

Letter From California

by Jay Kinney

Soviet Agitprop Implodes



Though it gets harder to remember with every passing day, one of the long-established premises of the recently ended Cold War was the notion that both the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. were engaged in an ideological battle for the minds and souls of the world's population. In line with this the West used powerful transmitters to beam Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty past the Iron Curtain while the Soviets spent millions trying to jam the broadcasts. For its part, the U.S.S.R. established numerous international front organizations and publications to parrot the Soviet line.

For decades this East-West psychological warfare was relatively upfront. Their side touted Marxism-Leninism, denounced American imperialism, and encouraged Third World "liberation struggles." Meanwhile, our side touted the free market and democracy, denounced Soviet imperialism, and encouraged Third World development. However, after five years of *glasnost* and *perestroika* and the much heralded end of the Cold War, we have come to a puzzling juncture where the psy-war hasn't exactly ended but seems to have imploded—at least at the Soviet end. Soviet propaganda is still being produced, but the logic behind it has gotten a little . . . twisted.

To see this more clearly, consider for a moment a typical pre-*glasnost* analysis of Soviet "active measures," i.e., propaganda and disinformation aimed at the West. In *Dezinformatsia: The Strategy of Soviet Disinformation* (1986), two Sovietologists identified Soviet propaganda themes and noted their reproduction by front organizations and other secondary sources. The authors analyzed two prime sources: the weekly "International Review" column in *Pravda* and *New Times*, the "Soviet Weekly of World Affairs,"

which is published by the International Information Department of the Central Committee in ten different language editions and shipped all over the world.

Stanislav Levchenko, a former KGB officer who had worked undercover as a *New Times* journalist, described the supposed targets of *New Times* propaganda this way:

New Times propaganda in large part is directed against foreign elites. In Western Europe, this includes academics, journalists, political leaders, and so on.

These are the kinds of individuals, the Soviets know, who read the magazine and are influenced by it. Additionally, *New Times* sets the lines on various issues for foreign Communist parties. . . . *New Times* also is used for internal propaganda directed at the population of the Soviet Union. *New Times*, in other words, is directed against both foreign and domestic audiences.

According to this pre-*glasnost* model, *New Times* ought to be a revealing source of Soviet propaganda and intentions. Moreover, with so much riding on it—the influencing of foreign elites, no less—it would stand to reason that the Soviets would be bending over backwards to get it to their target audience. Or so I assumed until I set out in search of contemporary Soviet agitprop.

The first thing that an American discovers in his quest to be propagandized is that the odds against success are overwhelming. This is not due to our government's effort to keep propaganda out of the country. Quite the contrary. The last time I checked, our customs and postal agencies were not confiscating shipments of revolutionary literature from abroad. During the 1970's the Chinese shipped crateloads of little red books that domestic Maoists eagerly snapped up without anyone in Washington batting an eyelash.

Rather, the problem seems to lie with the Soviets themselves. Just as

they have trouble harvesting their own grain, the Soviets appear to have serious difficulty with getting their propaganda anywhere near that target audience of academics, journalists, and political leaders—or near *anyone* for that matter. Take *New Times*, for example.

New Times publishes, from time to time, an impressive list of outlets around the world where the curious can pick up a copy or enter a subscription. In San Francisco, *New Times* lists The Book Center (a modest little leftist bookstore in the Mission District that doubles as the office of the California branch of the CPUSA) and Zhanie Books (a primarily Russian-language bookstore). However, as I discovered on a recent visit, The Book Center hadn't received a new copy of *New Times* in several months. Why? An apologetic clerk explained that since their subscription of ten copies of the English-language edition had expired, the Soviets had been a bit slow in putting things back in order. There was a stack of fresh *New Times* in Spanish on the racks, proving that the Soviets hadn't lost interest in publishing per se, but precious months of potentially fruitful propagandizing were slipping down the drain, never to return.

The situation at Zhanie was hardly better. An initial phone call inquiring about *New Times* produced the glum news that "No, we don't have any *New Times*. They sell out within a day or two of when we get them in." Short of haunting the bookstore on a daily basis, it sounded like one had to have an inside line in order to lay hands on the periodical. Perhaps all of Zhanie's copies were being snapped up by local Russian émigrés nostalgic for the old sod. That left very few for foreign elites hoping to chow down on some genuine propaganda.

