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Stephen Miller

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## New York Jew: A Tale Distorted

*In the third volume of his autobiography, Alfred Kazin grotesquely misrepresents the character of Lionel Trilling, rehearses the orthodoxy of anti-anti-Communism, and reduces Jewish history and culture to a narrow ethnic mystique.*

“The reciprocal civility of authors,” Samuel Johnson said, “is one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life.” A writer who was at the center of literary life in London for about 40 years in the mid-eighteenth century, Johnson well knew how writers are wracked more than most people with the pains of envy, jealousy, and resentment. It comes as no surprise that Alfred Kazin’s *New York Jew*,\* a memoir of life among writers and intellectuals in New York during the past 30 years, shows up some authors for the vain, petty, and mean-spirited souls they often are—personal qualities that say nothing, of course, about the quality of their work. It comes as some surprise, though, that a few weeks after the book was reviewed favorably in the *New York Times Book Review*, 19 distinguished intellectuals objected—in a letter to the editor of the book review—to what they described as Kazin’s “grotesque misrepresentation” of Lionel Trilling, the well-known literary and cultural critic who died several years ago.

Lionel Trilling is one of the central figures in Kazin’s book, which is the third volume of an autobiographical trilogy that includes *A Walker in the City* and *Starting Out in the Thirties*. Dense with precise observations of the urban landscape and rich in fascinating sketches of famous writers, *New York Jew* is a tightly-woven and elegantly-written work of autobiographical art. Yet it is also a disturbing, misleading, and irritating book. And these qualities are especially apparent in Kazin’s portrait of Trilling.

The portrait is an ambivalent one. When Trilling first appears on Kazin’s stage, he is praised as a “master of distinctions,” someone with an extraordinarily subtle and fine mind. But it was a mind so fine, Kazin soon implies, that no clearcut political or cultural position could violate it. According to Kazin, Trilling was a careerist, an opportunist who always worried about his reputation. “He seemed,” Kazin says, “intent on not diminishing his career by a single word.” The initial bow of respect is followed by a slap in the face. “No one,” Kazin says, “could have been more discerning, and less involved.”

Kazin confesses that he was once invited to dinner at the home of Lionel Trilling and his wife, Diana Trilling, and that he was never invited back. Should we dismiss Kazin’s portrait of Trilling as mere petulance on Kazin’s part for having been, in effect, snubbed by the Trillings? Or should we dismiss it as resentment on Kazin’s part for not having received quite as many literary honors as Trilling received? Such speculations, I think, should be indulged in only by those who knew Trilling and Kazin—only by those who are capable of entering into an argument about Trilling’s character. The disinterested outsider can only examine

the general ideas that go into the making of the portrait. And they are worthy of discussion, for they touch upon a question that has been at the center of American intellectual life since the end of World War II.

The question is a two-fold one: What were the appropriate responses to the evils of Communism and Nazism? Throughout *New York Jew*, Kazin implies that on both issues—if we can call Nazism an issue—Trilling’s response failed to pass the test of adequacy whereas his own passed with flying colors.

The question of an appropriate response to Communism requires some historical elaboration. After the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, most American intellectuals broke completely with the Communists, the exception being Lillian Hellman and a band of Hollywood screenwriters who devoutly worshipped the Soviet Union until the late forties and early fifties. The question for most intellectuals was not whether one should be for Communism but how one should be against it, and the debaters sorted themselves out into two distinct groups: the anti-Communists and the anti-anti-Communists. Although such crude terms don’t do justice to the nuanced political positions of many, they have a certain appropriateness since they were employed by those participating in the debate.

