

GEORGE URBAN

# A Conversation with Leszek Kolakowski

## *The Devil in History*

### *I. The Party knows best*

**M**Y MENTAL IMAGE of Leszek Kolakowski has two, as I see it, complementary, faces: your attitude to Marxism, and your attitude to the Church. Let me try to approach your interpretation of Marxism indirectly—through some of the parables you have written about the Old and New Testament. What induced you as a Communist philosopher to publish a book under the title “Talk of the Devil”?

KOLAKOWSKI: This book was not meant to be a political statement. It contains various cautionary tales, each taking its cue from some episode in Holy Scripture. In each, in one way or another, the

Devil makes its appearance, but my stories were not designed to offer some philosophical equivalent of a *roman à clef*. My purpose was mainly to underline the significance of the awesome paradox whereby good results may flow from evil, and evil results from good. That these two can thus support each other is a shattering fact about the human experience. But these problems may be discussed in terms broader than those offered by politics.

—You may very well not have intended these parables to contain clues to your philosophical-political thinking, but for the critical reader they are, as I see it, indubitably there. It is a significant fact about your writings that you should be so much preoccupied by Scripture—“Talk of the Devil” is a companion piece to your “The Key to Heaven”—and if I were asked to render a layman’s reading of these cautionary tales I would say that your purpose is not only to lay bare the nature of evil, but to identify it in the framework of two “churches”—that of Christianity and that of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.

KOLAKOWSKI: I did not, as I say, intend to write political stories in disguise, though in some cases I probably did. However, I spent many years studying Christian sects and heresies, especially those of the 16th and 17th centuries, and one can’t do that without observing certain analogies which occur in all ideological thinking and all bodies in which such thinking is enshrined. Nevertheless, I am ready to concede that, seen from our present perspective, I have given certain hostages to the analogies you have in mind.

—Let me try to transfer your “awesome paradox” (whereby good can flow from evil and evil from good) from daily experience to our understanding of history. Where does “the devil” (so to speak) enter history, or our understanding of it?

KOLAKOWSKI: It is part of Hegelian historiophilosophy that historical events turn the intentions of historical actors into their opposites—but this is, as I say, also our run-of-the-mill daily experience. Marx and Engels had much to say about this problem. Man, they contend, is—until the début of

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a class-conscious proletariat—an object of history. He is not only unaware of the history he is making but simply *cannot* be aware of it because he finds himself in the grip of a “false consciousness” which is not just a mental fact, reversible by a mental cure, but has social roots: social processes of his own making appear to man as forces governed by superhuman powers. This grand design of the dialectic—the intentions of the makers of history being turned into the reversal of these intentions—produces certain “laws” of history. These apparently operate from the inception of the division of labour until the mid-19th century, when the arrival of the proletariat on the world scene happily coincides with the arrival of Marx and Engels as revolutionary social thinkers. From then on the proletariat, enlightened by Marxist thinking, serves as the appointed vehicle of the revolutionary dénouement of history. False consciousness is eliminated. History is no longer marred by the law of reversed intentions. The proletariat, now gripped by true consciousness, can and does translate its will into the desired results. The riddle of history is solved, man’s alienation is ended, and the world moves into the era of classless society. Such, in simple outline, is the Marxist mythology.

*—I can detect not one but two “devils” in your story. The first, as you have said, is the genuine problem of the frustration of human intentions, which is an experience we all share.*

KOLAKOWSKI: Yes, but it is (I must stress this) a great evil which has preoccupied me all my life and induced me to spend time contemplating Hegel’s and Marx’s answers to it, with all the latter’s prophetic anticipations. The second “devil” is the Marxist assumption that with the début of the proletariat as a perfectly conscious historical class the whole burden of past experience can somehow be declared null and void, and mankind consequently embarks on writing an entirely new history, history *par excellence*. Marx put this very graphically when he observed that the coming revolutions will draw their poetry from the future, not the past.

Hegel had trained the searchlight of his thinking exclusively on the past and explicitly repudiated extrapolations into the future. Marx’s orientation, on the other hand, was not only futuristic, but he believed that it is with the hoped-for results of the future that we have to judge the *past*, too. This compounds the evil. Marx’s view is deeply rooted in the utopianism of August Cieszkowski and Moses Hess, and thus partly in Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism.

We can, I agree, say that there are two devils in my account: first, history’s stubborn inclination to frustrate and reverse human ambition and, second, Marx’s chimerical notion that the revolutionary movement of the world proletariat will somehow

abolish all ideological, social and economic contradictions of past society and usher in the golden age.

In other words, I believe that the frustration and reversal of human foresight is a basic fact about the human condition. . .

*—Which is one way of believing in original sin. . .*

KOLAKOWSKI: . . . and I am also convinced that the claim that there is a technique for overcoming this condition, or a privileged class to carry out this technique, is dangerous and misconceived.

*—Every despotism worth its salt claims to have (as you have just implied) a “hot line” to God or the future. Hence their demand that the despot’s orders be taken on trust: “Der Führer befiehlt, wir folgen”—“Stalin-the-genius is always right”—and so on. You have observed in several of your essays that in any theodicy Divine Providence is vindicated in spite of the existence of palpable evil—this, indeed, is the meaning of theodicy.*

*“God, to test the faithful, now and again delivered St Peter’s See into the hands of the ungodly [you write in “Marxism and Beyond”]. So much greater, then, the merit of the faithful if they bow their heads to the Divine Voice, even though it issues from the throat of Balaam’s she-ass. . .”*

*If this is so, and if we take (for the sake of argument) Marxism as a substitute religion with claims similar to those of the genuine article, might a Communist not cogently reason that “the Law of History” or “Historical Necessity” sometimes delivers the leadership of the “workers’ movement” into the hands of a Stalin? And might he not, further, insist that this, however, does not invalidate—much rather does it reinforce—his duty to subject himself to the orders of Stalin? Bukharin argued this kind of thing when he said (much to his later undoing): “It is not him [Stalin] we trust but the man in whom the Party has reposed its confidence. . .”*

KOLAKOWSKI: This has been the standard Communist argument. Time and again I have heard old Communists say: it is better to make mistakes *with* the Party than to be right *against* the Party. They were mostly blissfully unaware of any trace of a “theodicy” in their attitude and, from a strictly Communist point of view, there was undoubtedly something very sound in what they were saying. Without this dogged and utopian loyalty to the cause in spite of its evils, the Communist movement would not have survived. Such attitudes now hardly exist. In Russia and Eastern Europe they expired with the last ideologically motivated Communists, though in the West one encounters freak survivals of the species. But while their commitment lasted, these men would not be shaken from their unquestioning allegiance—no mistakes, wrongs and crimes of the Party could dent their conviction that the unity of even a guilty Party was a thousand times more important than frivolous considerations of “morality” and the like.

—The existence of evil for a truly believing Christian reinforces his commitment to God, for if God were all-good in his earthly manifestations, a Christian's love of God would be a mere commercial transaction: returning love for love. But when he loves God through evil, his faith and loyalty have stood the supreme test. This is the sort of argument (echoing Luke 6, 32) we repeatedly encounter in your writings, and I would, on the strength of it, take my analogy with Communism a step further by suggesting that a truly committed Communist *loves* Stalin, including Stalin's murderous deeds, because his faith in the cause, like the Christian's love of God, demands that he should will the means if he truly wills the ends. What I'm saying is that an unforgiving and unjust Party has a gruesome magnetism of its own.

KOLAKOWSKI: Your analogy is only partly valid. Christianity does not claim that God's justice will prevail in our life in this world—that merit will be rewarded and wrong-doing punished. It holds that God's ways are inscrutable—that we cannot comprehend them by intellectual cognition alone. Christianity teaches that we must trust God's justice in spite of manifest evil and wait for justice to be done on the Day of Judgment.

Communism, by contrast, claims to be offering a scientific and empirically verifiable explanation of the whole of reality. It is not a religion but a caricature of religion which incidentally confirms the theologians' observation that the Devil is an ape of God.

Whether a committed Communist *has* to love the wrongdoings of a Stalin on the analogy you suggest seems to me more open to question.

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*"The tyranny of one man is the perfect embodiment of the spirit of Communism."*

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Undoubtedly most fully loyal Communists approved of and even loved Stalin's misdeeds if they were at all ready to concede that these were misdeeds. But many preferred to believe that nothing may be called a misdeed as long as it arguably serves the good cause. In either case, the analogy stands to the extent that a caricature, too, is an image—albeit an overdrawn one—of reality.

—You have argued in "Main Currents of Marxism" that Marx's theory that the proletariat possesses a special type of historical awareness—"cognitive privilege"—inevitably leads to the Stalinist kind of dictatorship. How does the first lead to the second?

