

'WE ARE ONLY BEGINNERS'

Sovietskaya Kultura interviews Yuri Afanasyev, Rector of the Moscow State Historical Archive Institute.¹

Sovietskaya Kultura: Our society is increasingly preoccupied with the problem of social passivity. You will therefore not be surprised if we ask you: what can historians do to remedy the problem?

Yuri Afanasyev: As in any society, the only answer to the problem is to tell the truth about the society in which we live. This is absolutely basic if we want to understand where our socialist society is going. The past is not simply a problem like any other. If we ignore it, we cannot come to grips with the present. If we do ignore it, ideas, both correct and incorrect, become incomprehensible, as do the hopes and fears on which they are based. Even our projects become incomprehensible. Human nature is such that we cannot get away from the past unless we understand it and base our actions on that understanding. That is a law of human nature.

In view of the problems our society is trying to resolve at the moment, it is essential that we study two key periods in our Soviet history: the period between **1917** and **1929** ('under Lenin and after Lenin'), and the period between **1956** and **1965** (the post-Stalin period, the **XXth** Congress, and attempts at reform). Studying the victories and defeats of these periods is not a futile exercise, as they were particularly dynamic and rich in contradictions.

To put it in more concrete terms: do we have an adequate understanding of the conflicting ideas, social projects and 'models' for socialism that were put forward during Lenin's lifetime and after his death? If we are to study these questions in depth, we have to be able to reread all the preparatory documents and reports from Party Conferences and Congresses, and that means that they must be republished in their entirety. And that in turn presupposes far-reaching changes in the way the Archive service works. Only when we have achieved that will we be able to study in sufficient detail the ideas—correct and incorrect—which caused such a stir at the time, and will we be able to understand their social roots and their internal logic.

I would go further still. Not everyone has the same opinion of Stalin.

And there can be no question of forgetting about his **articles** and reports. Perhaps we should think about republishing them in their entirety if necessary. Television still depicts him as wearing a halo of wisdom and glory. Why not give the younger generation a chance to form their own opinions by giving them access to Stalin's writings, as well as to those of Lenin and his comrades? Going back to the XXth Congress is not enough: we have to pursue the analysis further.

We cannot leave matters there. A recent television film called *My Contemporaries* showed the young Gagarin on his return to earth. He was walking down a carpet, and you could tell that someone was coming to meet him. Whose hand was he going to shake? The older generation exchanged knowing looks. But young people had no idea. Should Khrushchev's picture have been shown or not? He was a complex and ambiguous figure, and the role he played in the post-war history of our country deserves to be studied in detail. How long can we go on pretending that he never existed? That's why we saw Gagarin in isolation! We really have to remember our past.

We were speaking of how far we have fallen behind in the last **twenty-five** years. For people of my age, those were the best years of our lives, and they have gone for ever. That may well be a cause for sorrow for us, but we cannot afford to forget: that period is too important and there are too many lessons to be learned from it. We can remember the XXth Congress. . . and the Xth Congress. Nothing should be wiped from our memories: neither the bad things nor the happy and less happy experiences of history, neither the courageous and noble deeds nor the effects of what was done and what was not done. We have to understand the early history of the economic reforms introduced in the **1960s**, and the reasons for their failure.

Do you know what we really need? A regular, audacious and well-documented review of the history of the Party.

Myths or History?

S.K.: In the meantime, we have myths instead. Myths have begun to flourish in recent years. What are the origins of this historical mythology that so dominates popular consciousness and which leads people to say that 'Nicholas II was no fool' and 'Kolchak had lots of personality', and so on. Where do these myths come from?

Y.A.: It is possible that what you are describing as 'mythology' is only a partial reflection of a form of history which has been reduced to the level of anecdotes and gossip. Myths and superstitions are acceptable only on the outer fringes of serious research. They cannot be allowed to replace real history. People have to be taught to think in terms of broad and sophisticated categories, and not to be content with historical attitudes.

Then they will find out that, as those who were close to him knew, Nicholas II was not only of limited intelligence and poorly educated; he was also cowardly, narrow-minded and cruel.

Another factor in the myths surrounding reactionary politicians of the past is the use of a certain tradition of caricature which was already out of date fifty years ago and which cannot meet today's cultural needs. The fashionable prestige enjoyed by historical figures from the *ancien régime* and by certain periods of reaction may simply be an effect of the taboos that surround this whole problematic and of the artificial way in which we usually approach it.

At the same time, we can see that the history of the revolution has become impoverished and depersonalized, and that it has become bogged down in sociological schemas that leave people cold. Especially young people. To a certain extent, society has lost its sense of moral direction. It is obvious from the way that certain authors describe historical events and characters that they have no qualms about openly distancing themselves from the class struggle.