A visit to Zhanie a week or two later was even more discouraging. No *New Times* were in sight, only three-month-old copies of *Krokodil* and a few newspapers, all in Russian. Two elderly Russian women were indifferently in charge, lending the place an uncannily authentic Moscow air. Seized with a

sudden terror that I might be forced to queue up for six hours only to be told that bread was unavailable, I tried to catch the eye of one of the women in order to make a quick inquiry about *New Times*. I should have known better. After ten minutes of waiting near the cash register, I was told that they were, of course, out of *New Times*.

The situation seemed more than a little absurd. Here I was in San Francisco, one of the most left-leaning cities on the continent, and I was totally unable to lay hands on a magazine that the Soviets were presumably eager to have me read. The local Communist Party couldn't be sure that their copies were going to arrive at all, while Zhanie apparently consistently sells out of them without bothering to increase their order. Was this any way to run a propaganda war? What was going on?

I next tried to track down a *New Times* while I was in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is, after all, the second-largest city in the country, and second only to New York in cultural influence. The back pages of the current incarnation of the old *Daily Worker*, the *People's Daily World*, showed a promising look-

ing ad for the Progressive Bookshop on South St. Andrews Place. I checked the hours—the ad said the store was open from one to five in the afternoon, Tuesday through Friday—and set off across town. South St. Andrews Place turned out to be a dilapidated residential street in Koreatown, a neighborhood now primarily occupied by recent Korean immigrants. The Progressive Bookshop was a dusty old two-story house with a large front porch and a locked and bolted front door. A peeling sign on the front of the building identified it as the Hungarian-American Cultural Association. A small notice indicated the bookstore was on the second floor, in a converted bedroom no doubt, but none of the occupants—Hungarian-American or otherwise—were anywhere to be found. My propaganda pilgrimage was a bust.

Were any copies of *New Times* to be had on the West Coast at all? If so, where? How about the progressive groves of academia? I was finally able to locate *New Times* at the U.C. Berkeley library, where they have apparently had a running subscription since sometime in the 1930's. Once

there I hunkered down with a selection of copies, both old and new, and pondered the current state of the psy-war.

Yes, indeed, as the authors of *Dezin-formatsia* had contended, the issues of *New Times* until well into the Gorbachev era did read like classic Communist propaganda. America was an imperialist warmonger, SDI was threatening world peace, cruise missiles should not be installed in Europe, socialist comrades from around the world were underscoring their solidarity with each other, the CIA was up to its dirty tricks—in short, the old *New Times* read like a slightly cruder version of the *Nation* minus the Edward Sorel cartoons.

And then in 1988 a confounding transformation took place. Criticism of America faded out, while soul-searching self-criticism about the failure of socialism in the Eastern Bloc monopolized the pages. Wistful articles about the virtues of the free market crept in along with zingy personality pieces on such famous Westerners as Janet Jackson and U.K. press baron Robert Maxwell.

What in the devil were the Soviets

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up to? This stuff only made sense as propaganda if the intended themes were talking up capitalism and casting the Soviet Union as a backwater has-been. The only overt suasion I could identify was a tendency to rattle on about "Our Common European Home," in an obvious Soviet effort to court favor with Western Europe.

To be honest, I was rather charmed by *New Times*' modesty, and this caused me to wonder if the Soviets weren't pioneering a new brand of psy-war. Obviously Germany's and Japan's economic resurrection in the wake of losing World War II was an inspiring model for winning by losing. If the Soviets declared the Cold War over and themselves the losers, perhaps they could prod us into rebuilding their decimated infrastructure, too.

This theory also accounted for the difficulty of finding *New Times*. The local communist faithful were hardly going to knock themselves out to peddle material that undercut their own

longtime devotion to Marxism-Leninism. The same issue of *People's Daily World* that provided the address of the sickly Los Angeles clubhouse contained an alternately pitiful and hilarious piece by Michael Parenti bemoaning "the anti-Marxist Soviets." Parenti whines that "'Reform-minded' Soviet intellectuals heap praise on those most critical of Soviet society and disdain the 'soft-minded' ones who might be more restrained in their observations. They even gently criticize hard-liners like [Robert] Conquest for not being ferocious enough." Parenti sadly observes, "The more retrograde and anti-communist the view, the more 'reactionary chic' it is and the more appeal it seems to have."

