

The Moral Lessons of Soviet History: the Experience of Opposition to Evil

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'One of the spiritual crimes of communism ... was that it wholly replaced the concepts of "sin" and "vice" with the concepts of "mistakes" and "deficiencies".' It was with these words that Yuri Karyakin, adviser on cultural affairs to Boris Yel'tsin and specialist on Dostoyevsky, concluded a talk in August 1992 entitled 'On the Road to Repentance'. He was speaking at a seminar dedicated to the theme 'The Moral Lessons of Soviet History: the Experience of Opposition to Evil'. The gathering, which was attended by a number of well-known academics from Russia and the West, took place at the Caux conference centre for Moral Re-armament in Switzerland. Karyakin's remarks were very pertinent to his theme. The word 'repentance' carries a moral power which suggests not simply an acceptance of error, but also an acceptance of guilt and sin. To talk of a 'mistake' implies that its cause was an insufficiency of information; when people are properly informed, they will cease their wrongdoing. Repentance, on the other hand, implies the existence of some form of evil. Communism's great crime, in Karyakin's view, was to take the drama of personal moral choices out of the history-making process.

The seminar was an experiment. Caux, which since the Second World War has been a centre for European reconciliation, has specialised in providing a setting for personal encounters and the exchange of experiences, rather than academic gatherings. However, this seminar was a new departure. Yuri Senokosov, the chairman of the seminar and director of the Merab Mamardashvili Foundation in Moscow, said in his introduction that the presentations should include both academic knowledge and 'an element of personal life-experience'. The subject of evil was an appropriate one to choose in trying to combine these two approaches. As a number of participants pointed out, people experience evil individually, and repent individually. Repentance, being a personal thing, cannot be turned into a method. Yuri Karyakin commented that the aim of the seminar as he understood it was not to provide a criticism of outer evil, but to focus on the experience of overcoming evil within oneself. The combination of approaches was very successful, although it may have not been to everyone's taste. Those who favoured reason alone might have left unsatisfied: they might have found too much of a personal religious nature. Indeed, some of the participants felt that the use of personal experience in an academic context was out of place. On the other hand, for those who favoured experience over theory, it might also have seemed unsatisfactory, for at times the dialogue touched great heights of abstraction. But for most the mixture of analysis and experience seemed to prove very stimulating, and many of the participants left intrigued and eager for some kind of a continuation.

Evil cannot be analysed easily, and throughout the seminar there were clear

differences of approach. On one level, participants could be divided into two groups: those whose primary perspective was the individual within the system, and those whose focus was the system itself. One of the most powerful speakers in the first group was Leif Hovelson, formerly in the Norwegian resistance and one of the initiators of the conference. Hovelson used his own wartime experience to try to describe the life of the 'living moral conscience'. He talked of his sufferings under the Gestapo and his inner struggle neither to compromise with Nazism nor to take vengeance after its collapse. He thus offered an intimate, religious picture of the soul face to face with evil. The other angle was well presented by Ernest Gellner, professor of social anthropology at Cambridge. Gellner saw the individual as part of a broader social development, and considered the Cartesian picture of the rational individual as flawed. History, he declared, shows that most people are shaped by their surroundings and take their values from them. It is true, he reflected, that some very fascinating individuals seem to depart from this rule, but they remain the exception. So it is best, he said, to see contemporary totalitarianism as part of a general trend of modernisation in combination with mankind's newly found scientific selfconfidence. It was inevitable that such a vast social experiment as Soviet communism would be tried.

Doubtless there were ideological differences behind the various views, but the differences were also disciplinary. The seminar's main historical presentation came from Geoffrey Hosking, professor of Russian history at London University, who presented a paper on concepts of the Russian state. He saw the Soviet system as a result of the Russian autocratic tradition in combination with the scientific worldview of Marxism and the methods of mass mobilisation which grew out of the First World War. Aleksei Salmin, a political scientist from the Gorbachev Foundation, talked on 'The Soviet Polity as a Moral Phenomenon'. It was, he argued, a kind of technological attempt to remove sin from the world without resort to God. Eventually, the technology exhausted itself. It would be wrong, he said, to say that good had conquered evil; it would be better to say that life had survived the system. One lesson of Soviet history, he said, was that free will is always victorious – in spite of all tragedies.

The result of these varying approaches was a breadth of interpretation of Soviet communism which was very constructive. In an inspiring presentation on the nature of dialogue, the Russian philosopher Grigori Pomerants recalled the analogy of four blind men studying an elephant: each man examines a different part of the animal, but it is always the same elephant. Nevertheless, some doubted that very much definite could ever be said about the elephant. Aleksei Salmin responded that although it might not be possible to draw any definite moral conclusions about the elephant, even if you did reach its tail, when the elephant in question is the Soviet system, there is still an obligation to analyse it. Clearly, Salmin was questioning the very feasibility of drawing moral lessons from history. This was also a problem for the young Russian specialist on Hegel, Nikolai Plotnikov. The problem of Russian intellectual history, he said, was too much moralism: what was needed was neutral historiography.