As a result, social awareness of our democratic traditions is being undermined. We have seen the emergence of an ideology (which is strongly encouraged in certain circles) which extols what it calls 'strong personalities'. This is an extremely serious phenomenon. Since the beginning of the 1970s, class positions have gradually been abandoned when it comes to analysing certain political figures or events. Even democratic positions are being abandoned.

Authors who have no qualms about attributing the heritage of Russian culture to the Tsarist regime and to the merits of its ruling classes, gleefully claim that the change in climate which occurred in the 1930s put an end to 'austere dogmatism' and paved the way for a much more positive evaluation of a bourgeois historiography which takes a very indulgent view of the *autocracy*.² In the name of a history which is capable of transcending 'narrow-minded' judgements about 'a dark and obscure period', certain authors of historical novels and stories have set themselves the far from original task of popularizing the 'national mission' of the Russian Tsars and aristocracy, and of fostering the belief that they expressed the interests of all classes and of the whole of society. The period when Russia was ruled from Kiev (*Our Contemporary*, 4, 1982), the reign of Ivan the Terrible (F. Nesterov, *Link Across Time*) and the reign of Catherine the Great and her companions in arms (*The Young Guard*, 3, 1970; *Questions of History*, 11, 1985, and Valentin Pikul's novel *The Favourite*³) have all been given this treatment. Now it is Nicholas II's turn (Iakovlieva, 1 August 1914). Nesterov, for instance, tries to convince his readers that the Russian people were 'as faithful to the Tsar as they were to God' and that their love for Ivan the Terrible was, despite his cruelties, greater than 'the love other sovereigns obtained by flattering and bribing the people'.

And so on.

It is regrettable that such ideas should enjoy such coverage in the press, as they are becoming the basis for the myths you mentioned earlier.

S.K.: According to some Western historians who praise the role the autocracy played in the development of the Russian State, October 1917 interrupted the normal course of history. What answer do we have to this analysis?

Y.A.: Any apologia for the autocracy is a blatant contradiction of the entire social-democratic tradition of the Russian intelligentsia and, in more general terms, of the whole progressive-democratic tradition. If we fail to take into account the broad anti-autocratic movement, we inevitably have a very superficial understanding of what really happened at the time. Everyone knew or felt that the Revolution would occur—even those who were afraid of it.

To describe October as interfering with the natural course of events raises some delicate and complex questions. But, basically, it is not an inaccurate description. If you think about it, the historians you mention are simply picking up one of Lenin's ideas. After all, it was Lenin who said that October represented a break with the natural order of historical development. All revolutions disrupt the normal course of events. But can the things that people create ever be said to follow a natural course? As they construct the future, people change life itself, sometimes brutally so. If, for instance, the events of April 1985 had not taken place, 'immobilism', corruption and nepotism would have gone on being the normal order of things.

To go back to October. Plekhanov and Martov in particular were in favour of the normal state of affairs. They believed that Russia was not ready for socialism, and that capitalism in Russia had yet to reach maturity. And Lenin knew that this was not a stupid argument. In fact he knew it better than the Mensheviks. But we know what his answer was.

According to Lenin, the dialectical paradox of October was as follows: the natural order of things had to be interfered with because it had become intolerable. The levers of proletarian power and cultural revolution had to be used to accelerate Russia's transition to socialism. An incredibly complicated and paradoxical problem then arose: the management of the country had to be strengthened and improved so as to strengthen socialism and to prepare for the transition to a state of self-management.

The Historian's Mea Culpa

S.K.: A lot of interesting books are being published on pre-revolutionary Russia, but our readers would probably have difficulty in naming even one popular work on the history of the Soviet period. Don't you see this as a

sign that historians are losing their influence on public opinion?

Y.A.: Unfortunately, this is true. Although it does not happen very often in Russia, books on history do sometimes represent a cultural event. But it is very rare for a book on Soviet history to do so.

Before historians can talk about the society in which we live on the basis of a sufficiently broad and pertinent problematic, they must have the moral right to do so. And they can only win that right if they challenge those who condemn history, and science in general, to social passivity, and if they fight the temptation to give in to inertia and servility. Historians can scarcely pass judgement on society if they stand back from it and address it from on high. If anyone has to make amends and cry 'Mea culpa', it is the historian. We can only hope that the hour for perestroika (restructuring) has sounded for our little community too. We have all heard enough calls for debates and for theoretical proposals in the past. But we all know only too well that when it comes to the science of history, new theories and discoveries are only welcome if they do not offend 'generally accepted ideas'. In the past, any deviation from the norm had serious implications, as it could mean elimination from the scientific field without further ado. One has only to think of the fate of historians like V.V. Adamov, E.N. Murdjalov and P.V. Volobuev.

