

New Russian Revolutionaries

PHILIP WALTERS

VSKhSON

(All-Russian Social-Christian Union for the Liberation of the People)
compiled by John Dunlop, YMCA Press, 1975, 214 pp.

The New Russian Revolutionaries

by John Dunlop, Nordland Publishing Co., Belmont, Mass., 1976,
344 pp., \$18.50.

The clandestine All-Russian Social-Christian Union for the Liberation of the People (VSKhSON) was founded in Leningrad on 2 February 1964. By 1967, the Union was planning its own contribution for the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution: a coup d'état. But it was betrayed to the KGB by one of its members. The four leaders of the Union were tried and sentenced to between eight and fifteen years. Seventeen other members were sentenced to between ten months and seven years. The leader, Igor Ogurtsov (see photograph in *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 3, opposite p. 8) is still in a labour camp, having received the maximum sentence possible under the article in the Criminal Code by which he was tried.

Fortunately, a copy of the programme of VSKhSON reached the West shortly before the KGB seized the archives of the Union. This programme forms the nucleus of the book *VSKhSON* and is described by John Dunlop as "the best-thought-out alternative to the present Soviet system yet formulated by neo-slavophil* circles". Apart from some minor omissions specified in the introduction, the book *VSKhSON* is composed of all available original material about the aims and ideology of the Union, and about its members and their fate in the camps. This material has been used by John Dunlop in his scholarly and readable account

* For a study of neo-slavophil ideas see "A New Creed for Russians? The Ideas of the Neo-Slavophiles" by Philip Walters in *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 20-31. *Ed.*

of the rise and fall of the Union, *The New Russian Revolutionaries*. The two books in fact complement each other.

John Dunlop begins *The New Russian Revolutionaries* with an account of the careers and personalities of the four leaders of the Union. Undoubtedly the driving force behind the whole enterprise was provided by Igor Vyacheslavovich Ogurtsov, a man of inspiring integrity, moral fibre and strength of will. His charisma united the members of the Union both practically and ideologically. Three other men, tried at the same time as Ogurtsov, were also leaders of the Union: M.Yu. Sado, E. A. Vagin and B. A. Averichkin. At the time of the first arrests in February 1967, the Union had a further 24 ordinary members and 30 more candidates who were being prepared for membership.

The Union's leaders stressed the importance of re-education believing, like Solzhenitsyn, that the inner renewal of the individual is a prerequisite for lasting external change in Russia. So the Union considered it important to build up a library of typewritten or photographed handbooks for use in the moral and political re-education of recruits.

When the Union was founded, many believed that Russia was about to collapse internally. Khrushchev's destalinisation policy coupled with economic mismanagement had provoked industrial unrest in many areas of Russia. However, when Khrushchev was replaced by Brezhnev and Kosygin, when "creeping restalinisation" began and the country did not collapse, the Union found recruitment increasingly difficult. Dunlop devotes a chapter to the Union's recruitment techniques. Its leaders had originally planned to have 10,000 members by 1980 but this utopian aim was soon abandoned. Nevertheless, the Union continued to organize itself along military lines and attempted to build up a store of arms. Curzio Malaparte's *Coup d'état: the Technique of Revolution* was read by the Union's leaders and preparations were made for a coup. It is impossible to say, on the evidence we have, whether or not the leaders of the Union believed either that their Leningrad coup in October 1967 would be successful or that by voluntary martyrdom they would provide an example for subsequent revolutionary groups.

Ogurtsov may not have prepared the minds of his followers for failure. Certainly the arrests came as a shock. At the trial of the four leaders – the first trial – only Ogurtsov and Sado seem to have acted with complete courage and honesty, denying their own guilt and refusing to implicate others. Dunlop points out that the authorities only realized the full implications of the Union's aims when Ogurtsov was questioned. A second trial was then organized at which 17 of the remaining members were tried and sentenced. Most of the Union's members seem to have redeemed their honour in the camps. Dunlop's chapter on their activities there makes inspiring reading. Ogurtsov spent the first seven years of his sentence in the notorious Vladimir prison: despite terrible conditions he too acquitted himself with nobility and integrity.



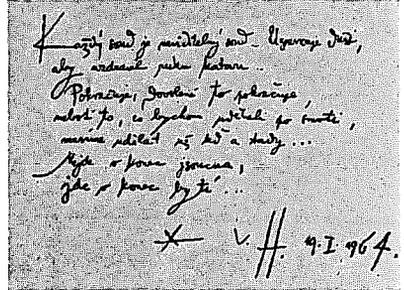
Metropolitan Josyf Slipyi, Archbishop Major of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. He was imprisoned by the Soviet government from April 1945 to January 1963 and named a Cardinal in 1965. (See article pp. 4-12.)





PROPAST PROPASTI

*Láska k Bohu ničl sebe,
 aby Bůh měl prostor.
 Láska k sobě a bližním ničl ničitele i bližní,
 aby Bůh měl čas.
 Ale my nemilujeme Boha, ničce lásku,
 aby nicota měla prostor.
 Ale my nemilujeme sebe ani bližní, ničce Boha,
 aby nicota měla čas...*

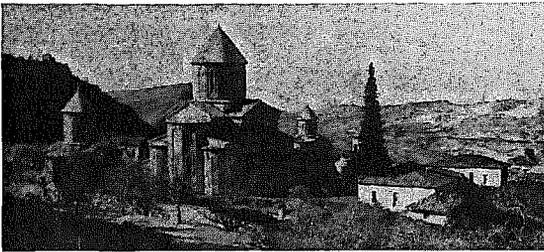


Above left Volumes of Vladimír Holan's poetry published in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s. (See article pp. 19–22.)