The anti-anti-Communists considered it reprehensible to dwell on the evils of Communism because they thought that by doing so one played into the hands of reactionary forces. To some extent they were right. Some anti-Communists were out-and-out reactionaries who were quick to label any liberal idea as Communist-inspired; and some, like Senator Joseph McCarthy, were unscrupulous exploiters of populist paranoia about foreign ideologies. Finally, some were sincere ex-radicals who became tediously obsessive in their preoccupation with the spread of Communism; that was all they could think or write about. But there were other intellectuals who deplored the excesses of the radical right and yet at the same time recognized that it was perfectly legitimate to worry about Soviet expansion under the banner of Communism, which they saw as a threat to America’s allies and ultimately to the United States itself. The Cold War, they realized, was not an American invention—not an American fit of self-induced madness. Although American diplomacy may have needlessly exacerbated tensions at times, the Soviet Union was a power to be feared and indeed to be preoccupied with. Among this latter group, whom we might call the sober anti-Communists, was Lionel Trilling, though it should be said that he was less vocal about these matters than other more political writers such as Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Sidney Hook, and Diana Trilling. Kazin, as one might suspect, was on the other side; he considered himself an anti-anti-Communist.

\* Alfred A. Knopf; \$10.95.

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One would think that a writer bent on describing the shape of intellectual life in New York after the war would offer a reasonably serious discussion of the relative merits of both positions, but Kazin does no such thing. He simply has no use for the sober anti-Communists, and he damns them in several ways. For one thing, he does not believe they were sober. About Diana Trilling, for example, he has the following to say: "She was a dogged woman and looked it, with a passion for polemic against all possible dupes of the Soviet Union that in the McCarthy era and the heyday of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom was to make her the scourge of all mistaken ill-thinking 'anti-anti-Communists.'" Mentioned in the same breath as McCarthy, Diana Trilling is also caricatured as the political equivalent of a woman's temperance crusader, her anti-Communism the self-righteous passion of someone whose favorite literary genre, according to Kazin, "seemed to be the letter to the editor."

According to Kazin, Lionel Trilling's anti-Communism was a less passionate affair; it was, rather, the posture of a trimmer. Trilling, Kazin implies, embraced anti-Communism because it was a safe position, one in tune with the political orthodoxy of the fifties. Trilling was thus one in spirit with the writers who worked with Kazin on the staff of *Time* magazine, about whom he says: "How helpful to some careers it became to say so"—to say, that is, how much one opposed Communism. Throughout the book Kazin makes fun of Trilling's favorite terms of discourse—society, culture, the educated classes—implying that these genteel phrases enabled Trilling to avoid confronting the sordid realities of American power during the Cold War era. Kazin was wiser, for he knew that "government ruled, not 'Society.'" "

Kazin's speculations about Trilling's motives might be right if preaching anti-Communism truly helped one's career in the literary and intellectual world. But in the New York intellectual and academic circles in which Trilling and Kazin moved anti-anti-Communism was orthodoxy. Anti-Communism may have played well in Peoria—and thus may have helped the careers of some journalists and many politicians—but it bombed in New York, where Whittaker Chambers, who preached anti-Communism in the pages of *Time*, was regarded with a loathing usually reserved for the likes of a Hitler. Just as Senator McCarthy labelled all liberals crypto-Communists, so many anti-anti-Communists thought all anti-Communists were crypto-McCarthyites. Kazin himself calls Irving Kristol a "professional rightist," a phrase that belongs to the arsenal of Stalinist vituperation. One wonders why he refrains from calling Lionel Trilling a "bourgeois deviationist." To suggest the hold Kazin's vision of the Cold War years still has on many intellectuals, one need only quote from a recent article on Lionel Trilling in *Salmagundi*, a leading literary journal, where the writer lumps all anti-Communists—sober or not—together, and speaks of the "headlong flights" of writers like James Burnham, Sidney Hook, Irving Kristol, Whittaker Chambers, John Dos Passos, and Arthur Koestler "from one political extreme to the other" (emphasis mine), as if this very mixed bag of writers espoused a politics that was the mirror image of Stalinism! The orthodoxy of anti-anti-Communism still reigns in intellectual circles, and all those who think differently are considered hysterical crusaders or opportunistic careerists.

