents insisting on civil liberties, political freedoms, or even strict adherence to international treaties or state laws gain widespread recognition in the West, but are little more than an irritant in Moscow and Leningrad. At best, they are able to generate only the barest modicum of support. At worst, they are scorned for the very cultural and historical association of their liberal outlooks and regarded as justifiably repressed. Dissent of this sort, however admirable and even heroic, is not in the least influential in pressuring the regime to respect, say, the Helsinki accords, and may even further Soviet intransigence to the degree that it becomes part of American policy calculations. Somewhat paradoxically, the only area in which it *can* be effective is in helping to build consensus restraints against all forms of arbitrariness—*proizvol*. This vital and historically urgent task—essential to containing latent Stalinist impulses—can only be pursued successfully, however, if dissident writers carefully and convincingly demonstrate how particular acts of party officials contradict general policies or accepted party procedures.

This was one of the brilliant achievements of Roy Medvedev's *Political Diary*, and one of the reasons it became such a powerful instrument, read even by party officials, despite its tiny circulation. As Pyotr Yakir notes in introducing his "Posthumous Indictment of Stalin" in *An End to Silence*, tens of thousands of pages could be (and have been) written on Stalin's crimes, but what makes his own modest six-page "open letter" to the official journal of the central committee, *Kommunist*, so forceful is the cleverness with which he indicts Stalin (and simultaneously the efforts of *Kommunist* editors to rehabilitate him and praise his achievements) by laying his specific acts, as noted in party congress resolutions, against explicit provisions of the Soviet Criminal Code. It is unacceptable, Yakir argues, for example, simply to remove Stalin's remains from the Lenin mausoleum or to praise his military leadership, since Article 36 of the Criminal Code specifically provides "deprivation of military and other ranks, as well as decorations, medals, and honorary titles" for those convicted of serious crimes; and Article 39, which defines aggravating circumstances and hence particularly serious crimes, lists, among others, crimes committed by a person who has already committed a crime; crimes having serious consequences; crimes committed against a minor, an elderly person, or a defenseless person; and crimes committed with particular cruelty and humiliation of the victim, about all of which there can be no question in Stalin's case. The restraining influence of essays such as Yakir's emerges from the irrefutability of his logic *on the party's own terms*, not from any appeal to higher principles. Similarly with the publication in *Political Diary* of the names, addresses, current occupations, and telephone numbers of other Stalinist "hangmen" still active in state or party service.

It is this, moreover, as Roy Medvedev suggests in *Samizdat Register 2*, that helps define the most serious deprivation of civil liberties in the Soviet Union to

be the lack of freedom of speech and press, rather than any individual rights such as the freedom to emigrate. This is so not only because the lack of free speech thwarts the development of individuals as independent thinkers, but because it impedes the Soviet Union itself from overcoming its recognized shortcomings, and fulfilling its own vital objectives. Sakharov and others are thus wrong in Medvedev's view to make such deprivations in civil liberties as "the absence of free emigration the major fault of our public life." The main problem of the socialist countries is "the guarantee to their citizens of freedom of speech and press, freedom of scientific and artistic work. It is the total restriction of freedom of speech and press which stops the Soviet Union from overcoming all its other shortcomings. For the first condition of solving any social problem is the right to study and judge it freely."

It is precisely when dissent is couched in these terms that the "democratic" movement begins to achieve an acceptable relevance to Soviet society in historical and social terms, and begins to acquire practical potential as an instrument of change. There are poignant "tales of the Stalin years" in *An End to Silence*, such as the meeting in 1949 between Paul Robeson and the famous Jewish writer Itzik Feffer, a prisoner of the KGB. There is also an extraordinary poem, "Days of Shame and Sorrow," by Olga Berggolts, jailed in 1938 after her husband's execution as an "enemy of the people" and later winner of a Stalin Prize; and a series of exceptional pieces on the questions of "guilt and responsibility," which treats such issues as whether silence is or is not a form of struggle, and whether democracy might sometimes be confused with revenge. Stephen Cohen has done an excellent job of selecting and editing the material. It is introduced with an important essay of his own on the "Stalin Question since Stalin," which examines the diverse aspects of this complex issue and suggests its political implications. The *Samizdat Registers* further expand one's appreciation of the breadth of Soviet dissidence by including interesting historical materials (M.P. Yakubovich on Kamenev and Zinoviev), informative pieces on contemporary Soviet problems (the economist M.B. Davydov on the mechanization of Soviet agriculture and A. Kasikov on alcohol), and particularly sharp critiques by Roy Medvedev on Sakharov's "My Country and the World" and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag*. One gains an important sense of the sophistication of Soviet dissidence, as well as the vital links that exist between contemporary underground writers and their progenitors in Russia's prerevolutionary intelligentsia. A powerful conscience continues to challenge absolutism, repression, cruelty, and ineptitude in the name of humane values, individual freedom, and social well-being. And it is particularly these historical dimensions of "democratic dissent" in the USSR that distinguish it from the more theoretical and analytic writings of East Europeans such as Szelenyi or Bahro.

