

Religion and Soviet Non-Conformist Artists

ALEXANDER GLEZER

After the exhibition of 15 September 1974 known as the "Bulldozer Exhibition", the Soviet authorities, frightened by the international outcry against the destruction of paintings by bulldozers, decided two weeks later to organize an exhibition for Soviet non-conformist painters in the Izmailovsky Park. It opened on 22 December 1974 and lasted for a fortnight. But one condition was laid down: no paintings of a pornographic or anti-soviet nature or paintings containing "religious propaganda" were to be shown at the exhibition.

No genuine Soviet non-conformist artist has ever produced pornographic or anti-soviet work. As Oscar Rabin (the leader of the non-conformists) said to an American correspondent: "Never in my life have I heard of the existence of anti-American, anti-British or anti-French art, and I do not understand what anti-Soviet art might be". But some of these artists have produced examples of religious art. For the religious revival in Russia is a reality. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Maximov and many other Russian writers and public figures have spoken about it. The evidence is manifold: for example, the attraction the Church has for the Russian Intelligentsia; the amazing popularity of Fr. Dmitri Dudko's sermons; the appearance, growth and spread of various religious sects; and, finally, the persecution of believers. This has intensified in recent years, and has led to the arrest and confinement of believers in prisons, camps and psychiatric hospitals, and to the removal from church office of priests who have carried the light of Truth to the suffering and have refused to compromise.

The intolerance of the Communist Party after the liberal Khrushchev period led to stricter censorship. The words "God", "prayer", "soul", "hell", "paradise" were removed from books. For example, in 1968 I was summoned by Boris Ivanovich Solovev, the chief editor of the publishing house "Soviet Writer". He asked: "What kind of ideas are these in the collection of poems of the Georgian poet Mukhrana Machavariani which you have translated?" "What are you thinking of?" I asked. And the great master in the art of castrating books quoted:

"You try again and again and again
 To reach honour and glory! You make haste, you take thought.
 How laughable! Your striving is in vain.
 So what?— you will be numbered for a little among the famous . . .
 You were born on the earth, born for the earth,
 And in time you will become earth."

I looked at him in amazement. He went on: "That's a typical piece of biblical preaching! Take it out of the book!" And he took it out. But it was not so easy to control non-conformist artists and those writers whose work was not published by the State publishing houses, but reproduced in *samizdat*. The more unbridled anti-religious propaganda became, the stronger and more persistent became the influence of religion in the work of these artists and writers.

Which non-conformist artists are using religious themes or motifs in their work? Edward Zelenin, in most of his recent work, includes the famous churches of his home town, Vladimir, either in the foreground or in a hazy background. In the sketches and pictures of Vyacheslav Kalinin (see photographs) rise up the churches of Moscow, known as the city of forty times forty churches before the Bolshevik revolution. Where are these churches now? Over the site of the magnificent Church of Christ the Saviour steam rises from the busy, noisy "Moscow" swimming pool. Although many of Russia's ancient churches have been destroyed or turned into clubs or stores, in the hearts and souls of men they have not perished. A landscape with a church reflected in water is one of Oscar Rabin's favourite subjects. (He is the best-known of the unofficial artists.) In fact the church does not exist, but its reflection in lake or river exists alongside the country cottages or modern mass-produced town box-houses. It is a symbol. It may not be there in the landscape in question, it may have been destroyed in that town or village, but the church has remained alive, because people's faith in God is alive.

In the work of Rabin's son, the young painter Alexander, sometimes icons appear: there are whole ones, which cast a good, pure light on all around, and others which are smashed, their fragments scattered. Only the eyes of St. Nicholas — they cannot be put out — still gaze fixedly at us. Dmitri Plavinsky often draws on old Russian culture in his work, and therefore on religion, since the latter permeated all the authentic culture of pre-revolutionary Russia. On enormous canvasses, diptychs and triptychs he lovingly paints the words Holy Scripture, written in a slavonic hand. The titles of his pictures speak for themselves: *The ruined church*, *An ancient book*, *The Cross*, *The Gospel according to John*. This last picture is two metres high, with apparently a golden glow radiating from it. In relief stand out letters — a text from the Bible, letters that are prophetic, filled with the hidden meaning of the Word. But above

are the clear, triumphant imprints of tourists' plimsolls or security police (KGB) boots. They are trampling on ancient culture, religion, and faith.