Kazin assumes that anti-anti-Communism was the only enlightened, responsible, and courageous position that one could take during the Cold War era. Lionel Trilling thought otherwise. In an introduction to the re-issue of his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, Trilling says that the very phrase anti-anti-Communism "tells us how much authority Stalinist Communism still had for the intellectual class." Anti-anti-Communism, Trilling continues, "was not quite so neutral a position as at first it might seem to have been: it said that although, for the moment at least, one need not be actually for [emphasis Trilling's] Communism, one was morally compromised, turned toward evil and away from good, if one was against it." One of the consequences of anti-anti-Communism is that it has led to a serious exaggeration and distortion of the evils of the McCarthy era. Kazin says of this period that "the demand for orthodoxy suffocated me." In what way, one wants to know? Could he not get published? Was he persecuted by

politicians, hounded out of a job? Kazin also calls a congressman on the House Committee on Un-American Activities "the good American Vishinsky." If this is a joke, it is in bad taste, since to compare the harassment and mild persecution of several thousand Americans with the murder of millions of innocent Russians (Vishinsky was the chief prosecutor of Stalin's purge trials) is absurd. Although Kazin was never an apologist for the Soviet Union and was never as foolish about the Soviet Union as Lillian Hellman, his autobiography perpetuates the legend of scoundrel time that Hellman created in her autobiography. Whatever we think of Kazin's portrait of Trilling, his picture of intellectual life during the McCarthy era surely qualifies as a grotesque misrepresentation.

## II

What constituted an appropriate response to Nazism? An idle question, one would think, since there were no anti-anti-Nazis; there were only anti-Nazis, pure and simple. In any case, Kazin's response is clear: The matter—or, rather, the awesome fact—of Nazism is for him "the nightmare that would bring everything else into question; that will haunt me to my last breath." As is obvious from the book's title, Kazin makes much of his sense of himself as a Jew, and this self-consciousness is continually related to his preoccupation with the Nazis' war against the Jews. The nightmare of Nazism is the thematic note of the book, one that Kazin sounds throughout.

According to Kazin, Lionel Trilling did not have such nightmares—or, at least, he never alluded to them, never confronted the fact of Nazism in his writings. Yet he too, like Kazin, was the son of poor Jewish immigrants; and therefore the nightmare of Nazism, Kazin implies, *should* have haunted him. Trilling turned his back on this question because, as Kazin says twice in the course of three pages, all his life Trilling defended himself from the many things he had left behind. Although Trilling did not deny his Jewish background, he took great pains to distance himself from Jewish manners and Jewish questions. As Kazin says: "I had never encountered a Jewish intellectual so conscious of social position, so full of adopted finery in his conversation." Because Trilling was eager to become a respected and respectable cultural critic, he could not afford to be a New York Jew; and Kazin, an intellectual who had not lost touch with his Jewish past, made him uncomfortable. "For Trilling," Kazin says, "I would always be 'too Jewish,' too full of my lower-class experience." Trilling, Kazin suggests, carefully avoided the question of Nazism because it would not help his literary career to dwell on subjects that might call attention to his Jewish origins. Trilling's response to Nazism was inadequate because there simply was no response.

Such is Kazin's case against Trilling on this matter, a case developed by fits and starts, at times presented explicitly, at times offered in the muffled voice of innuendo. Let us assume that Kazin is right and that Trilling, as Robert Alter put it, adopted "the manner of a facsimile WASP." No doubt those who attempt to assume a way of life far removed from their origins may appear ludicrous and pathetic, but Kazin implies that acting in this way constitutes a kind of ethnic dishonesty, a betrayal of one's background. The son of a Jewish tailor, he implies, has no right to speak the way Trilling did. Kazin also assumes that Jewish writers are obligated to wrestle with their Jewishness directly, not obliquely, and so he condemns Trilling for evading the subject. Both assumptions betray a rigid and self-righteous kind of cultural determinism.