KOLAKOWSKI: I did not say that it was inevitable, but that the Leninist version of Marxism, though not the only possible one, was quite plausible. Very briefly: Marx alleges that the working class carries, simply because it is the working class, a kind of privileged knowledge, "revolutionary consciousness", of the course of history (this interpretation of his words was—correctly, I believe—strongly

argued by Lukács). But this cognitive privilege, while it may have existed as something much to be desired in the minds of Marx and Engels, has to this day failed to materialise in the minds of the workers. Lenin (and before him Kautsky) thought that this little practical difficulty could be overcome by adding a supplement to Marx's theory: since the proletariat was incapable of spontaneously generating "revolutionary consciousness", it had to be instilled from without. This was to be done by the "vanguard" of the proletariat, the Communist Party; and the Party—now sole repository of the true purpose of history—is vested with the right, indeed the duty, to discard the immature, empirical consciousness of the masses and lead them, through revolution, to the classless society. And Lenin added—which is an important point—that what the workers could produce of themselves was a bourgeois consciousness, since in a capitalist society only two basic forms of consciousness could exist.

The implication of this theory is that the Party knows better what lies in the genuine interests of society, and what constitutes the will of society, than society itself, and once the spirit of the Party is incarnated in the will of one man, Marxism-Leninism comes to mean the dictatorship of one man *over* the proletariat. Thus Marx's hypothesis that the working class has a privileged knowledge of the final purpose of history culminates in the assertion that Comrade Stalin is always right.

—Wouldn't the theodicy, Marxist-style, in that case still apply? Suppose we equate the "Historical Mission of the Proletariat", as conceived by Marx, with Divine Providence, and the despotism of Stalin with palpable evil—wouldn't Marx's vision (God's love) still be vindicated under the injunction: do what Stalin orders you to do because his sin is *felix culpa* in the service of a higher good?

Repeatedly you stress in your books that a Christian loves God because he has faith, not because he expects to be rewarded. The act of believing is the whole justification of faith. The more evil God appears to be the more the Christian reaffirms his faith in Him. Stalinism is then—I would infer by way of a parallel—a special manifestation of Marxism, and a believing Communist simply reaffirms his faith in Marx's vision by obeying and supporting Stalin.

KOLAKOWSKI: I must enter a correction—Christianity teaches that God can test the faithful by letting them suffer, but He cannot show Himself to be evil. And the analogy does not hold good for another reason: Stalinism is not an incidental evil which somehow superimposed itself on an otherwise benign vision. On the contrary: the tyranny of one man, the worship of a personalised ideology and the power-structure derived from it, is the perfect embodiment of the spirit of Communism. Stalin's rule is the rule of Communism *par excellence*. All other variants of Communism-in-

power are half-baked, diluted, timorous, immature or senile by comparison. Since the death of Stalin, Soviet Communism has not been able to regain its health, though as far as the institutional framework is concerned, the legacy of Stalinism survives intact.

—*If the institutional incarnation is intact, why could Stalinism not survive Stalin?*

KOLAKOWSKI: Because, under Stalin, the police-terror, the purges and massacres affected too many members of the *apparatus*. That they affected the people at large would not have mattered, because the population as such is of no importance in the Soviet system, but the continuing insecurity of the *apparatus* was intolerable. Nobody was safe. Members of the Central Committee and the heads of Stalin's various satrapies could be imprisoned and executed with as little fuss and on as little evidence as the man in the street. When Stalin died, the Soviet establishment took care not to saddle itself with another dictator of the stamp of Stalin.

## II. Totalitarianism & Socialism

I AM INTERESTED in tracing the development of your attitude to the totalitarian element in Marxism. Some twenty years before you wrote "Main Currents of Marxism" (i.e. in your revisionist phase as a Communist), you suggested in a number of different formulations that for any worthwhile social change to be achieved one's targets have to be set way beyond the hoped-for change because mankind is slow and ruled by inertia. Hence, you argued, utopian social thinking should not surprise us—we have to aim for outsize objectives and employ the rhetoric of inflated hopes in order to achieve modest results. Indeed you repudiated the caution of commonsensical objectors: "an excess of common sense may be inimical to an effective fight."

If all this is true (and here, too, you reflect the words of the New Testament, e.g. Luke 12, 31), where would you draw the line between idealism and blindness, enthusiasm and suicide? Couldn't Stalinism, and any dictatorship that claims to be working for social change (and which does not?), draw on your reasoning to justify its existence?

KOLAKOWSKI: I would endorse this line of thought now only with very great reservations. I still insist that often it is only by aiming for what is now impossible that we are likely to attain the possible. But any social Utopia which purports to offer a technical blueprint for the perfect society now strikes me as pregnant with the most terrible dangers. I am not saying that the idea of human fraternity is ignoble, naive or futile; and I don't think it would be desirable to discard it as belong-

ing to an age of innocence. But to go to the length of imagining that we can design some plan for the whole of society whereby harmony, justice and plenty are attained by human engineering is an invitation for despotism. I would, then, retain Utopia as an imaginative incentive ("regulative idea" would be the Kantian phrase for it) and confine it to that.

—*Your emphasis, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, that Utopia is necessary but also necessarily unattainable, marks an important point in your revisionism. To call the Communist blueprint "utopian" and to add in the same breath that the labours of mountains will give birth to a small mouse was, it seems to me, your way of striking an uneasy compromise between approval and complete rejection of the Marxist vision.*

KOLAKOWSKI: I suppose it was, but this is now a long way behind me. A society without conflict is a figment of the imagination. Evil is continuous throughout the human experience. The point is not how to make one immune to it, but under what conditions one may identify and curtail the devil.<sup>1</sup> We are not faced with a choice between a perfect and imperfect society—our options are between one sort of imperfection and another. Yet, in order to realise that gradations exist between the two, we have to keep alive a certain regulative idea of perfection as an ideal standard against which we can measure our failures and achievements.

—*Are you entirely happy with rejecting Utopia as a normative idea? You did (again in your middle period) repeatedly observe that Utopia on the Left is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: "Utopia crosses over from the domain of... moral thought into the field of practical thinking, and itself begins to govern action..." In another instance you say that the Left can never renounce Utopia "because goals that seem unattainable now will never be reached unless they are articulated when they are still unattainable..."*

I believe these are historically well-attested observations. I also believe that you are now right in stressing that the "blueprint type of Utopia" is dangerous. Yet our experiences with the Third World, for example, suggest one significant lesson, namely that the developing majority of mankind seems to want, and want desperately, a seamless type of Utopia of the kind you now reject. The magnetism for the Third World of the Marxist-Leninist type of vision of the perfect society has been overwhelming, even though, in most cases, it amounted to no more than a convenient label for a "quick fix" towards modernisation.

Two questions follow. First, is it within the realm of the possible that the underdeveloped, under-nourished, and under-housed majority of mankind will understand the perils of the "blueprint type" of Communist Utopia—that Arabs and Iranians will cease to see the West as their principal adversaries and shift their hostility to that mother and father of all blueprints—the Soviet Union? Second, if in the Third World *some* Utopian target-setting is an unavoidable necessity, can the Western democracies offer a kind of "Utopia for export" that

<sup>1</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, "Can the Devil be Saved?", ENCOUNTER, July 1974.



might appeal? Could it be done without making nonsense of what democracy stands for?

KOLAKOWSKI: If some millenarian fever seizes a large part of society, little can be done. But millenarianism is not a normal condition. What people in the Third World would seem to seek is not paradise but the means to cope with misery and starvation, even though it is true that extreme despair may breed chiliastic illusions. The West has no "Utopia for export", as you put it, and it would be foolish to try to devise one. It can offer no instantaneous, patent answers to the problems of over-population, the ungovernability of giant cities, soil-erosion, and similar calamities. What it can do is offer very complex, piecemeal and uncertain advice, and show through irrefutable examples that totalitarian solutions are not only most unpleasant, but that they do not work in either the First, the Second, or the Third World.

—You have stressed in your recent writings that socialism is the prerequisite for any fully effective totalitarian system—that dictatorships and despotisms of various ferocity can arise, and have arisen, in a variety of non-socialist environments, but that a fully totalitarian dictatorship must have socialism for its base. Wouldn't Sparta under the constitution of Lycurgus and Hitler's Germany (to take two random examples) rather challenge your theory, unless, of course, we grotesquely stretched the word "socialism" to cover certain Spartan and National Socialist institutions?