The pencil sketches of Valentina Kropivnitskaya (see photographs) are wise and peaceful. They depict fantastic and real, unseen and mysterious creatures which pray to God. The cupolas of little Russian wooden churches rise above them. These creatures, brought into being by the imagination of the artist, sadly and bitterly watch a church being slowly submerged in the water. This sketch is called *Drowned churches* and was inspired by a particular event. During the construction of the Volga dam some ancient churches really were "drowned". Once they had adorned the banks of this great river, but when in 1971 I travelled by boat on the Volga, only the tops of the bell-towers rose above the water. They looked lonely and sad, as though crying out for help.

Yuri Zharkikh, a native of Leningrad, looks the perfect image of a Slav. He resembles some figure from an old Russian fairy tale. As a highly sensitive man he hated the reality which surrounded him and longed to withdraw into a monastery. But his creative drive won. Zharkikh became an artist. In his painting he remained true to the ideals of Christianity: love for one's neighbour, disinterestedness, a striving for moral perfection. He depicts social and religious subjects in his work: for example, revolution is personified as Saturn devouring his own children; he depicts the struggling dissident, surrounded by a host of informers and Philistines; as a symbol of moral purification he paints the Crucifixion of Christ. Painted in brown, delicate, like a root dried up and twisted in pain, the Crucifixion figures in almost every one of Zharkikh's pictures. This root has undergone terrible suffering; it has been trampled underfoot and buried; now it emerges into the light and becomes the source of new life. Sometimes the Crucifixion is surmounted by seven cupolas, painted in intense lilac and blue colours, which radiate a bright light. For the artist they symbolize the seven great churches, each of which fulfils its mission on the earth.

Otar Kandaurov, a Georgian by birth, paints philosophical and religious subjects. In, for example, his painting *Silence*, from the *Gospel Cycle*, Christ is on Golgotha. He sits alone on Adam's skull. In a few minutes he will be raised on the cross. He thinks of the spiritual effort (*podvig*) he must make, beyond all human possibility: on this cross he must overcome the inertia of death, and exalt the human race to the heights of immortality. The Crucifixion is depicted from the inside. Here man is alone with death, immortality, God. At the top, above the cross, is the setting sun, destined to become the halo round the head of the crucified Christ. A tiny, bright cross above the sun is the symbol of the Ascension. In the portrait of St. Augustine (a painting in the series *Spiritual leaders of humanity*) Georgia is represented as three old churches which rise against a background of snow-covered mountains. These churches can see

everything, because they symbolize three Georgian saints. Kandaurov considers art to be a religious vocation: "I take art to be a language, enlightened by the Word of God, since 'in the beginning was the Word'."

The Leningrad artist Michael Shemyakin has an unusual approach to religion in his art. As he could not show his work in his own country he emigrated to France a few years ago, and has already won widespread recognition in Paris. He is inspired by primitive art:

When you look at the rock paintings of early peoples, for example those in the cave at Lascaux, where gigantic white figures alternate in a fantastic way with black ones, you are involuntarily seized by a mystical sense of something cosmic, you realize you are standing in front of the symbolism of an unknown ancient religion. You feel that the creators of this art were not indulging themselves, were not painting just for fun, but were worshipping some divinity. Yes, their paintings are impressive chiefly because of their faith, their religious content. What I dream of is finding a new way of expressing faith, true spirituality and religious belief.

Other examples of unofficial religious art include: the expressive crucifixions of Ernst Neizvestny (see *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 11-13, and photographs), his powerful, huge prophets; the enchanted Gospels, flying in the sky, of Alexander Kharitonov (see photographs), and his gaily decorated churches in festive array; the merry snow-flakes over the cupolas of churches in the paintings of Vasili Sitnikov; the faces of saints in the deeply religious compositions of Yakov Vinkovetsky. Before the opening of the exhibition in the Izmailovsky Park, the authorities insisted on removing only two paintings – both works of Vinkovetsky. To the Party directors of art they contained "religious propaganda" of a kind which was all too convincing.

Why does religion frighten the Soviet authorities which have at their disposal the KGB, the militia and an army equipped with supersonic fighters and rockets? Why do even religious motifs in the work of a few unofficial artists give rise in the Party hierarchy to bitter, and from their point of view, righteous anger? There is one simple answer. The USSR is in its own way a "religious State". Its religion is Marxism-Leninism and it is intolerant of other faiths. True faith in Christ, Mohammed, Jehovah or Buddha releases men from a faith in Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin imposed by force, frees their spirit, restores to them freedom of thought, a free life and creativity. And this the communists fear most of all, because it means the end of a power based on a false ideology.

(Translated by Hugh Wybrev)