Is this, then, the death of Soviet propaganda, or is it a leap to a new level of sophisticated manipulation? After all, cautious observers like Edward Jay Epstein have noted a number of earlier Soviet turns to the West, such as the "New Economic Policy" of

the 1920's, which were abruptly reversed by dictatorial fiat. And even as I write, Gorbachev keeps consolidating power in the name of democratizing and decentralizing control. Then again, perhaps we are truly in a new era when studies such as *Dezinformatsia* no longer apply. In either case, if *New Times* is still intended as propaganda to influence foreign elites—even if the line being peddled is one of lulling us into complacency and self-congratulation—why is *New Times* nearly impossible to obtain? Conversely, if *New Times* is no longer propaganda, why is it still being published? With a budget of at least two hundred million dollars a year, *New Times* must be justifying its existence to some Soviet bean-counter amidst paper shortages and an economic tailspin.

In an effort to keep a finger on the faltering Soviet pulse, I subscribed to *New Times* last fall. As 1990 came to a close and the Soviet hard-liners clamped down on the Baltic republics, *New Times* continued to be amazingly self-critical of Soviet antidemocratic actions. And then, at the turn of the New Year, *New Times* ceased to show up in the mail altogether. After four or five weeks of missing issues had passed I called Imported Publications in Chicago, one of *New Times*' primary U.S. subscription agencies, and inquired about the vanished magazine. They claimed that a dispute over payment had arisen between Aeroflot (which flies Soviet periodicals to America in bulk) and the Soviets' periodical distribution agency that handles all magazines for exportation. As of last March, *New Times* was still missing in action.

Common sense suggests that internal ideological struggles in the Soviet Union have no doubt had more to do with *New Times*' disappearance than payment disputes between one Soviet agency and another. Then again, I suppose it is possible that *perestroika* got as far as introducing cost accounting to Aeroflot's managers, who decided that they had given a free ride to bulk propaganda shipments for long enough. Perhaps this will be the ultimate fruit of *perestroika*: in the future all propaganda will have to pay its own way.

Jay Kinney is an editor and writer living in the Bay area.

LIBERAL ARTS

ON REVOLUTION



And the hungry are so hungry, and yet the revolution is right. But it is right not ideologically, but as an *impact*, as *will*, as *despair*. "I am not a saint and perhaps I am even worse than you; but I am hungry, I'm a wolf, hungry and agile, and also my hunger has given me courage; and you have been an ox for a thousand years; if once upon a time you had horns and hooves to kill me, now you are old and feeble, and I'm going to devour you."

Revolution and the "old order" are simply "old age" and as yet "undiminished strength." But it is not an ideal, not by any means an ideal!

All social-democratic theories are reduced to the thesis—"I must eat." Well, the thesis is correct. Against it even the Lord Almighty has nothing to say. "He who gave me a stomach must also provide me with food." Cosmogony.

* * *

Yes. But the dreamer walks away: for he loves his dream more than food. And in revolution there is no room for the dream.

And perhaps just because revolution

has no room for the dream, it will not succeed. There will be a lot of broken crockery, but there will be no new building erected. For only he alone builds who is capable of an overpowering dream. Michael Angelo, Leonardo da Vinci—they did build, but the revolution will "play them a most prosaic trick" and will strangle them in their youth, at the age of eleven or thirteen, when they suddenly discover something "of their own in their soul."

"Oh, you are proud; you don't want to mix with us, to *share*, to be chums. . . . Oh, you have a soul of your own, not a communal soul. . . . The community that gave life to your parents and to you—for both you and they, without the community, would have died from starvation—is now taking back what you owe it. Die!"

And "the new building," with the features of the ass, will crumble to pieces in the third or in the fourth generation.

—from *Solitaria*,
by V.V. Rozanov, 1912

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

Cardinal Sins



After sharing my ill-informed impressions of California with you last month, I should probably just let it be. After all, only fools think they understand the South after a few months, and I presume the same is true for California. But expatriation here in the Spandex State seems to have dried me up on the subject of the South. Despite the concerned friends who've been writing and sending clippings, I just don't feel *in touch*. Since there are still a couple of months left in our year out here, it looks as if it's California or nothing—and, no, I'm not putting it to a vote.

Tell you what: I'll just tell a few stories and go easy on the meaning of it all, OK?