Perhaps Nazism did haunt Trilling as it haunted Kazin, but he chose not to let it determine what he would write about. Yet perhaps Nazism did not haunt him—did not, that is, haunt him more than the other nightmares of the twentieth century. The path to one's origins is not a straight and narrow one. Just as some Armenians (or Poles, or Ukrainians, or blacks, or countless other persecuted ethnic and racial groups) will be more preoccupied with their distinctive history and distinctive miseries than others, so some Jews will choose the path of a Kazin, some the path of a Trilling—if, indeed, Trilling's path is correctly charted by Kazin.



To assign vulgar motives to those who take the path of a Trilling smacks of ethnic mystique.

Unfortunately, *New York Jew* is shot through with ethnic mystique. I say this not to unmask Kazin's Jewishness as a literary pose—and not, certainly, to question the sincerity of Kazin's deep anguish about the fate of the Jews under the Nazis. I say it to point out that the emotional and intellectual configuration of Kazin's Jewishness is a very contemporary phenomenon, resembling the mystique peddled by other contemporary writers who dwell on their blackness, womanness, Irishness, etc. This sensibility is commonplace among those who have, in some measure, become deracinated—have lost their cultural moorings and are floating free. Ill at ease in their isolated freedom, they continually conjure up a sense of community that is based upon their anguished and outraged awareness of the unique nature of their people's sufferings.

Such a mystique usually has little to do with the felt life of a particular cultural or religious tradition. Kazin, in fact, makes it quite clear that he wanted to escape the weight of Jewish traditions—that it was his early ambition to move in a "world of power in which my own people had moved about as strangers." Kazin's sense of Jewishness, Robert Alter has said, is "peculiarly disembodied." For Kazin, being Jewish means belonging to a community composed of suffering outsiders; it does not mean subscribing to a distinctive body of customs, ceremonies, and thought.

The guiding light of this disembodied Jewishness is Franz Kafka, whom Kazin calls "our brother" and "our great and beautiful novelist, prophet, misfit"—a prophet because his works anticipated the Holocaust. Kafka earns the right to be labelled with an "our" because for Kazin he is *the* Jewish writer, his imagination dominated by a distinctively Jewish sense of guilt and suffering. It was Kafka who said that "not the murderer but the victim is guilty," and Kazin says that the Jews "were just a people *accused* [emphasis Kazin's], as of old; a people whose only mission was to feel guilty." By making Kafka serve as the archetype of the Jewish imagination, and thus especially capable of being appreciated and understood by Jewish readers, Kazin does violence to the unique literary characteristics of Kafka's work that make it moving and chilling to many readers, whatever their ethnic background. Moreover, by writing about Kafka in this way, Kazin indulges in a kind of ethnic obscurantism, for there is no such thing as a distinctively Jewish imagination—a point that should be apparent to anyone who has read Saul Bellow, Isaac Babel, Isaac Singer, Philip Roth, and a host of other Jewish writers.

Perhaps Kazin can so confidently appropriate Kafka in this way because Kazin himself has such a limited notion of Jewishness—equating it with suffering and guilt. He reduces Jewish history and Jewish culture to a melodramatic, one-dimensional lamentation about the miseries of a people who are misfits, outsiders. The Jews, he says, have suffered—and, presumably, will continue to suffer—because "in a world increasingly conceived as the struggle of 'modern' revolutionary forces, the Jews seemed to be entirely a people of the past, living in the past." This generalization is simply untrue; the least thought about the matter should have made Kazin realize that the Jews are not the only people rooted in the past. Kazin, however, needs the notion of Jewish uniqueness in order to link the suffering the Jews underwent at the hands of

the Nazis with the suffering he—a New York Jew—underwent in his several marriages. "We fought," he says of one such marriage, "like the cornered Jews we were...." Kazin knows how terrible the final solution was, but surely the notion of the eternally suffering Jew makes it easy to lose sight of the uniqueness of the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. During the first five years of the forties, European Jews truly were cornered.