Top right Vladimír Holan's poem, "Abyss of Abysses" (translation p. 19).

Above Manuscript of a poem by Vladimír Holan.

Left The Gelati monastery (12th century) in Georgia. (One of the Georgian Orthodox Church's spiritual centres is described on pp. 13–14.)



Below left A beautiful example of church architecture in Georgia. The church is called "Ikorta".



Dunlop assesses at length the programme of the Union, which is reproduced in Russian in the book *VSKhSON*, and in translation as an appendix to *The New Russian Revolutionaries*. The programme is original in detail and derives its inspiration primarily from Berdyaev. The first section criticizes all aspects of the Soviet State; the second section proposes an alternative society to be based on Berdyaev's concept of "personalism", which stresses the absolute value of the individual. The population of Russia is to regain control of the economy. The aim is the Orthodox ideal of *sobornost* :

Both capitalism and its sickly offspring, communism, can be overcome only through Christianisation of the entire life of society . . . The ideal of Christianity is individual diversity in free unity. Christianity is opposed to egoistic individualism and to faceless collectivism.

The programme proposes to set up a popular assembly as the highest legislative body in the future State. This assembly is to be elected by communes, corporations and professions: the desired political structure is thus syndicalist. The programme rejects political parties and recommends that the head of State be elected by the government's supervisory body, the Supreme Council. Although the programme does not use the word "monarch", Dunlop states in *VSKhSON* that "the form of election and the function of the head of State clearly indicates a monarch. Petrov-Agatov also confirms several times that *VSKhSON* proposes a 'constitutional monarchy.'" The "monarch" is to be the nation's moral watchdog.

Although nationalist in inspiration, the *VSKhSON* programme is universalist in intention: Russia is called to unite the world, and Orthodoxy to inaugurate universal Christianity. Nevertheless, the programme does not mention the fate of the various nationalities in Russia. The nationality policy of *VSKhSON* was probably tolerant, however, since various men not of Great Russian extraction, including the Assyrian Sado, felt able to join.

Dunlop ends his book with a survey of the activity of *VSKhSON* members since their return from the camps. He shows the extent of cooperation between former *VSKhSON* members and the neo-slavophil movement with Osipov and his journal *Veche* at its centre. There is a pioneering quality about *VSKhSON*'s denunciation of the communist system in the name of the Russian nation and its heritage. As Dunlop states: "That *VSKhSON* arrived at such a position in 1964, when Khrushchev was still in power and 'revisionism' yet in the air, is quite remarkable."

Dunlop's book includes some interesting and useful appendices. The first provides biographical details about all the members of *VSKhSON*; various tables help the reader compare the educational, professional and marital status of the members; and there is a chronological table of the main events in the life of *VSKhSON*. The second appendix contains a

translation of the programme of VSKhSON. The third appendix lists all the books and documents which were available to VSKhSON members and which influenced their thought; this appendix also contains a list of works written by VSKhSON members themselves.

According to Dunlop, "what made VSKhSON particularly disturbing and unwelcome (i.e. to the Soviet power) was its 'neo-slavophil' orientation". But this was not the slavophilism of the late 19th century as propounded by I. Aksakov, Danilevsky and the Panславists with its extreme nationalism. This was the slavophilism of Solovyov and Berdyaev who were inspired by the idea of Russia's peculiar religious calling and unique role in world history. This should encourage us to believe that VSKhSON's policies of universalism and of tolerance towards national minorities were sincere and not mere cloaks for Great Russian chauvinism.

Nevertheless, in one significant respect the VSKhSON programme diverges from the slavophil model: it includes a plan for the overthrow of the regime by force. Slavophiles generally believe that "all power is of God" and must be suffered with patience. Indeed Osipov could not accept this part of the VSKhSON programme. Initially, it seems, the VSKhSON leaders found it difficult to justify political violence, but finally decided to aim for a coup d'état rather than a revolution so as to minimize bloodshed. From the start such a coup d'état was perhaps doomed to failure. VSKhSON did not have enough members; they had virtually no armaments; the rank and file members were not adequately briefed by Ogurtsov about what was involved in such a coup; nor was it clear how much support VSKhSON could rely on. Dunlop is perhaps too sanguine about the movement's chances of success. Ogurtsov, in his view, may have been hoping that a coup would succeed despite the small size of VSKhSON because the "People" would rally to the cause once the initiative had been taken. But how strong was the allegiance of the Russian populace to VSKhSON? Dunlop's assessment is perhaps over optimistic. He asserts that "it was the broad mass of the Soviet populace which gave birth to the rank and file (and leaders) of VSKhSON". In fact most of those recruited were members of the intelligentsia including, inevitably, many students from Leningrad University.

To combine an immediate, violent political end with a long-term programme of moral regeneration seems self-defeating. If the ideals propounded by the VSKhSON programme are to be safeguarded, it is probably wiser to rely at this stage on familiarizing the public with moral concepts and so to promote the "moral revolution" which Solzhenitsyn advocates.