KOLAKOWSKI: The point where despotism differs from totalitarianism is the destruction of civil society. But civil society cannot be destroyed until and unless private property, including the private ownership of all the means of production, is abolished. As long as large numbers of people exist whose livelihood and conduct of life are independent from the state, your tyranny—hard and bloodthirsty though it may be—cannot be totalitarian. Stalin was fully aware of this when he decided to liquidate the independent peasants as a class. The totalitarian ideal could not be achieved without the collectivisation of the peasantry—without the destruction of a class of people who constituted among them a large part of civil society and were not at the mercy of the state. Once this class had been liquidated at the cost of several million lives, the state, with its artificial ties embracing the whole of an atomised and terrorised society, became omnipotent. It is in this sense that I argued that a totalitarian society has the best chances of fulfilling the ideal in a socialist economy. At the end of the process the individual became the property of the state. This does not mean, though, that all forms of public ownership open the road to totalitarianism. There are many examples which show that civil liberties and democratic institutions can coexist with extensive nationalisation.

No absolutely fireproof totalitarian system has

yet been devised, but the Stalinist and Maoist models have come very close to translating the "entelechy" of totalitarianism into reality. Nazi Germany, on the other hand, and Fascist Italy were imperfect totalitarianisms (Mussolini's Italy, to be sure, much more imperfect than Hitler's Reich); Hitler was satisfied with the subordination of the existing forms of economic activity to the internal needs and imperial ambitions of the state, instead of expropriating and nationalising all means of production. Nor have most of the Soviet Union's East European dependencies achieved the Soviet level of totalitarianism. In spite of all attempts to impose uniformity through pressure or—as in the cases of Hungary and Czechoslovakia—armed intervention, there are more and more cracks in the East European glacies of the Soviet empire.

Fortunately, much in the make-up of human beings resists the pressures of totalitarian control.

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*"If everyone stopped participating in the mendacity, the Communist system would at once collapse."*

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Family life, emotional and sexual relationships, individual and collective memory, art and literature escape to a certain extent the impact of the system. This holds, as we now know, even for the most regimented society we have yet seen: Communist China where, under Mao, a great effort was made either completely to destroy family life and personal relations, or to subordinate them to the goals and ideology of the state—so much so that the Maoists under the Cultural Revolution exceeded anything the Soviet system under Stalin managed to achieve in terms of the *Gleichschaltung* of the individual. Yet the spirit of liberty survived.

—Your critique of Communist totalitarianism is matched by your exposure of the immorality of supporting any political philosophy which claims historical inevitability. The case you argue is simple enough: if society is ineluctably heading for a classless society via "socialism" and communism—as Marxism claims—then the individual is not showing any kind of moral choice or courage in supporting "socialism" because he is simply betting on a horse which is absolutely certain to win. You, of course, have put it much better in "The Opiate of the Demiurge" ("Marxism and Beyond", 1968):

*"He who joins the struggle for socialism sustained by an unwavering certainty of victory is merely betting on a number at which history's roulette wheel is, in his opinion, bound to stop. His actions are morally worthless..."*

Now, this is projecting your own high standards of political morality on to the average mortal. It is, I think, as well to admit that the ordinary citizen, certainly in the West, has no such yardstick to support his political

choices. Indeed, his choice is grounded in a carefully calculated *immorality*, for the first question he asks of any political cause clamouring for his support is: "Is it likely to succeed?" And if it is not, he will probably withhold his support—morality or no morality.

Aren't you, therefore, gearing your expectations of Soviet and East European behaviour to an exceptionally, and perhaps unfairly, high pitch?

KOLAKOWSKI: I would certainly insist that it is reprehensible to support any political cause for no better reason than the certainty of its triumph. But, of course, in practical life this is not the kind of consideration a Soviet or East European citizen is likely to worry about. He is, nevertheless, often in a position of being able to choose between a profound and manifest evil, and one which is less so. In that case it is his duty to opt for a course which is less likely to do damage, less likely to interfere with liberty, human dignity, the maintenance of national values, than the alternative choice or choices. I realise that there is nothing very dignified about limiting one's practical expectations to such pedestrian alternatives; but these are the only ones available for the time being. Let me put this somewhat differently: I am deeply suspicious of the "package deal" type of political choice whereby we are told to accept a party, or movement, or political philosophy, lock-stock-and-barrel—the good with the less good and outright evil as parts of an interdependent whole. This is a dangerous prescription, likely to justify any choice, because we know well enough that on sober analysis each has points which commend it for our acceptance and others which we find unacceptable. This goes *a fortiori* for one-party states.

—What moral guidelines would you, then, offer, to men and women living under a Communist system?

KOLAKOWSKI: Having lived outside the system for many years now, I am not in a position to give advice to people who have to take risks. You will no doubt remember Solzhenitsyn's warning: "Don't lie." Solzhenitsyn said this was a *minimum* requirement. I'm not so sure; for it seems to me, on second thought, more like a *maximum* requirement, because if everyone stopped participating in the mendacity, the Communist system would at once collapse.

Naturally, in everyday life, one has to differentiate and make all sorts of allowances. There is a wide spectrum of attitudes ranging from those entertained by active scoundrels participating in and benefiting from the oppressiveness and mendacity of the Communist system, to those entertained by people actively fighting the system. But in between these there are many choices. I, for one, do not condemn those men and women who, without actively opposing the system, are doing their best to widen the existing framework. In the intellectual domain, some good can be done by

simply writing books of genuine merit, injecting an element of truthfulness into cultural life, and refusing to go along with the official lie.

### III. The Lie in Soviet Society

SCHOLARS of the "progressive" type have shown a good deal of reluctance in recent years to go on applying the concept of "totalitarianism" to the Soviet system. It has been argued that the concept is dated; that the Soviet system is in reality a modernising economy fighting off a set of especially debilitating handicaps: that we ought to approach the study of the Soviet Union in the spirit of disinterested enquiry, "in a technical framework...functionally", institution for institution, enterprise for enterprise. Would you agree?

KOLAKOWSKI: I would not. I am aware of no historical or political analysis that has discredited the concept, while I do know of a large body of scholarly studies which *confirms* the opinion that the concept is rightly applied to the Soviet Union even though, since the death of Stalin, Soviet totalitarianism has been an ailing totalitarianism, less than fully effective.

—We might test the validity of the application of "totalitarianism" to the Soviet system by measuring the Soviet Union against Professor Carl J. Friedrich's five basic traits which, so he tells us (in his "Totalitarianism", 1954), mark off a totalitarian society from one which is not so. One could, of course, test it against various other criteria, too, such as Max Eastman's "twenty ways" in which (as he argued in "Stalin's Russia") Stalin beats Hitler; but I prefer Friedrich because Eastman wrote his book in 1940, before, that is, Hitler committed his worst crimes. Also, as a former Trotsky sympathiser, Eastman is susceptible to the accusation that he over-compensates for his earlier commitments.

Carl Friedrich lists five clusters of traits which I shall summarise in shorthand. First, an all-pervading ideology which claims to offer the perfect final society for the whole of mankind.

KOLAKOWSKI: True for the Soviet system.

—Second, a single party organised in a hierarchical manner, usually under a single leader, superior to or commingled with the government bureaucracy.

KOLAKOWSKI: Applies to the Soviet Party.

—Third, the complete monopoly of all means of effective armed combat, that is, the police, the border forces, the army, navy and air force.

KOLAKOWSKI: Applies.

—Fourth, monopoly of the control of all means of mass communication such as the press, radio, television, motion pictures, and so on.

KOLAKOWSKI: Applies.

—Fifth, terroristic police control directed not only against demonstrable “enemies” of the régime but against arbitrarily selected classes of the population.

KOLAKOWSKI: Applies. Stalinism was all these things but it went beyond them in several important respects. Stalinism in its mature form was a unified state-organism facing atom-like individuals. With civil society virtually destroyed, everyone was supposed to become his brother’s spy. The unattainable ideal of the system was a situation where all people were at the same time inmates of concentration camps and secret police agents—a unique combination in human affairs.

In the last stages of Stalinist totalitarianism the Party itself was destroyed. The reason, we may guess, was that many of the older members of the Party, though loyal to Stalin, were also trying to uphold at least a basic minimum of the ideology. Although they were, in all practical matters, perfectly obedient to Stalin, the *Vozhd* rightly suspected that they had their loyalties divided between himself and the ideology as they had received it from Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin himself. Even potential disloyalty was intolerable. The Party had to be taught that the ideology was what the leader at any given moment said it was. The purges and mass executions of the late 1930s, and again after the War, were not simply the work of a paranoiac. In these respects Stalinist totalitarianism has, with the possible exception of Maoism under the Cultural Revolution, no parallels.

—How much continuity was there between the Leninist and Stalinist types of totalitarianism? Scholars are strongly divided on this issue, some arguing that the link was weak or indeed that Stalinism was *sui generis*, while others believe that Stalinism was the logical end-product of Leninism and even Marxism.