Kazin criticizes Trilling for defending himself from the many things he had left behind—in particular, his Jewish origins. But Kazin has also left his Jewish past, and the Jewish mystique that he rehearses in this autobiography is also a defense of sorts, a way of being Jewish without bearing the weight of Jewish traditions. Kazin is not so much in touch with his Jewish past as haunted by that aspect of it which speaks only of suffering. Learning about the Jews at Belsen who greeted their liberators by reciting the most important Hebrew prayer, Kazin says: "Weeping in the rain, I said it with them. For a moment I was home." But Kazin is "home" only for a moment, only when he confronts the horrors of the concentration camps. It would be pointless and heartless to ask whether this is an appropriate response to Nazism, but it is a dis-

turbing and—in some ways—a complacent response, for Kazin's Jewishness quickens into life only when he thinks of the Nazis and his marital ordeals. The land of Kazin's Jewish mystique is a uniform vale of tears, a land peopled only with "obsessed, grieving Jews." In this sense, we might call Kazin's Jewish mystique a misrepresentation of sorts—a simplification and a distortion of the complex world of Jewish history and Jewish culture.

To fathom the motives that led to this misrepresentation is impossible, but Lionel Trilling's essay, "The Fate of Pleasure," provides an intelligent gloss on the emotional and intellectual strategies at work in *New York Jew*. In that essay, Trilling argues that "our high culture invites us to transfer our energies from the bourgeois competition to the spiritual competition." Or, to put it in less abstract terms, intellectuals have some need to show to others not how rich or successful or clever they are, but how spiritually

intense they are—how much they are capable of suffering, anguish, and rage. In *New York Jew*, Kazin seems to be engaged in a spiritual competition both with Trilling—implying that Trilling was less moved by the nightmare of Nazism than he was—and with himself; by dwelling on the fatality of his Jewishness, he seems to be reassuring himself that, as Trilling put it in his essay, "I have more life in me than I have."

*New York Jew*, however, is not all in this vein. At times Kazin forgets that he is a cornered Jew and gives us affecting portraits of several American writers as well as luminous descriptions of the many walks he has taken in Paris, London, Rome, and New York. These descriptions of the urban landscape are very much in the American grain, recalling the poetry of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, and they possess an energy and dazzle that Trilling's grave "English" prose never attained. In fact, we may say that Kazin, unlike Trilling, is very much an American writer, both in his celebrations of walking in the city and in his spiritual aggrandizement—his championing of the lacerated self. Perhaps the Trillings snubbed Kazin—if, indeed, they did snub him—not because they disliked his politics or were uncomfortable with his Jewishness but because they found him too intensely American. Perhaps, to use a contemporary idiom that seems especially appropriate, they thought that he came on too strong. □



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W. Scott Thompson

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## The Soviets' African Waltz

*A knack for imaginative and effective leadership is what the Soviets prize most in their African allies. In this respect, Colonel Haile Mengistu Meriam of Ethiopia—who in 1977 walked into a cabinet meeting and shot all of his erstwhile colleagues—is a model ruler.*

It was in the center of Accra, 1966, just a few days after Ghana's armed forces had overthrown the "Osagyefo" (Redeemer) Kwame Nkrumah. I watched with mild amusement as busload after busload of expelled Russians headed for the airport, now that the new men in charge had decided to end Ghana's growing dependence on Moscow. Crowds of Ghanaians jeered at the Russians, who had won no more points for good manners or style here than elsewhere. "They crowd market and buy old missionary clothes from America," an elderly matriarch mumbled at me. "No good person buy used clothes. Ghanaians dress fashionable." (Had she realized how much better these cast-offs from Kansas were than what was available in Kiev or Smolensk she might have been more charitable.) Still young and naive, I turned to a European diplomat-friend, who had been around Africa a long time, and suggested that perhaps this signalled the end for Russia in Africa. Africans seemed to be coming to their senses after their early flirtations with the Soviets after independence; and perhaps the overthrow of Nkrumah's tyranny promised a return to more congenial and more democratic values.\*

"The Russians will be back," my friend said. "Maybe not to Ghana, but wherever there is chaos—and of that there will be plenty. The thin veneer of Western institutions is crumbling very quickly in Africa today. New, even less sophisticated leaderships will need new guidelines for governance, of which nothing is more serviceable than Lenin's green light to any kind of tactic for sustaining power.