In an attempt to retain their positions, certain people arrogated the right to pronounce upon theoretical problems. At the beginning of the 1970s, for instance, we saw the destruction of a whole trend in research. It was based upon the theory that pre-revolutionary Russian society was diversified, and defined the characteristics of Russia's **development** in historical terms.⁴ And now, fifteen years later, the same censors have the impudence to adopt the very ideas which they once denounced in the name of Marxism. Just look at that collective study of 'The Historical Experience of the Three Russian Revolutions'. How can anyone who adopts such a moralistic position and behaves in such an 'upright' fashion dare to propose a historical diagnosis and suggest a course of treatment? The course of treatment they recommend is straight out of the 'Short Course'.⁵

You were speaking of passivity and initiative. But how can you expect a historian to show any initiative when these same administrators have a monopoly on the scientific press? If they come across an article that does not quite conform to the directives issued by the editorial board of a scientific journal, you can be sure that they **will** persuade the board to authorize publication, provided that it does not make too many waves of course. But if you want to publish new ideas in your own journal, you come up against a wall of bureaucracy.

According to many of my colleagues, the ills that our society suffers from will only be cured when these bureaucratic obstacles are removed.

Only then will we be able to make advances in historical science. Removing the obstacles will be difficult. It is difficult enough to admit that there are problems. We have been criticised on the grounds that we have lost our ability to evaluate our scientific role in any critical way. We would argue that this criticism does not really apply to Party historians. And when we are urged to produce a structured and critical analysis of these problems, S.L. Tikhvinski, an Academician and the Secretary of the History Section, claims that *perestroika* is being used as an excuse to discredit the entire science of history. As though we didn't have better things to think about!

We have to be able to speak freely. For twenty years, intellectual life has been stagnant. Not entirely of course; that would be impossible. But it has been subject to serious restrictions for years. Nowadays it is fashionable to take a gloomy view of the situation in our country and of the impasse in which our planet finds itself. Of course we have to think about these things. But complaints also have to be addressed to specific individuals. And it is no accident that Mikhail Gorbachev constantly comes back to this point, and even names names in the Central Committee of the CPSU and in the leadership. We all have to do the same: *perestroika* and anonymous criticisms do not go together. Certain specific individuals were and are directly responsible for this immobilism. The least we can do is to let people know who they are, particularly as their way of thinking and their methods of action continue to have the same effects. The campaign to put a stop to certain developments in historical research at the beginning of the 1970s was headed by S.P. Trapeznikov, who had wide discretionary powers in this branch of science and who always appointed his own men to positions of power. They were therefore bound by ties of loyalty and by their common interests. Some of them still have important positions and are constantly calling for 'bold research and debates'. When the history section of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR met on 9 March, corresponding member P.V. Volobuev mentioned certain people by name, and savagely criticised the current state of our discipline. It is a pity that others did not follow his example. But certain administrators were heard to say that we should not hurry *perestroika*. We are, I believe, about to see an increasing polarization around these various positions. A new era is opening up, and a new campaign is about to begin.

'A Directive Against Directives'

S.K.: Is this just a matter of opportunism? What harm did it do to science and to readers in general? Which periods do we have to look at anew, in a more truthful light?

Y.A.: No, no: there are no more opportunists now. Just think of it. There used to be two kinds of people: those who used their brains, and those

who could not, or who had forgotten how to do so. The latter spent their entire lives following directives to the letter. But now the directive is: 'Intellectual Autonomy'. A directive against directives. And that really is new.

At a more serious level, many people refuse to 'reform' so as not to compromise their own interests, or perhaps they are simply incapable of doing so. We need new forces. It is no accident that in January 1987, a year after the XXVIIth Congress, the Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU raised the question of cadres.

You were asking which periods we have to look at anew, in a more truthful light. The logic of the development of science is such that there is no such thing as a problem which has been resolved once and for all and which does not have to be re-examined. But having said that, in the present situation, the task of the historian is to contribute to perestroika and to ensure that it is an irreversible process. Certain questions therefore have to take priority. I think the time has come for us to make it possible to study all the problems connected with the Stalin cult. At the moment, no research is being done on these problems, even though they raise questions of overwhelming importance. On the other hand, non-Marxist historiography has produced hundreds, if not thousands, of books on the subject. The result is that Soviet historians like V.I. Kassianenko who specialize in the Stalin period tend to get lost. In my view, they get lost because they insist on approaching the problem from the wrong angle.