KOLAKOWSKI: The Stalinist kind of totalitarianism issued directly from Leninism and that—albeit less directly—from Marxism. I cannot here go into a detailed discussion of this problem, but let me simply say this without offering evidence: I do not think that Stalinism was a necessary and unavoidable product of Marxism. But that is not saying enough. To make my position clear I would pose the question differently: “Was the Stalinist ideology a legitimate interpretation of the Marxist philosophy of history?” And my answer to *that* question is Yes. I can address myself in even stronger terms to the same problem by asking: “If one made a thorough attempt to translate the principal values of the Marxist kind of socialism into practical politics, would something like the Stalinist system be likely to emerge as the result?” And my answer to that question, too, is Yes.

—You have spoken of the atomisation of Soviet society. Where do the confessions made at the Moscow show-

trials fit in? It is, on the face of it, surprising that whereas Hitler and Mussolini were content to have their enemies arrested and executed without exacting from them confessions in praise of the system, Stalin had his victims bribed or tortured to the point where they extolled the glory of the man and the power that were sending them to the gallows.

KOLAKOWSKI: Being the model dictator he was, Stalin was anxious to have his victim annihilated *morally* as well as physically. It was not enough for everyone to see that Stalin’s victim was rightly hanged or shot—it was just as important to show that *the victim himself* recognised the rightness of being hanged or shot.

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*“Even those who somehow survived the camps nevertheless acquired a sub-conscious interest in supporting the lie, because they had themselves assisted in creating it.”*

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—It was nevertheless surprising that so many could be made to indict themselves so abjectly and consistently over so long a period. I happened to be a daily ear-witness to the trial of László Rajk in 1949. It taught me a lesson that I ought to have learned before but didn’t, viz. that it is one thing to offer cool historical or psychological explanations from the detachment of one’s ivory tower, and quite another to experience day by day, blow by blow, the slow unfolding of a web of wildly unlikely and contradictory lies and fabrications. I could sense well enough *how* these men had been reduced to the state they were in. But I could not quite see *why* a victorious world power would need this kind of evidence to support its legitimacy.

KOLAKOWSKI: Enough is by now known about the ways in which false confessions were obtained for us not to have to say any more about them. Stalin’s manifest objective was to show that there was *no* mercy. The people arrested, tortured and executed in the 1948–52 period may or may not have had sympathies with some of Tito’s policies, but that was not the point. The point was to drive it into the heads of every man, woman and child that the slightest deviation by deed or thought was to be punished by death, and not an easy kind of death at that. There were to be no martyrs.

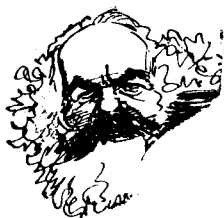
Going back to the 1935–38 “Show Trials”, one could conceivably understand why Stalin needed the false witness of the *Old Bolsheviks*, especially those who were brought to public trial (most of them were not). But why did he insist that those hundreds of thousands of small people, who were never given a trial but simply shot, should *also* go through the tortuous process of self-indictment and adulation of the Bolshevik system? No one was going to read about *their* confessions—so why do it?

The explanation (as I see it) is simple: Stalin wanted to make all those hundreds of thousands of people *accessories* to his crimes—accessories, moreover, to crimes committed against themselves—and thus *accomplices* in a general campaign of falsification. Even those who somehow survived the camps nevertheless acquired a subconscious interest in supporting the lie, because

they had themselves assisted in creating it. This is, to my mind, the root cause of the neurosis of Soviet society.

—You are, in fact, endorsing Alexander Zinoviev's reading of life in the land of "Ibansk" where truth and the lie, farce and tragedy are hopelessly interwoven.

## On "Taking Ideas Seriously" . . . .



**K**ARL MARX was a German philosopher. This does not sound a particularly enlightening statement, yet it is not so commonplace as it may at first appear. Jules Michelet, it will be recalled, used to begin his lectures on British history with the words:

"Messieurs, l'Angleterre est une île." It makes a good deal of difference whether we simply know that Britain is an island, or whether we interpret its history in the light of that fact, which thus takes on a significance of its own. Similarly, the statement that Marx was a German philosopher may imply a certain interpretation of his thought and of its philosophical or historical importance, as a system unfolded in terms of economic analysis and political doctrine.

A presentation of this kind is neither self-evident nor uncontroversial. Moreover, although it is clear to us that Marx was a German philosopher, half-a-century ago things were somewhat different. In the days of the Second International the majority of Marxists considered him rather as the author of a certain economic and social theory which, according to some, was compatible with various types of metaphysical or epistemological outlook; while others took the view that it had been furnished with a philosophical basis by Engels, so that Marxism in the proper sense was a body of theory compounded of two or three parts elaborated by Marx and Engels respectively.

WE ARE ALL familiar with the political background to the present-day interest in Marxism, regarded as the ideological tradition on which Communism is based. Those who consider themselves Marxists, and also their opponents, are concerned with the question whether modern Communism, in its ideology and institutions, is the legitimate heir of Marxian doctrine. The three commonest answers to this question may be expressed in simplified terms as follows:

1. Yes, modern Communism is the perfect embodiment of Marxism, which proves that the latter is a doctrine leading to enslavement, tyranny, and crime.

2. Yes, modern Communism is the perfect embodiment of Marxism, which therefore signifies a hope of liberation and happiness for mankind.

3. No, Communism as we know it is a profound deformation of Marx's gospel and a betrayal of the fundamentals of Marxian socialism.

THE FIRST ANSWER corresponds to traditional anti-Communist orthodoxy, the second to traditional Communist orthodoxy, and the third to various forms of critical, revisionistic, or "open" Marxism. My argument however, is that the question is wrongly formulated and that attempts to answer it are not worth while. More precisely, it is impossible to answer the questions "How can the various problems of the modern world be solved in accordance with Marxism?", or "What would Marx say if he could see what his followers have done?" Both these are sterile questions and there is no rational way of seeking an answer to them. Marxism does not provide any specific method of solving questions that Marx did not put to himself or that did not exist in his time. If his life had been prolonged for ninety years he would have had to alter his views in ways that we have no means of conjecturing.

THOSE WHO HOLD that Communism is a "betrayal" or "distortion" of Marxism are seeking, as it were, to absolve Marx of responsibility for the actions of those who call themselves his spiritual posterity.

In the same way, heretics and schismatics of the 16th and 17th centuries accused the Roman Church of betraying its mission and sought to vindicate St Paul from the association with Roman corruption. In the same way, too, admirers of Nietzsche sought to clear his name from responsibility for the ideology and practice of Nazism. The ideological motivation of such attempts is clear enough, but their informative value is next to nothing. There is abundant evidence that all social movements are to be explained by a variety of circumstances and that the ideological sources to which they appeal, and to which they seek to remain faithful, are only one of the factors determining the form they assume and their patterns of thought and action. We may, therefore, be certain in advance that no political or religious movement is a perfect expression of that movement's "essence" as laid down in its sacred writings. On the other hand, these writings are not merely passive, but exercise an influence of their own on the course of the movement. What normally happens is that the social forces which make themselves the representatives of a given ideology are stronger than that ideology, but are to some extent dependent on its own tradition.

THE PROBLEM facing the historian of ideas, therefore, does not consist in comparing the "essence" of a particular idea with its practical "existence" in terms of social movements. The ques-



KOLAKOWSKI: Yes, Zinoviev's *Yawning Heights* is a perceptive satire.

—I still wonder whether we have fully explained Stalin's need of "morituri te salutant." I incline to feel that by exacting praise from the dying, Stalin wanted to create a special kind of monument to himself—one that would somehow inscribe it in capital print in the annals of

history that *he alone* was Lenin's true reincarnation: revolutionary, theoretician and "builder of socialism."

KOLAKOWSKI: One might say Stalin was obsessed by a demonology of sorts which went way beyond his political needs. He *had* to demonstrate, again and again, the power of ineradicable evil: now it resided in Trotskyism, now in Leftist Deviation,

tion is rather how, and as a result of what circumstances, the original idea came to serve as a rallying-point for so many different and mutually hostile forces. Or, what were the ambiguities and conflicting tendencies in the idea itself which led to its developing as it did?

It is a well-known fact, to which the history of civilization records no exception, that all important ideas are subject to division and differentiation as their influence continues to spread. So there is no point in asking who is a "true" Marxist in the modern world, as such questions can only arise within an ideological perspective which assumes that the canonical writings are the authentic source of truth, and that whoever interprets them rightly must therefore be possessed of the truth. There is no reason, in fact, why we should not acknowledge that different movements and ideologies, however antagonistic to one another, are equally entitled to invoke the name of Marx—except for some extreme cases with which this work is not concerned.