Let's start with Stanford, where we're living this year. Now, I don't want to pick on the place. It has enough troubles already. This year has seen, for instance, revelations of how overhead money from federal research grants went for things like sheets for the president's custom-made bed. And you've probably been reading about this "political correctness" business lately, too. (Our nation's pack journalists should be penalized for piling on: where have they been all this time?) Anyway, I'll just say that everything you've heard on that subject is true, but I'm surviving. I drop by the Hoover Institution from time to time to get my head straight.

No, Stanford's a great university, arguably the best one west of Fort Smith. Let's get that on the record. It has a first-rate faculty and smart students, and if you think humanistic learning here is not a pretty sight, just wait until what they're doing here trickles down to Generic State U.

One evening I was leaving the library with Susan Howatch's book *Glamorous Powers*, when the student at the inspection desk raised an eyebrow at the title, and asked if it was any good. Realizing that *Glamorous Powers* does sound a little Judith Krantz-y, I mumbled that the book is about the Church of England.

"Oh," the student said. "Is there anything in it about monks? I'm working on a paper on the cenobitic tradition."

Impressed that an undergraduate knew the meaning of "cenobitic," I told him there were some Anglican Benedictines in the book, but it was mostly about ecclesiastical politics—"sort of like Trollope, but around World War Two."

"Trollope," the kid said. "Is that a writer?"

As I said, Stanford students are bright, and they know a lot. But it's next to impossible to guess *what* they know, especially now that Jesse Jackson's friends have cleansed the curriculum of works by dead white European males.

Another story. The dean of the Stanford chapel is an old friend from North Carolina, an Episcopal priest who used to teach at the Duke Divinity School. As you might guess, he wasn't terribly sound to start with, but California hasn't been good for him. On the first Sunday in Advent, for instance, music for the chapel services was provided by a (first-rate) jazz guitarist, who played "Someday My Prince Will Come."

At other services we've found ourselves praying alternately to God the Father and God the Mother. Now I don't know how you feel about it, but that strikes me as rather *Hindu*. I mean, I can live with a genderless deity, but a hermaphroditic one gives me the creeps. Anyway, somebody—probably not me—needs to point out that these, ah, manifestations are locked into traditional sex-roles. The father gets to do all the whiz-bang creating, for instance, and the mother seems to be into nurturing. Maybe they mix it up on alternate Sundays and I just missed it. Neither parent makes any *judgments*, of course.

Speaking of which, Stanford announced a new "domestic partners" policy last fall that opened married student housing to unmarried couples—including unmarried couples of the same sex. When there was an outcry from some married students, my buddy the dean of the chapel chaired a "town meeting" to discuss the new policy. The principal opposition came from foreign students who don't want their children exposed to American

ways—at least not these American ways. Asians (the p.c. word for Orientals) seemed especially inclined to this sort of judgmental insensitivity, but what brought the meeting to an abrupt and noisy end was the observation by a Muslim student that in his country, of course, it would be his duty to kill homosexuals.

I wonder if anyone has really thought through this business of "multiculturalism"?

Anyway, on the ground here, outside the hothouse of the university, multiculturalism is a working daily reality. UHF television offers programs in Spanish, Japanese, Farsi, Italian, Evangelical—name your group, and the liability lawyers and chiropractors are advertising in their language. San Francisco has always had its ethnic neighborhoods and restaurants, of course, but now even a suburb like Mountain View offers not just Italian and Mexican restaurants, but Chinese of all regions, Indian (north and south), Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese . . . Walking the main street, you feel as if you're in some exotic entrepôt, a vestpocket version of Singapore, say, or Beirut (in the old days).

It's not unpleasant, and certainly the new immigrants seem to do most of the actual work around here. It looks to me as if it weren't for Asians and Hispanics, the economic base of this place would be a matter of bicycle and roller-skate shops.

By the way, I wrote "Hispanic" instead of "Mexicans" not just to be p.c. A friend whose wife teaches first grade in San Jose reports that more than half of her students are Latin American—not just Mexican, but Honduran, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, differences I suspect most of us in the East never even thought about. The same is true for "Asians," a culturally meaningless hodgepodge of a concept if there ever was one.

Much the same variety can be found within the *voluntary* subcultures. Whatever your hobby, enthusiasm, political or sexual kink, you can find others who share it and gather to do it or talk about it—Tocqueville gone berserk. Some folks go to church on Sunday morning? That's cool. Up the road a way, at the same hour, a hundred motorcyclists gather at Alice's Restaurant for brunch. Off in the other