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Book Review

Conscience, Dissent and Reform in Soviet Russia by Philip Boobbyer. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005 (BASEES/Curzon Series on Russian and East European Studies, vol. 21). Hardback, 282 pp., £65.

Mikhail Gorbachev's failed attempt at a 'perestroika' of the system of 'real existing socialism' and the largely nonviolent breakdown of the Soviet system allow for a wide variety of perspectives and approaches. In this well-written and well-structured book, Boobbyer makes a strong case for a 'moral interpretation' of Soviet history, and the material that he adduces is both quantitatively and qualitatively impressive. His book is a tribute to those hundreds of Soviet-Russian citizens, dissenters, intellectuals and reform-minded party members who did try to live according to their conscience and not 'by the lie', and who after the Second World War reintroduced a moral discourse of values, conscience and repentance. Most known figures, including such icons and 'role models' as Andrei Sakharov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Men', Dmitri Likhachev and Merab Mamardashvili (p. 220), and many unknown ones receive due attention in an account that is based on a rich and varied body of material, including 55 interviews (p. 231f). The core of Boobbyer's book, chapters 4 to 10, forms an excellent refresher course on the human side of Soviet history between 'thaw' and 'perestroika', discussing the human rights movement itself, literature as a moral authority, developments in the academic world, and the growing dissatisfaction within the ruling CPSU. The first three chapters discuss the 'preparatory' period up to Stalin's death in 1953, including a comprehensive discussion of prerevolutionary moral traditions, and the last two chapters and the conclusion focus on the perestroika period.

While Boobbyer does succeed in driving home the importance of the 'moral factor', he does not, however, really offer an understanding of how this factor relates to other relevant factors in offering an explanation of the 'fate' of the Soviet system. How does the moral factor relate to, say, international politics (the arms race that the USSR could not sustain economically), or the development of technologies of communication and information, or the flaws of a planned economy in terms of material rather than moral interests? The book thus leaves the reader with a question: is it a history of the Soviet *system* from a moral point of view in addition to other perspectives, or is it a history of 'conscience and repentance *discourse* in Soviet Russia' without addressing the question of how discourse relates to system? The author's claim that the Bolshevik project was a moral one from its inception strongly suggests the first, but this calls for a theoretical framework that assesses the relative-yet-real importance of morality – such a framework is, however, lacking. Reading the 'interest in issues of perestroika' as indicative of 'a time of soul-searching' (p. 199) is, in itself, convincing enough,

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but it confronts the historian with the impossible task of looking inside people's brains and hearts in order to distinguish, on the basis of interviews and memoirs, between the 'many expressions of regret for the past [that] were certainly heartfelt' and those 'statements of repentance [that] were likely also made in a ritualistic sense' (p. 202). Boobbyer's reluctance to pass judgment on people is correct and sympathetic, but in leaving open the question of 'sincerity' it risks turning his own thesis into a mere statement.

At the same time, one of the great merits of this book is that it convincingly highlights a number of parallel developments in official and unofficial Soviet society, thereby excluding any 'Manichaean' opposition between an 'evil' system and small numbers of 'good' people. The writer who, in the eyes of many (though not Boobbyer: p. 73), stands for this opposition, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, receives, in the end, less credit than the more pragmatic and modest Andrei Sakharov, who 'brought an ethical dimension into politics' (p. 220). Sakharov's pragmatism is met by Boobbyer's own realism that tells him 'how difficult it is to generalise about moral values' (p. 185). The parallel developments that Boobbyer notes include the important similarity between socialist realist novels and the novels of Solzhenitsyn and many other dissident writers: they were *Bildungsromane* (p. 142), meant to be formative and edifying, albeit in different directions. Also, the moral concern of dissidents coincided with a much wider sense of moral concern among the intelligentsia and, after publications by Tugarinov and Shishkin in 1960 and 1961, with the establishment of ethics as a philosophical discipline in its own right, no longer reducible to the categories of historical materialism (pp. 150, 152). The search for an alternative to the 'Leninist' instrumentalist justification of any means by an absolutely true and right end, and the quest for moral absolutes by authors like Abdusalam Guseinov and Yuri Davydov (p. 153), both point to a central weakness of the Marxist-Leninist world-view, namely the fact that the socialist order that came into being after the Bolshevik revolution was a transient stage by definition, and therefore not the real object of politics. In a communist society morality would become universal, and the opposition of revolutionary and bourgeois morality superfluous; however, this future stage was much slower in arriving than initially expected. Socialism was there to stay, and this forced the system, after the terror of the 1930s and the 'Great Patriotic War', to go 'back to normal', including normal values such as honesty, sincerity, and trust (p. 64). From this angle, Mil'ner-Irinin's thesis that 'in its final manifestation all-human morality would not have a class dimension' (p. 152) was not controversial because it was not Marxist, but because it denied class-struggle in the present.