Soviet history draws attention to itself. It is 'stronger than us', declared Salmin. In his opening talk, 'The Problem of Violence and the Structure of Rationality', Yuri Senokosov expressed bewilderment at the extremity of evil which had befallen Russia. The violence itself could perhaps be explained, but its extent was incomprehensible. Attempting to draw moral lessons from history may be a project of doubtful academic validity, but in the context of Stalinism and the development of a *gulag* culture (as indeed in the context of the Holocaust), it is surely comprehensible and necessary. It is also a task requiring a degree of delicacy. Senokosov noted that to confront evil itself

is dangerous. He reminded his listeners of Nietzsche's observation that anyone who fights with the monster must beware of becoming a monster himself, and that when one looks into the abyss, the abyss returns one's gaze. Be careful, then, he said, not to cross certain moral boundaries in your attempts to understand what has happened. Behind these warnings was an interesting thought about the very nature of drawing moral lessons: the objective gaze can easily be led astray, and must not therefore regard itself as God-like. A passion for moral truth, he was noting, even a justifiable one, can easily become a new orthodoxy.

Senokosov was searching not simply for an explanation of evil, but for a way of ensuring purity of analysis. The self-discipline of the analyst is also important. This was an issue which was raised by Grigori Pomerants. Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, he suggested, had not been well received in its time, because Dostoyevsky had had the ulterior motive of exposing the fallacies of the Westernisers and his novel was a kind of monologue against them. By contrast, Pomerants said, Dostoyevsky's Pushkin speech had exhibited a willingness to enter into dialogue, and was thus much more effective. The cause of this change in Dostoyevsky, according to Pomerants, was a victory over himself. Precisely what he meant was not clear. However, Vittorio Hösle, professor of philosophy at Essen University, responded to what he saw as a peculiarly Russian stress on the importance of combining knowledge with moral integrity. 'I agree', he added, 'that there are truths which one can grasp profoundly only when one has had certain life experiences. One of the greatest achievements of the Greek and the medieval Christian culture has been the conviction that to certain truths you are admitted only after having worked on yourself.' Unfortunately, he said, the West had abandoned such a perspective for a system where information could be bought irrespective of any connection with the core of personality. Pomerants, following his thoughts on Dostoyevsky, declared that evil starts with a passion for the right cause which is then infected by the spirit of hatred.

How to oppose evil, but not be contaminated by it? How, perhaps, to be moral without being moralistic? This was a theme raised by Yevgeni Barabanov in his talk on 'Autonomic and Theonomic Ethics'. Barabanov suggested that the divergence between these two kinds of moral system was not necessarily fundamental. Sakharov, for example, while not a believer, had in practice a moral code which included elements of the transcendent; as the Gospel of St Matthew tells us of the Last Judgment, it is deeds not words which are crucial. The dividing line, according to Barabanov, was not so much between these moral systems, but between them and what he called 'authoritarian ethics'. Theonomic ethics, he suggested, were personal, directed towards an individual 'you'. By contrast, authoritarian ethics were directed towards the community as a whole, towards a 'we'. Theonomic ethics, according to Barabanov, offered absolute moral obligation without absolutising morality as such. Authoritarian ethics, which he described as a false imitation of theonomic ethics, made morality itself into an absolute, and then became 'the morality of domination'. He clearly had in mind the collective moral code of the Soviet system, but he also suggested that these ethics were responsible for some of the tragic compromises of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Barabanov concluded his presentation by quoting the Russian philosopher Semen Frank's diary entry of 1942 that the true victor over fascism would be the one who first started to forgive. Leif Hovelson's experiences under Nazism suggested that forgiveness is possible, but very difficult. Salmin, in his talk, stated that hatred is extremely hard to fight against. In one sense, the whole aim of the seminar was to search for means of fighting evil and hatred. At least that is how Senokosov saw it: for

him, its purpose was to search the past so as to prevent the violence happening again. Thus, the seminar had a practical side to it: it was an exploration of a non-violent alternative for Russia. Len Karpinsky, for example, currently editor of *Moscow News* and formerly one of the national leaders of the *Komsomol*, stated an interest in practical politics, and not abstruse theories. Repentance was a burning political issue, he declared; properly understood and applied, it might take precedence over military solutions.

In his own presentation, Karpinsky, whose father has been a colleague of Lenin's in Zurich, gave an absorbing picture of growing up with communism. He took as the title for his talk Solzhenitsyn's aphorism 'Do not live by lies', and commented with great candour on his own relationship with the Communist Party and his attempts to fight for reform from within. He applied to join the party four times, was twice accepted and twice refused, and once thrown out for 'incompatible views'. Finally he himself left after the shootings in Lithuania in January 1991. 'This of course may seem amusing', he said 'but it generally reflects the evolution of my attempts to overcome the lie — and not just to overcome it intellectually, but also to take some action which would correspond to my new perception of the world'. Following the late Merab Mamardashvili's description of the USSR as a 'non-society', Karpinsky termed it an 'antieconomy' and an 'antiworld' in which it was extremely difficult to identify precisely where the lie was located.