When he comes to discuss the mass repression of innocent citizens in the 1930s, Kassianenko is unsure whether to talk about 'mistakes', 'insufficient respect for socialist legality' (which is mentioned in the same breath as 'inadequate services') or 'excesses which were inevitable during the class struggle and during revolutionary reconstruction'. Yet a number of famous Party resolutions refer to 'perversions', 'arbitrary rule', 'abuse of power during the period of the personality cult' and to the outrages committed by Beria's 'criminal gang'. Those are the phrases which people remember. Since 1956, no scientific data has emerged to help us reconsider the problem. Kassianenko himself provides no new data in his article on the construction of socialism in the USSR and the struggle between two worlds (*Questions of History*, 2, 1968). The Party resolutions have never been overturned, and it is quite unjustifiable, in either political or moral terms, to call them into question.

S.K.: Nowadays we prefer to read Marx and Lenin without having to rely on ready-made interpretations. Why do ready-made interpretations deny us access to Marxism?

Y.A.: That is something of a rhetorical question, and the answer is obvious.

We have to read Marx and Engels, not potted versions and paraphrases.

It is depressing to see how rarely our students turn to the original texts and to find that they regard them as illustrative appendices to commentaries. Marx and Lenin are our eternal companions rather than our masters. They force us to think, and they raise more problems than they solve. They give us an intellectual stimulus. We have to look at the founders of Marxism in the light of changes which they could never have foreseen. But the textbooks present us with changes that took place long ago and with problems that have been resolved for good. The ideas of Marx and Lenin are described as though they were answers, and not problems.

And that is the essence of dogmatism

Why do apparently learned commentaries act as a barrier to reading the texts? For the very simple reason that they are not learned. They are based upon postulates such as 'The classics are always right and they are completely right', or 'They have truth on their side, and their adversaries have only lies on their side'. And even when the classics themselves give the lie to that, even when Marx and Lenin change their minds or contradict what they once said, our commentators talk about 'changing realities', but not about conflict, research or choices. Reality changes, but the classics do not! Those who argued with Marx and Lenin were educated men of great talent, and some of them were in fact brilliant, like Proudhon, Bakunin, Lassale, Kropotkin and Plehkanov. If we describe them as stupid, we diminish the status of the classics themselves. As with all historical values, the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin acquire a new depth as time passes; they acquire a new and richer content which they themselves could never have predicted. Their ideas represent an opening on to the future.

And that is not all. Every period tries to find answers to its own questions in Lenin's writings. And it seems to me that we should now be taking a particular interest in three periods. We have to look at the beginnings of the construction of a socialist economy, and we have to study the Leninist art of handling political changes. I do not mean that we have to go into all the details, but we do have to understand the general principles of his political thought and his harsh polemics with major figures who were both brilliant and useful to the Revolution.

Art Does Not 'Have' To Do Anything

S.K.: Art fills in the gaps in history and provides the missing pieces in the jigsaw. Chatrov's plays are one example, and it is not surprising that they should be so popular.⁶ We are tired of both unilateral official in . . . tations and of Western commentaries on the Revolution and the Civil War. In your view, what historical events and processes could provide the themes for works that could move readers in the same way that, say, *Quiet Flows the Don* moves them? What do you expect from the historical

novel and from literature in general?

Y.A.: Literature, and art in general, obviously cannot replace the work of historians or social thought. When Chatrov makes a montage of texts and documents, he is doing useful work, and his talent is not in dispute, but his work represents a serious challenge to historians, who are irreplaceable. Conversely, history cannot replace art. Art can capture an atmosphere and can sum up whole periods in a way that even the most brilliant and honest historian cannot. Take the Civil War: no historian can rival the work of Isaak Babel, Vsevolod Ivanov or Gleb Panfilov.

I am not entirely happy with the way you phrase the question: 'What contribution does art have to make?' Art does not 'have' to do anything. Alexei Guerman's film *My Friend Lapchin*, for example, shows that the events of the early 1930s affected every aspect of contemporary life. The characters in the film do not know that, and they do not know what the future holds in store for them, but the spectator does. Suddenly a distant historical moment is magically transformed into a whole era which stretches from the Civil War to our own day.

Given that I expect art to be. . . art, I cannot really say what I expect from it. But if it really 'has' to be something, let's say that I expect it to surprise me and to investigate the past in depth. It was quite impossible to predict that films like those by Guerman and Tengviz Abuladze would be made.' The same could be said of Tarkovky's *Mirror* and *Andrei Roublev*, a film which is both powerful and *debatable*.⁸

I don't know what I expect of art.