In the same way, it is sterile to inquire "Who was a true Aristotelian—Averroës, Thomas Aquinas, or Pomponazzi?", or "Who was the truest Christian—Calvin, Erasmus, Bellarmine, or Loyola?" The latter question may have a meaning for Christian believers, but it has no relevance to the history of ideas. The historian may, however, be concerned to inquire what it was in primitive Christianity that made it possible for men so unlike as Calvin, Erasmus, Bellarmine, and Loyola to appeal to the same source.

In other words, the historian treats ideas seriously and does not regard them as completely subservient to events and possessing no life of their own (for in that case there would be no point in studying them), but he does not believe that they can endure from one generation to another without some change of meaning.

THE RELATIONSHIP between the Marxism of Marx and that of the Marxists is a legitimate field of inquiry, but it does not enable us to decide who are the "truest" Marxists.

If, as historians of ideas, we place ourselves outside ideology, this does not mean placing ourselves outside the culture within which we live. On the contrary, the history of ideas, and especially those which have been and continue to be the most influential, is to some extent an exercise in cultural self-criticism.

I propose to study Marxism from a point of view similar to that which Thomas Mann adopted in *Doktor Faustus* vis-à-vis Nazism and its relation to

German culture. Thomas Mann was entitled to say that Nazism had nothing to do with German culture or was a gross denial and travesty of it. In fact, however, he did not say this. Instead, he inquired how such phenomena as the Hitler movement and Nazi ideology could have come about in Germany, and what were the elements in German culture that made this possible. Every German, he maintained, would recognise with horror, in the bestialities of Nazism, the distortion of features which could be discerned even in the noblest representatives (this is the important point) of the national culture. Mann was not content to pass over the question of the birth of Nazism in the usual manner, or to contend that it had no legitimate claim to any part of the German inheritance. Instead, he frankly criticised that culture of which he was himself a part and a creative element.

It is indeed not enough to say that Nazi ideology was a "caricature" of Nietzsche, since the essence of a caricature is that it helps us to recognise the original. The Nazis told their supermen to read *The Will to Power*, and it is no good saying that this was a mere chance and that they might equally well have chosen the *Critique of Practical Reason*. It is not a question of establishing the "guilt" of Nietzsche, who as an individual was not responsible for the use made of his writings; nevertheless, the fact that they were so used is bound to cause alarm and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the understanding of what was in his mind.

St Paul was not personally responsible for the inquisition and for the Roman Church at the end of the 15th century but the inquirer, whether Christian or not, cannot be content to observe that Christianity was deprived or distorted by the conduct of unworthy popes and bishops; he must rather seek to discover what it was in the Pauline epistles that gave rise, in the fullness of time, to unworthy and criminal actions.

Our attitude to the problem of Marx and Marxism should be the same, and in this sense the present study is not only an historical account but an attempt to analyse the strange fate of an idea which began in Promethean humanism and culminated in the monstrous tyranny of Stalin.

**Leszek Kolakowski**  
in the introduction to his 3-volume  
*Main Currents of Marxism*  
(Oxford University Press)

now in Rightist Deviation, in Titoism, in Zionism, whatever. In every case Stalin put up a symbol of absolute evil which the Party was then directed to fight and vanquish. Of course, this cultivation of enemies did have its practical uses—it kept the Party and the bureaucracy in a state of mobilisation and enforced unity. But the demonology was undeniably there.

—*Why did Hitler or Mussolini not need this eschatological justification through the medium of show trials and false confessions?*

KOLAKOWSKI: The lie plays an important but different role in Nazism—it has to do with straightforward propaganda: e.g., you tell the public that you have a decisive weapon when in fact you haven't, and so on. In Nazism there was a high degree of convergence between the Nazis' goals and their avowed goals. They stated more or less openly what they wanted: national glory, the extermination of the Jews, the partial extermination of some of the Slavic nations to make room for German ambitions, the creation of a Nazi world empire, and so on. These were genuine Nazi goals and the Nazis always said that they would pursue them as, in fact, they did.

Communism, on the other hand, and especially Stalinism, hides behind a false façade. Stalinism had to pay lip service to the old socialist tradition. It had to talk about internationalism, social justice, freedom, equality and the like because the framework of socialism and the vocabulary in which it was couched were its only title to legitimacy. Therefore the lie in Communist practice was, and is, a much more heinous thing than it was in Hitler's system, because the Stalinist practice of nationalism, slavery, and genocide is the complete negation of the avowed aims of the Soviet system. Hitler didn't, as far as his goals were concerned, lie very much to the world, but the world believed his truth to be too Satanic to be credible. Stalin lied to the world and, for a very long time, the lie succeeded.

—*You have spent many years thinking and writing about Stalinism. I can consequently well understand your pre-occupation with the devil. . . .*

KOLAKOWSKI: The devil is part of our experience. Our generation has seen enough of it for the message to be taken extremely seriously. Evil, I contend, is not contingent, it is not the absence, or deformation, or subversion of virtue (or whatever else we may think of as its opposite), but a stubborn and unredeemable fact.

<sup>2</sup> See the debate between Richard Pipes and Wladislaw G. Krasnow, "Anti-Soviet or Anti-Russian", *ENCOUNTER*, April 1980; also Richard Pipes, "Solzhenitsyn & The Russian Intellectual Tradition", *ENCOUNTER*, June 1979.

—*It is an intriguing and much discussed question whether the Satanic element in Bolshevism inheres in the Russian tradition, or stems from Marxism-Leninism alone. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Vladimir Maximov are the best known spokesmen of the view that the evils of the Soviet system are ideological rather than Russian, while the list of those who believe that some form of centralised despotism is endemic in Muscovite political*

*"The Poles cannot share Solzhenitsyn's image of the Czarist régime as one of fatherly concern. They have lost too many of their men to the Czars' hangmen."*

culture includes Hugh Seton-Watson, Ronald Hingley, Robert C. Tucker, and Richard Pipes.<sup>2</sup> It is against Richard Pipes, and especially against his book, "Russia under the Old Régime" (1974), that Solzhenitsyn's principal attacks are directed. Richard Pipes's method of using certain Russian proverbs to underpin his argument "affects me in much the same way as I imagine Rostropovich would feel if he had to listen to a wolf playing the cello", Solzhenitsyn wrote in the Spring 1980 issue of "Foreign Affairs." Indeed, he claimed that American scholars demonstrate a "fundamental misunderstanding of Russia and the USSR" and that their presentation of pre-revolutionary Russia echoes arguments of Soviet propaganda. Where do you see the origins of the Satanic element in Bolshevism?

KOLAKOWSKI: Stalinism resulted from the coincidence of a variety of factors. I would not deny that Russia's particular tradition bears the brunt of responsibility for it. Yet, for several decades before the 1917 Revolution Russia was the scene of a clash between Slavophile and Westernising forces. The Westernisers were powerful in the second half of 19th-century Russian culture, including political culture. Both the Bolshevik and Menshevik currents of Russian Social Democracy (as it then was) represented Westernising types of political thinking; and it was only after the Revolution that they were swamped and swallowed up by the old Tatar and Byzantine tradition in the shape of Leninism and then Stalinism.

Yet this explanation alone does not satisfy. That the cultural de-Westernisation of Russia under Leninism and Stalinism was something that happened within the ideological framework of Marxism cannot be dismissed as insignificant or accidental. We cannot say that the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist element was unimportant in the process. I would, therefore, define my position as being somewhere between Solzhenitsyn's and Pipes's—closer to Pipes than to Solzhenitsyn, but differing from Pipes in the sense that for me the impact of Marxism is important in its own right. I don't see Soviet Marxism merely as a latter-day incarnation of traditional traits in Russian culture.

Otherwise it becomes very hard to explain why pre-revolutionary Westernising socialists and liberals were so easily disarmed and defeated. What, we must ask, was it about Marxist ideology that enabled it to push Russia back, at one terrible blow, to the Tatar tradition in the name of "socialism"? And I am saying this fully aware of the fact that, by now, very few (if any) Soviet leaders are seriously guided by ideology. They nevertheless adhere to the intellectual framework and vocabulary of Marxism and Leninism because without it their title to rule would be non-existent.

But, while we are on Solzhenitsyn's text,<sup>3</sup> let me make some further points that need stating although they are only loosely connected with the question in hand. Solzhenitsyn is certainly right in stressing two things—first, that the oppressiveness of the Soviet régime far exceeds that of Czarist Russia in its last two decades; second, that Soviet rule is no less destructive of Russian national culture than it is of the culture and traditions of other nations and nationalities in the Soviet empire, even though Russian is used as the *lingua franca* of the state.