Boobbyer's book shows, to my mind, that the existence both of dissidents and of reformers depends on the non-coincidence of reality and actuality: the Soviet system failed in its attempt to replace reality by an ideal. Even such a trivial fact as that 'Shevardnadze was stirred in his youth by a television production of Dickens' *David Copperfield*' (p. 134) obtains relevance in this light. Literature was not subversive because it was antisoviet in content, but because an independent reading culture as such was subversive. One of the interesting questions about the Soviet system, therefore, continues to be why it was not *more* totalitarian than it was: technically, it would have been perfectly possible, in the 1960s, to destroy the pre-revolutionary libraries in the homes where future *intelligenty* grew up, or to close, in the 1970s, the second-hand bookshops where they purchased their copies of *Vekhi* (*Landmarks*) (1909), or, in the 1980s, the *Berezka* shops where western visitors bought Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* for their Russian friends. *Samizdat* and *tamizdat* could have been crushed – they were not, but *why* not? Why was the resurgent interest in

pre-revolutionary Russia, including a revival of religious thought, and even of such practices as *startsy* and *yurodstvo* (pp. 107, 109), not clamped down upon? Why was the Soviet intelligentsia allowed to establish a continuity with its nineteenth-century predecessor, including the high expectations set on literature?

The hypothetical answer given by Boobbyer is the key to his book: 'The Soviet project', he writes, 'was from its inception a moral one' (p. 3, also p. 169). But while the revolutionary attempt 'to create a new society on the basis of a radical transformation of values' (*ibid.*) gradually gave way to the more conventional 'moral code of the builder of communism' reproduced by Boobbyer (p. 63), what remained was the *appeal to the individual*: the construction of communism and a life as a good Soviet citizen had to be the result of a conscious and conscientious individual choice, and it is this aspect which made the Soviet system 'morally vulnerable'. When in the late Soviet period the regime 'had lost the ability to appeal to the "human factor"' (p. 222), this was a problem to the extent to which it had come to rely, precisely, on this human factor. Boobbyer's emphasis on this aspect is, I believe, justified, but it tends to eclipse the vulgar truth that the nomenklatura also represented a cynical exploiting ruling class that tried to survive, as long as it could, the Stalinist dictatorship to which it owed its privileged existence.

The ethical dimension of the dissident human rights movement which undermined the system (pp. 74ff), its success, and even its influence on reformist circles within the CPSU (pp. 211, 229), Boobbyer argues, are impossible to understand without an insight into the *moral* failure of the system. The good news that can, arguably, be derived from the fate of Soviet-type humanism is that even the construction of a perfectly just and humane society relies on the crooked timber of humanity and, therefore, must fail. The end of the Soviet period in Russia in 1991 also marks the end of a process of gradual fusion of motivation 'from below' and 'from above' to change the situation; during the 1980s this brought to the fore the best in many participants, and led to a 'dialogue of traditions at the heart of the human rights movement and more generally in dissident and reformist culture' (p. 227). Boobbyer is probably wise not to spend too many words on what happened when the 'moral revolution' was over, and 'the idea that there was a "revolution of conscience" during perestroika' proved to be problematic (p. 229).

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