Lenin's 'State and Revolution'

S.K.: October 1917. . . October 1987. Which moments in this period can shed new light on both the period as a whole and on our current problems?

Y.A.: I often ask myself why Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* during the last peaceful moments before the great explosion of October. We have to read and reread that text. The proletariat was about to seize power, and the question of power was crucial. For the social-democrats, there was a choice: state or revolution. For Lenin, everything centred on the conjunction: how could the *and* be made a political reality? The *and* is central to Lenin's thought, and our experience, with all its failures and successes, confirms its importance. The revolution takes place in state forms, but the state has to be revolutionary. The expression 'a revolutionary state' is a paradox, and everything revolves around the *and*. Why? The expression 'bureaucracy and revolution' is unthinkable. Lenin's main concern was to avoid the creation of a Soviet bureaucracy. It is clear that for him the State was indispensable, but that a bureaucratic state would mean the collapse of the Revolution. Creating a State without a bureaucracy was

therefore the central issue.

It so happens that, at some point, one of the two terms disappeared from our intellectual framework: we remembered the State and forgot the Revolution. But we are now once more faced with the problem of State and Revolution. It is no accident that Gorbachev's report to the last full meeting of the Central Committee paid such particular attention to this problem, or that the second part of that report should have dealt with strengthening socialist democracy and promoting self-management.

When we begin to assess the choices made in the 1970s, we have to emphasize the fact that we were in too great a hurry to shout 'Victory!' and that we forgot that what we were seeing was the beginning of a universal change that was to last for hundreds or even thousands of years. We are still living in the first century, even the first day, of a long process. Both our successes and our failures have to be assessed on that time scale. This only a beginning. The value of our experience, our struggles, our sufferings and our hopes are our contribution to world history. If he were alive today, Lenin would probably make new adjustments and introduce new changes. It is a sobering thought to realize that his essential ideas have not dated, that they relate to the future and that they have yet to become part of reality. Lenin regarded Marx in this way, and if we are to follow the Leninist tradition, we must regard Lenin in the same way.

S.K.: You are the Rector of a university institute and you are therefore responsible for training a new generation of historians. What does *perestroika* mean to you, and what will the new historians be like?

Y.A.: The goals I pursue as a Rector and those I pursue as a historian are obviously not the same. Some goals seem to me to take priority over others. I think, for instance, that teaching should be improved and enriched to such an extent that we no longer turn out opportunists, 'priests' who recite ready-made truths, or pen-pushers who take a bureaucratic approach to archive work. We should be turning out real historians who understand the cultural meaning of their work.

NOTES

1. This interview originally appeared in *Sovietskaya Kultura*, March 21, 1987.
2. The reference is to Stalin's 1936 rehabilitation of a form of historiography which took a favourable view of Souvorov and other Tsarist heroes. Solzhenitsyn takes the view that, by rehabilitating this current, Stalin gave Russians a Fatherland once more.
3. Pikul is a writer of Lithuanian origins; his work is strongly influenced by Pan-Russianism and has xenophobic overtones. His historical novels, almost all of which have become best-sellers, have given rise to a certain indignation amongst the liberal intelligentsia. When he was interviewed by Le *Nouvel Obsewateur* (8 May 1987), Academician Dmitri Likhatchev, whose patriotism is beyond reproach, described them as 'revolting'. *Pravda* refuses to take sides, but on

17 May 1987 it published an interview with **Pikul** entitled 'I Like Strong Personalities'.

4. The reference is to Mikhail Guefter's theory of the 'multiform' social structure of pre-revolutionary Russia.
5. The publication of the *History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks): Short Course* was authorized by Stalin in 1938.
6. Mikhail Chatrov's best-known play is *The Dictatorship of the Conscience*, which is currently running at the Leninski Komsomol Theatre. It portrays an imaginary trial involving Lenin, but is in reality an attack on Stalin and Stalinism. A two-act play entitled *The Brest Peace* was published in *Novy Mir* in April 1987. It brings together Lenin, **Trotsky**, Bukharin, Kamenev and Stalin. It is due to be staged at Moscow's Vakhtangov theatre, and will probably provoke the same impassioned debates as *Dictatorship*.
7. **Tenguiz** Abuladz's *Repentance* was awarded the jury's special prize at the Cannes Film Festival. It was first shown in Moscow in January 1987 after a four year delay, and denounces a dictator who bears a close resemblance to **Beria**.
8. Andrei Tarkovsky, whose Christian-inspired films won many prizes in the West, died in Paris after spending several years in exile. The Soviet press ignored the political positions he took in the last years of his life, and unanimously praised his work. His most recent films (*Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*) have not yet been shown in the USSR.