What, then, explains the Revolution and the ensuing tyranny? Speaking as a Pole, we Poles may rightly argue that the Communist system was imposed on us by foreign tanks, and that in the absence of the Soviet threat the system would instantaneously fall apart. But this is not an argument the *Soviets* can use: *they* have no Big Brother breathing down their necks; *they* are sovereign as a State; *their* system was launched and is being kept alive by domestic forces alone.

It astonishes me that Solzhenitsyn is so eager to prove the innocence of the Czarist régime. No Pole can swallow that; nor can any member of those many non-Russian peoples whose forefathers lived under Czarist rule. Solzhenitsyn alleges in the article you quote that although Alexander I entered Paris at the head of his forces, he did not annex an inch of European soil. This is only true on the supposition that the Poland of the time had already been part and parcel of Russia on the strength of divine law as interpreted by Catherine II!

Religious freedom? Does Solzhenitsyn forget the history of the Uniates, whose ruthless persecution began under Catherine and was then continuous in Czarist history (with especial ferocity under Nicholas I) until its consummation under the Soviet régime?

Our fathers saw the Russian Czars as hangmen, and rightly so. What reason would the Poles have

had (or any of the other oppressed nations in the Czarist empire) to support a man like General Denikin, whose avowed purpose during the Civil War was the restoration of the old empire? We have learnt from bitter experience exactly what Lenin meant when he promised "self-determination" to the subject nations of the Czarist empire. Yet the lies of Lenin and those of his successors cannot be used to whitewash the Czars who did not even bother to make such promises! Victims for 130 years of fierce Russian oppression, the Poles cannot share Solzhenitsyn's image of the Czarist régime as one of fatherly concern. They have lost too many of their men to the Czars' hangmen.

—Let me pick up your point about ideology. You said that very few Soviet leaders are seriously guided by it—yet they adhere to the rhetoric because ideology is their only title to legitimacy. This is strikingly illustrated by various passages in Veljko Micunovic's "Moscow Diary" (1980), where Khrushchev's attempts to lure the Yugoslavs back into the "camp" are shown to have taken the form of appeals and reminders of Marxist-Leninist solidarity, a shared revolutionary heritage, and so on. The Yugoslavs (in Micunovic's presentation) do not ultimately fall for the bait, but neither do they entirely avoid making concessions to the rhetoric. The ideological framework was, and is, important.

KOLAKOWSKI: Moscow's only title to Yugoslav allegiance was "socialism." This was as true for Hungary in 1956 as it was for Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979. That, in reality, Moscow's concern was Soviet hegemony does not diminish the importance of the rhetoric of ideology. In fact, it makes it more significant as a handy and effective tool.

#### IV. The Disintegrating System

TALKING OF the element of evil in Stalinism, I'm reminded of your warning in "Main Currents of Marxism" that the Stalinist system fears nothing more than ideological criticism from within the "socialist" family. And I'd like to link this idea with an argument you use, half in jest, half in earnest, in one of your "edifying tales from Holy Scripture to serve as teaching and warning." The tale I have in mind is "Father Bernard's Great Sermon" in which you are concerned with the power of evil and seem to offer the sardonic conclusion that one can only cast out Satan with Satan. In an argument that is itself a devilish satire on some verses in the Gospel (Matthew 12, 23-28) you make a half-crazed, misanthropic Father Bernard say:

"So there is one, only one effective method against Satan and none other—cast Satan out with Satan, force him to the floor using his own weapons, destroy evil with evil, infect the poisonous weed with its own poison. . . ."

Now the *ultimate* message of your story is clear: "if you use one devil to cast out another, you will still be left

<sup>3</sup> Now published as a small book, *The Mortal Danger: How Misconceptions about Russia Imperil the West* (translated by Michael Nicholson and Alexis Klimoff; Bodley Head, London; Harper & Row, New York).

with one." Nevertheless, you have made Father Bernard's case sound so convincing that I cannot help feeling that you were (so to speak) jesting in earnest; for I at least have been left with the impression that behind Father Bernard's diabolical mockery and self-mockery there is a truth you want your reader to assimilate:

*"Only the fallen one . . . can struggle against the fallen, because to wage war one has to dwell in the same pit, and only a fallen angel can defeat another. . . ."*

Now, I wonder whether you were aiming your satire at the sort of thing encapsulated in Lenin's observation (taken over from Peter the Great) that one can only defeat barbarism with barbarism? Or were you, perhaps, trying to say something much closer to the bone, namely that only one who has been reared in the bosom of evil can know that true character of evil and defeat it? Which would point to the role of Communist heretics such as yourself—"fallen angels" who *have* shared a pit with the devil and would know how to "infect the poisonous weed with its own poison."

KOLAKOWSKI: Let me stress that the words you quote from my tale are spoken by an emissary of Hell—and here I am certain that I was thinking of no political analogies. Yet your questions merit discussion in their own right.

To take Lenin's quip first. It has been a long-held Communist illusion that you can somehow build a

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*"Communism believed that you can compel people to love one another—and that is a prescription for GULAG. Once you even think that you can do that, you have your GULAG in potentia."*

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radiant future using fear, oppression, and terror as your means. It took the world's Communists several decades to learn—and many have not made the discovery to this day—that if you build equality by increasing inequality, you'll be left with inequality; that if you want to attain freedom by applying mass terror, the result will be mass terror; that if you want to work for a just society through fear and repression, you will get fear and repression rather than universal fraternity. You might, of course, say that it didn't take enormous intellectual effort to understand this—yet the illusion was deeply ingrained in the minds of Communists. Suppression of the "class enemy", the abolition of civil liberties and indeed terror were accepted as the necessary evil which precedes the new society. Today we can see clearly enough that means define ends, but Communist thinking has always held the reverse to be true. Trotsky stated this clearly and emphatically.

Nineteenth-century society reacted to the industrial revolution and urbanisation with two sweeping ideological answers: Nationalism and

Socialism, each trying to restore in its different ways what industrialisation had destroyed. Both were searching for the fully just fraternity, one basing itself on linguistic community and a shared historical experience, while the other sought to create a toiler's egalitarian community cutting across national barriers. I will waste no words on the degeneration of these visions, in the 20th century, into fanatical and destructive state ideologies culminating in the merger of the two in Hitler's "National Socialism." What is important for my present purpose is that both aspired to social perfection which they sought to attain by means of human engineering. This is particularly true of Communism—a bastard offspring of the socialist idea. Its technological approach to human life made it especially receptive to the idea that a flawless fraternity of men could be institutionalised by ukase. It believed (to put it quite simply) that you can *compel* people to love one another—and that, of course, is a prescription for GULAG. Once you even *think* that you can do that, you have your GULAG in potentia.

We might find it appalling that free societies of the Western type are based on greed as the main human motivation, but this is still better than compulsory love, for that can *only* end in a society of prisoners and prison warders.

—What about the second part of my suggestion, which I would now break down into two separate statements: (a) that the Communist system can only be defeated by means just as violent as the system itself, and (b) that only a fallen Communist can fully expose the crimes and inadequacies of the Communist system?

KOLAKOWSKI: These are two separate questions. One can say Yes to the first without saying Yes to the second, and vice versa.

Let me first take your proposition that the violence of Communism can only be defeated by like violence. I would very much hope that this is not so. A violent collapse of the Soviet system would have incalculable consequences—some possibly as bad as the survival of the system itself. I cannot foresee the future, but my hope is that the system will disintegrate peacefully, through the strains and stresses which plague it, rather than through violent upheavals. In my own country, Poland, the opposition has never propagated, much less used, violent methods. Quite apart from the fact that violence would be a hopeless and absurd undertaking, it might, as I say, start a chain of unguided and unguided reactions. We cannot possibly wish these upon ourselves.

On the second point—starting with the 1930s, a number of former Communists have played leading roles in the ideological criticism of the Soviet system. They spoke with inside knowledge, and it may well be that their contribution has been indispensable. The facts are too well known to need



going over; but I would warn against any suggestion that this critique implies violence or that violence of any kind has, in fact, been used as a result of it. If Communism is—as I believe it is—already in a state of slow disintegration, responsibility lies with the terror and violence which the system itself has exercised throughout, and with its total lack of self-correcting mechanisms.

—*Since 1917 we have never been short of diagnoses that the system was moribund. Yet it exists and expands and shows, on the face of it, few signs of disintegration. Have we all been fooled by Soviet propaganda? What is your evidence for saying that the disintegration is in progress?*

KOLAKOWSKI: The Soviet empire is suffering from a whole series of internal contradictions which defy resolution. It is unable to halt the growing tension between its various nations and nationalities. This is the most powerful disintegrating factor. I am not happy about it because nationalism has always had a tendency to explode with extreme destructiveness, and it easily generates obscurantist forces. Then there is the incurable malaise that the system is incapable of economic efficiency and modernisation. Today Russia is—as she has been uninterruptedly since 1917—a land of chronic food shortages, widespread cheating and corruption.