Yet the *constructive* power of current dissident writing in practical terms is not in its humanity or ethics, however impressive and historically important, but in its ability to define and explain fundamental contradictions of contemporary Soviet life, and offer feasible solutions *within* the framework of a "democratic communist" value system that allows at least the possibility of their hearing and acceptance.

At least four such contradictions warrant particular attention and concern. Perhaps most familiar is the growing set of disparities between Soviet socio-economic realities and popular expectations. These need no elaboration here, but what is often obscured in the ill-concealed satisfaction with which they are often highlighted in the Western media is the enormous concern this set of problems generates among party officials and ordinary Soviet citizens themselves, and the consequent pressures they create for new courses of action. The solution may or may not be, as M. Bogin argues in *Samizdat Register 2*, echoing Bahro, a socialist society based on a combination of state control over large-scale production and private control over small- and medium-scale production. But his argument assumes special force through his identification of excessive centralization with Stalinist techniques, and his insistence, reflected now through Poland's Solidarity movement in ways that must give the new Soviet leadership pause, that exclusive party dictatorship in these areas is neither a practical nor a popular alternative.

Closely related is the contradiction between an increasing Soviet need for high technology and a scientific intelligentsia, and the authoritarian impulse to restrain free intellects. Medvedev puts the issue directly:

The scientific and technical revolution, which is inevitable in the USSR, just as it is elsewhere in the world, will bring about changes in the social structure and in its economic base that will prove incompatible with the system of unlimited rule by a single individual (or by a small group). Extreme centralization and lack of democracy in politics, economics, and culture; the absence of any mechanisms allowing the advancement of the most able and gifted; the absence of free exchange of ideas and information—all of this becomes an enormous impediment to the development of the productive forces.

Here one needs to recognize not the repressive powers of Soviet rule, however great, but the *limitations* of repression in the face of Soviet Russia's overwhelming intellectual needs. Medvedev is surely correct when he maintains that the intelligentsia is growing rapidly in numbers, and cannot function efficiently without access to information and free discussion. Nor is he wrong to point out that such mass repression among the scientific and technical community as occurred during the 1930s would likely bring about a total collapse of Russia's economy.

The question for Andropov and others then is not whether the intellectual life of scientists and other professionals will be liberalized, but what the limits of liberalization and the parameters of relatively free inquiry will be.

Soviet-Western relations are a further aspect of current Soviet difficulties, but again, less in terms of the imperial impulses stressed in the press or by the Reagan administration (and which the USSR, one can argue, shares with the United States) but in terms of the growing awareness of ordinary Russians, as a result of advanced global communications systems, travel, tourism, and an extensive degree of economic interdependency, of the disparities between Soviet living standards and even those in Eastern bloc countries such as East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, not to mention the West. In effect, essential components of Stalinist economic autarchy have yielded in the past two decades to the necessities and efficiencies of international cooperation and economic interdependency while the regime has attempted to maintain a form of "intellectual autarchy" fundamentally at odds with its own objectives. And the question is not whether economic interdependency will continue, which it surely will, but how the regime will accommodate to its increasingly problematic social and cultural consequences.

In response to all of these issues, as well as to the contradiction endemic in Soviet politics between a desire for stability and order and the absence of effective formal mechanisms to control *proizvol*, "democratic communists" insist on freedom of information, expression, and criticism—not simply as civil liberties in their own right, but because their absence is a demonstrable obstacle to Soviet Russia's ability to overcome pressing problems. However difficult it might be to accept, one must recognize that the absence of democratic *political* institutions is not an issue of any great consequence for contemporary Soviet society. Neither are writers such as Solzhenitsyn, nor dissident protesters (and their Western supporters) who identify progress in terms of freedom to emigrate or the relaxation of other fundamental human rights restrictions. The problem of consequence, instead, is how to make the contemporary Soviet system work well in its *own* interests, and as well as possible in conformity with its own rhetorical values.

If the ideas of "democratic communism" are as vibrant as these volumes indicate, and bear real potential, it is because they press democratization within the acceptable and historically legitimate value system of a responsive communism. There are genuine solutions here to fundamental problems that, while assaulting the "armor of stratification and centralization," and the "usurpation" by the "vanguard" of the "majority's right to think, criticise, chart a path, decide," as M. Bogin puts it in *Samizdat Register 2*, do so from a position of deep socialist commitment.