Many people had sincerely tried to find ways of not participating in the lie while remaining within the Soviet system. Within this complex world he, Karyakin, Yevtushenko and others had developed the idea of 'intellectual conscience': if you understand something to be true, you are morally obliged to act upon that understanding. 'That', he said, 'was the most difficult thing for most people.' Karpinsky concluded his talk by saying that the totalitarian mind was very resilient. Communism, while outwardly dying, he said, could easily live on in a 'commercialised totalitarian education'.

In response to Karpinsky's presentation, Karyakin turned to literature. Kipling, he said, had with great genius created the figure of Mowgli. And yet Mowgli was not true to life, for he had grown up as a human being among wolves. A human being among wolves, Karyakin reflected, would grow up with the thinking of a wolf. 'We are Mowglis', he said, 'and you have to accept it . . . You are sitting, thinking, working, quite intelligently. Suddenly the machinery [of your mind] gets caught in a spin . . . What do you do? You put your hand up, open your skull, and find a piece of Marxism.' Karyakin particularly had in mind the generation born after 1917. Karpinsky agreed with Karyakin. When he rejoined the Communist Party in 1988, he said, he had instinctively acted according to a belief that only through the Party could the reform process be continued. His thinking had been moulded by the Party. Nevertheless, there was also another element. In one sense his motives had been entirely honourable. But the chance to rejoin the Party had been accompanied by the chance to become a political commentator for a newspaper. The selfish motive was also there. For this reason, Karpinsky concluded, it would be wrong just to write off most Party members as simply victims, for they all knew that their careers had been closely tied to their convictions.

Yuri Karyakin stated that he could not be involved in the trial of the Communist Party, because he himself had participated in it. This struck a profound chord with Vyacheslav Igrunov, former dissident and one of the founders of 'Memorial'. In spite of the fact that he had fought the communist system through so much of his life, Igrunov questioned whether indeed he had done all he could to oppose communism.

His openness, which some participants found disconcerting, revealed a common struggle with evil within people of very different experiences. Igrunov suggested that 'we all lack courage to find evil in ourselves', and that the Communist Party should never be blamed for wrongs for which the whole nation was guilty. The trial of the Communist Party was itself a manifestation of the lie on which the Party had been based: the desire to make scapegoats of the leaders.

Karpinsky, Karyakin and Igrunov, in the intensity of their comments, revealed the difficulty people have in coming to terms with the past, and in simply knowing, in some circumstances, which was the right choice and which the wrong one. This was a point raised by Pomerants, who noted how often men are faced with alternatives both of which are sinful, and by Barabanov, who reflected that evil decisions are still taken with good intentions.

Yuri Karyakin was anxious not to underestimate the evils of communism. In his view, unlike fascism, communism was characterised by a great difference between theory and reality. You could believe a set of words, regardless of the facts. It had coopted almost everyone into a huge criminal system. And its goal had been to destroy moral and spiritual life as such. He was not the only speaker to attribute the evils of communism to its atheist roots. In such a context, he asked, could a communist repent? There had been no Augustines or Pascals in communist history; nor could there be. (Although he added, as an aside, that Berdyayev, Bulgakov, Frank and Struve were, in their rejection of all kinds of communist and religious dogmatism, the Russian Augustines.) An inability to repent was written into the foundations of the communist mentality. These remarks caused some consternation among some participants, who held that no one was beyond the reach of God's grace.

In response, Karyakin proposed a 'library of repentance': a compilation of materials on the subject which could help Russians understand themselves. Ernest Gellner had previously noted that Sakharov, while opposing much of what was wrong with communism, had still accepted its overall picture of the world. Even Solzhenitsyn, Karyakin now added, had believed in Lenin, and had declared that it was only a miracle that had saved him. And if both these men had thus proved fallible, then, he stated, there should be no illusions that communism had been overcome:

We are at the very beginnings of the spiritual overcoming of communism, and we should not flatter ourselves with its outer collapse. The matter is not such that there was a time of sin, and now there is the time of repentance. All this is present, at every point of our spiritual being, right until the last moment of our lives.

Karyakin therefore proposed a 'library' for those who did not know how to repent.

Karyakin's conclusion to his talk, that one of the hallmarks of the twentieth century has been the replacement of the idea of sin with that of error, sums up what was most thought-provoking about the seminar. It is difficult to describe Stalinism as just a 'mistake'. While some of the participants probably had difficulty accepting the notion of 'evil', it is still a good label to apply to much of what happened. Without evil, there can be no repentance, and evil and repentance tell of a particular kind of human nature. Perhaps it is in this field, the study of human nature under unusual circumstances, that Soviet history will prove most instructive.