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*“The Western image of Soviet strength is largely due to the fears and incomprehension of the West.”*

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Third, there is the tension between the new and more highly educated layers of society demanding a freer and more plentiful life, and the system which can offer no such life. The pull of these growing expectations is the more difficult to resist as the system cannot, as it did under Stalin, completely isolate itself from the West. Contact with the West is yet another source of tensions, for while the system is badly in need of capitalist aid, know-how and technology, it fears and tries to limit the resulting contamination.

These, then, are some of the pressures plaguing the Soviet Union. The Soviet leaders cannot go back to a pure form of Stalinism for fear of jeopardising their own power and bringing the country economically even lower than it is. My prediction, therefore, is that they will go on trying to work out some compromise between terror and the needs of modernisation. But I don't think they will hit on a satisfactory formula, and the disintegration will continue.

—*If they are so weak—why are they so strong? For weakness is the last thing we in the West associate with the USSR these days.*

KOLAKOWSKI: Soviet strength is in the eye of the

beholder. I will leave aside military matters of which I know little, but if we look at the internal cohesion and viability of the Soviet system—and that, after all, is the bed-rock on which military strength, too, ultimately relies—it is at once clear that the Western perception of Soviet strength is in very large measure due to the fact that the Kremlin is in a position to conceal its recurrent disasters from Western eyes and even from those of its own population. The Soviet system has one decisive advantage which despotisms have always enjoyed over democracies: nothing has to be explained, because there is no free discussion—hence the Soviet system may very well succeed in showing a robust complexion to the outside world while inside it is being eaten away by cancer. The Western image of Soviet strength is largely due to the fears and incomprehension of the West.

—*You observed in “Marxism and Beyond” that a Party which wields despotic power cannot turn its back on ideology—an erosion of ideology would undermine its power because ideology is its sole source of legitimacy. You made a similar point earlier in this discussion when you emphasised the importance of an even unconvincingly filled ideological framework. The question I want to put to you is this: In the Soviet Union popular belief in the ideology is a thing of the past and has been so for quite some time. No one believes in Marxism-Leninism any longer. Yet the rhetoric of ideology continues to offer a rationale for the exercise of state power. Do you expect “the end of ideology” to bring about the demise of state power, too?*

One notes that the erosion of ideology has so far by no means weakened the power of the Soviet state to assert itself either vis-à-vis heretical co-religionists such as the Chinese, or infidels in the rest of the world such as the Afghans. Might it, indeed, not be the case that it is only through the exercise of state power in adversary relationships with Imperialists, Nationalists, and Heretics that a semblance of ideology can be maintained?

KOLAKOWSKI: Lip-service to ideology can survive—nobody knows for how long—but as long as it does, the functions you and I have ascribed to it at the state level will continue to be performed. At the same time, even the rhetoric of Soviet ideology has considerably changed since Stalin's time. It is now a vague, incoherent pot-pourri of phrases, mixing old Communist tenets with ill-concealed nationalist slogans. The real ideological channel of communication with the population is, by now, not Communism but Nationalism: national glory, the growth of the Empire, racism, xenophobia, and only very thinly-disguised anti-Semitism. This, in contrast to Soviet ideology, does have a good deal of influence. If we now move to the satellite states (Poland, for example), Communism has almost vanished from the official vocabulary. From time to time it is mentioned at Party congresses and in ceremonial speeches as an act of religious tribute to

the founding fathers, but everyday propaganda is conducted in terms of economic development, modernisation, a higher living standard, peace, and so on. On these there is an assured consensus, for naturally everyone is against war, against economic inefficiency, and against low standards of living.

—Of course, popular reactions in Poland or Hungary are not comparable with those in Russia. No East European Communist government under Soviet tutelage could hope to create for itself a sense of legitimacy by an appeal to nationalism. But, as you have said, in the Soviet Union the official ideology, patriotism and nationalism can mutually support one another under certain circumstances, and have done so in the past. I can, for example, well imagine that the expansion of Soviet power to Afghanistan has gone down well with “patriotic” sections of the Party and population, just as the occupation of Czechoslovakia, too, was well supported by nationalistic sentiment.

KOLAKOWSKI: I wish I knew how the Russian population reacts to Afghanistan. It may well be that Soviet propaganda has managed to stoke up a mentality which makes the ordinary Russian feel that Afghanistan is a contribution to the glory of the greater Russian empire. On the other hand, he knows well enough that the Afghan adventure is costly in human lives and that he and his like are having to pay the price.

In a country where the suppression of public opinion is total we have no way of telling what is in the Russian mind. I would indeed go further: that opinion cannot be freely expressed is a very real cause of the non-existence or self-suppression of opinion. Where views can be freely expressed this fact is very important for the formation of *what* is expressed. People in constant fear of saying something that might land them in trouble simply do not, after a time, even *think* the sort of things that might boomerang on them. They suppress dangerous thoughts before these have occasion to arise, for nobody likes to think that he did have a dissenting opinion but was too much of a coward to articulate it.

—There is a book to be written about “Self-Censorship and the Communist Intellectual”....

KOLAKOWSKI: Alexander Zinoviev put his finger on the problem, and his conclusions are pessimistic. He says that in the Soviet Union nobody, of course, believes the official slogans about Communism. Nevertheless six decades of “socialism” have succeeded in producing a new man—an unthinking object perfectly willing to live with the official slogans, not because he believes them to be true in the normal sense of the word, but because he has lost any sense of distinction between the truth and the sort of verbal behaviour expected from him by the authorities.

After the 1953 East German rising, I remember

talking to an SED Party *apparatchik*. “I cannot understand these workers”, he said. “Only a few days ago they applauded the Party leaders’ speeches and voted for the Party, but then overnight we had these violent demonstrations against socialism and the Soviet Union. . . .” This illustrates my point: our consciousness incorporates layers of dormant “underground” materials. As long as there is no call or opportunity for them to be articulated, they remain dormant and to some extent even unknown. But if something suddenly releases the springs of articulation, they rush to the surface and assert themselves with great force. This is what happened in East Berlin and also in Hungary in 1956. In Budapest, a seemingly well-disciplined and enthusiastic Party fell apart within a matter of days until nothing was left of it—nothing at all.

—China before and at the time of the “Hundred Flowers” movement provides another example, and right now we can see a somewhat similar response in the way the Chinese are trying to react to the crimes and rigours of the Cultural Revolution. In both cases an extraordinary show of conformity was suddenly shattered by dissent and protest, and were it not for the repressive policies, at least in the field of civic freedoms, of the current liberalising régime, the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution would be even more spectacular than it is.

KOLAKOWSKI: Yes—the penalty of self-repression is explosion at the most unexpected times and places. This is as true for societies as it is for individuals.

## V. The Dead Ideology

AREN'T WE making somewhat light of the seriousness with which Communists take their commitment, even if they are not unconditional believers of every word in the sacred books? You have said that the lack of freedom to express certain ideas acts as automatic self-censorship on the ideas themselves. I believe the reverse to be equally true: those forced to express and propagate certain ideas inevitably come to believe them, or a good deal of them, to be true. The reason is the same you have mentioned: no one likes to think of himself as a coward or liar. I am leading up to an observation of yours in “Marxism and Beyond”:

“The intellectual and moral values of Communism are not luxurious ornaments of its activity but the conditions of its existence.”

Don't you think that Communist leaders and members of the apparat, whether in the East or the West, are impelled by the functions they perform and positions they occupy genuinely to embrace some of these “intellectual and moral values”?

KOLAKOWSKI: I wrote the words you have quoted a quarter of a century ago, from a revisionist point

of view, when I still thought that Communism could be somehow rejuvenated through intellectual and moral reform. But I have long given up any such idea.

I regard the whole ideology as dead, utterly dead. The Soviet Union is led by a clique of power-holders and political manipulators who spawn power-holders and manipulators of their own in the client countries in Eastern Europe. They are governed by notions of military power, national aggrandisement, prestige, and a fractious sense of compensating for their traditional backwardness *vis-à-vis* the West. The true definition of the Soviet

leadership is not that of a "Communist" leadership but of a parvenu élite.

Do the Soviet leaders to some extent identify, as you suggest, with the spirit of the script they read to the public? I very much doubt it. Ideology is not an independent variable shaping their decisions, even if these decisions are justified and presented in ideological terms. I would describe their position as that of an Oligarchy finding themselves in possession of an inherited Empire which they feel they must maintain and expand, and that means upholding the ideological rationale on which the Empire is built. Sincerity of faith does not come into the

## A Force for "Peace & Progress"?

Moscow

**I**T is quite legitimate for the Russians to encourage the spread of communism throughout the world, and this in no way should affect détente. But it is impermissible for the West to try to stop the spread of communism as that would be to act against history; and countries that have become communist cannot be allowed to change their systems because that would constitute counter-revolution. That is the gist of a lengthy and important restatement of the Soviet position on the ideological struggle and peaceful coexistence published in the current issue of the Russian weekly journal *New Times*.