"And the Russians will be ready to come back. Their leaders are *hommes sérieux*. They will sit down and analyze their mistakes here—and *Pravda* won't have to mention this monumental humiliation. They will come back wherever there is the opportunity, until they have got control, from a strategic point of view, of the whole continent with its absolutely indispensable mineral wealth."

Following their expulsion, the Russians did indeed convene conferences and study groups to examine their failings. Unlike the process of self-flagellation that took hold in the United States after Vietnam, this was undertaken from the rather sensible point of view: "How do we prevent imperialism from outmaneuvering us next time?" What the Soviets' published lessons reflect is their realization that great dangers lay in involving themselves too deeply with a state whose ruling party was not "tied deeply to the masses" (to use that very special euphemism for ironclad control), or whose leadership was not in some way critically dependent on Soviet support. That the Soviets had overlooked this in the case of Ghana was no doubt due in part to their earlier success in making an ally of Cuba. Khrushchev had concluded that he could easily find more Cubas, and more Castros, in Africa. His successors, after the loss of Ghana, were more sensitive to the special circum-

stances of the Cuban situation: its unique geographical position and hence its great dependence for survival on Soviet support.

At the same time, the post-Khrushchev leadership was determined to narrow the gap in diplomatic clout between itself and America. What emerged in the way of a policy toward Africa was at once a new flexibility at the purely diplomatic level and a far stricter ideological standard for full engagement. In other words, reap what benefits are available from any state that really matters whatever its ideology; but if you are going to get deeply involved, make sure that you can control the situation insofar as it affects Soviet interests. That meant making sure there was a Leninist mentality present in the leadership and lots of imported Communist advisers in the cadre.

In the intervening years, the Soviets ceased to worry excessively—if at all—about small African states, except where strategic advantage lay (as with Somalia and Guinea, whose leaders allowed the Soviets to build base facilities). Thus, instead of fretting over the survival of a regime like little Mali's, or coining new categories of socialist standing so as to include its party in the Communist pantheon, they cultivated big states that mattered.

The new policy first paid off with the Nigerian civil war. Hardly any state in Africa had been so reviled in Soviet literature under Khrushchev in the 1960s, but when civil war broke out in 1967, the Soviets filled up the anti-insurgents' arsenals. Since the end of that war in early 1970, the Soviets have enjoyed highly useful relations with Nigeria, of great utility in generating parliamentary majorities at continental African (and UN) gatherings where Nigeria's influence is great.

This was the course of Soviet policy through the early seventies. Small advances were made here and there, small losses were sustained from time to time, but the balance sheet showed a slow but inexorable gain. Moreover, while the KGB fed weaponry to insurgents throughout the continent and nurtured friendly regimes, the United States, trying to extricate itself from Southeast Asia, was ignoring Africa almost altogether. And the Soviets were in no hurry to disabuse Mr. Kissinger of his notion of Africa's unimportance.

It was events *outside* Africa that gave Moscow its long-awaited

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\* The Russians lost a great deal with the change of government in Ghana—including a strategic airbase that had NATO strategists nervous. At the intelligence level, KGB and East German agents had been able to recruit operatives within Ghana (from among both the natives and the numerous, ever-present pan-African freedom fighters). Two KGB agents, Robert Akmerov and Col. Vladimir Sverchkov, had been allowed to set up a Technical Unit ("#3") to tap buildings where visiting heads of state and other dignitaries stayed. Russian-supplied patrol boats, used not by the navy, but by a presidentially-directed border guard unit, carried arms to opposition groups in neighboring countries, where Ghanaian and Russian interests ran parallel. By the time the coup occurred, a group of senior Ghanaian officials was working, under instructions from Nkrumah, to change Ghana into a "scientific socialist" republic on the "Eastern" model.

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