The article appears to be a reply to Western assertions that the Russians are not acting in good faith over détente because they conceive it simply as a one-way movement of the balance of forces in their favour and are ready to encourage this movement with military help.

THROUGHOUT the article the West is equated with the forces of imperialism, war, class, oppression and exploitation, whereas communism is described as a force for peace and progress which self-evidently is in the interests of the masses. By this logic, the Russians argue that military parity cannot be conditional on ideological parity, since at a time of peace the masses themselves will always choose "socialism, peace and progress."

"The preponderance of socialist forces, and those rejecting war and imperialism and supporting democracy and socialism, not only remains but is growing. There is not and probably never can be parity here. It is naïve to try to establish some equality or status quo here, and somehow to regulate the aspiration and sentiments of the masses."

The article said the working class movement in capitalist countries was growing stronger and the non-aligned movement had consolidated itself on an "anti-imperialist" basis. These trends could not be stopped by armed force, and any attempts to do so

would lead only to a sharp aggravation of the world situation. But it would be ridiculous to blame this aggravation on "those who were against war and for social progress"—in other words, on the communists.

The blame lay on the imperialist anti-détente policy "whose social essence consists precisely of changing, by means of interference in the internal affairs of peoples, with the help of the arms race and international confrontation, the balance of social and class forces, which is changing to the detriment of imperialism."

THE ARTICLE emphasized that the Soviet Union and the Communist Party had always been firmly opposed to the social status quo. This principle reflected "objective requirements of world social development." They also rejected attempts to torpedo détente, which the article said had been "particularly flagrant" this year.

But just as the party opposed the export of revolution, so it equally resolutely opposed the export of counter-revolution, and supported the struggle of peoples for their rights.

*New Times* thus justifies the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and hostility to developments in Poland. The idea is that since opposition to the communist régimes in both countries has been labelled by the Russians as "counter-revolutionary", opposed to the real interests of the masses, the Russians' actual or potential intervention could in no way be compared to the West's use of force to stop the spread of communism.

THE FORMER was sanctified by the "objective forces of history"; the latter was not. Only from this standpoint, the journal said, could one "correctly" understand international events which caused arguments even among the left such as the revolutions in Afghanistan, Iran and Nicaragua and the ousting of the Pol Pot régime in Kampuchea.

Michael Binyon  
in THE TIMES (London)

picture. Certainly nothing better has yet been devised to sustain and export despotism than Communist phraseology. Pan-Slavism and Orthodoxy under the Czarist régime were amateurish tools by comparison.

—If you want to corner authentic Communists, you have to look for them in their one remaining habitat: Western Europe and the USA. . . .

KOLAKOWSKI: I'm not even sure whether these "authentic" Communists are Communists of the first water. With the collapse of ideology in the East, the Western Communists have a difficult row to hoe. When you think of the strength of their allegiance under Stalin—both to the creed and to the Soviet "bastion"—their current evasive attitude is spectacular. More often than not they want neither to defend nor to denounce the Soviet exemplar—just to avoid the issue as much as they can. Think

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*"A Communist type of Utopia can be fully totalitarian without owing allegiance to the Soviet model."*

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of Maurice Thorez enunciating from the rooftops that the Soviet Union was the great matrix of liberty and the hope of mankind, and put this side by side with the apologetic and embarrassed mumblings of Western Communists today. The Soviet Union *has* no genuine partisans among Communists, only people who offer excuses and mitigating circumstances to explain some particularly repugnant aspect of Soviet reality.

All this goes *a fortiori* for intellectuals who are (as we know) traditionally accident-prone. Despotisms of all shades have never gone begging for intellectual rationalisers, but if you compare the noisy militancy with which the Western intellectual estate closed ranks behind Stalin's monstrosities with their present disorientation—the contrast is truly remarkable. The Maoist fad was already a much diminished replay of the great surge of Stalinism, but it died with Mao just as the cult of Stalinism among Western intellectuals had died with Stalin. I am convinced that if the Soviet Union fell apart, 90% of Western Marxism, too, would go down with it, including those varieties which emphasise that they do not identify themselves with the Soviet system and indeed condemn it.

—Doesn't this rather weaken your argument that Communist ideology of the official Soviet type has few takers? If the continued existence of Marxism in the West is, as you say, a function of the continued existence of the Soviet Union, then the Soviet leaders are right in saying that the very existence of the Soviet system is a kind of

reinsurance policy for the world's "progressive" forces. And this undoubtedly implies a case for arguing that the excision of the Soviet system is, in the last analysis, a precondition for the peace of Western society.

KOLAKOWSKI: It seems true that the existence of the Soviet system provides broad intellectual cover for European and American Leftism, even though this is no longer acknowledged.

—The question is: should we attach greater significance to this cover than the Russians attach to the fact that the very existence of a free and prosperous West is subversive of Communist institutions?

KOLAKOWSKI: I would say both are real.

—No matter how thoroughly the European Left may have internalised the lessons of Stalinism with its conscious self, its unconscious reactions almost unfailingly propel it in the direction of patience, compromise, understanding, at worst benevolent doubt, vis-à-vis Soviet policies. For example, a vote on improving the military posture of NATO will attract the far Left of the British Labour Party, the Left of the German SPD, and Left Socialists in Holland into the same anti-American lobby using the same arguments. The Pavlovian reflexes of the 1930s appear to be powerfully alive. The Soviet Union may no longer represent a state of blessedness for the Left, but to work *against* the Soviet Union is an inadmissible challenge to Providence. I have, for example, no difficulty with the notion of a Soviet-Vichy France, under Communist-Socialist auspices, if Western Europe came under warlike threat from the Soviet Union—that is, French self-Finlandisation.

KOLAKOWSKI: I share your concern about France; indeed I would drop the qualification "under Communist-Socialist auspices". . . .

But to your main point: I observed earlier on that there has to be a certain amount of Utopianism in every society. It so happens that the repertoire of radical social change contains nothing as effective as Communism as a force capable of mobilising wishful thinking, frustrated expectations and grievances of every kind. Now, a Communist type of Utopia can be fully totalitarian without owing allegiance to the Soviet model. Indeed some Western Communists now dismiss the Soviet experience with rather open contempt while at the same time holding fast to the idea that a great orgy of nationalisation will somehow usher in social harmony as well as plenty. The absurdity of the notion that the universal spread of bureaucracy, state control, and centralisation will make for greater freedom, more spontaneity and higher individual satisfaction in the economy is manifest. It is true, on the other hand, that a pure sort of economic liberalism has been a dead option for a long time; and the issue now is not *whether* the state should control various branches of the economy, but to what extent it should do so.

It is preposterous that the belief in one magic



remedy for the human predicament should be entertained by men and women who are adult by any other standard; but there is in the human makeup an elemental urge to harmonise in one perfect whole everything in our experience that seems incompatible and inexplicable. Communism is a technique for keeping this dream alive and institutionalising it, and it has, we must concede, done so with some success if we consider the irrationality of the whole enterprise.

These dreams are, as I say, independent from the Soviet model; nevertheless the Soviet example—or what is taken to be the Soviet example—provides intellectual security of the kind implicit in the existence of a distant but powerful uncle, even though the appalling history of Soviet Communism is, reluctantly or less reluctantly, now admitted.

—There is, then, an element of truth in Ronald Reagan's much-derided statement that "the Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on"?

KOLAKOWSKI: Certainly not, if this means that, were it not for Soviet incitement, "there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world." Clearly there would.

—You have said that the Communist dreams are essentially independent from the Soviet model, that is to say, they possess a certain life force of their own. Yet, in 1975, in your fierce polemical exchange with E. P. Thompson,<sup>4</sup> you observed that the Communist idea was dead: "That skull will never smile again." How do you reconcile these two statements?

KOLAKOWSKI: I may have failed to make a distinction which is relevant to our discussion. Communism in the West has habitually identified itself with Sovietism (other varieties being relegated to very minor importance). This Communism—if we leave aside Soviet military strength and military expansion—is now an ideological, political, and cultural corpse. In the Third World it either takes a very different (which does not necessarily mean more attractive) form, or it is just another word for domination by Soviet imperialism.

Yet I do not believe that Utopian thinking can ever be completely eradicated from human affairs, and I do not believe it would be desirable if it could, in spite of all the disasters which have followed from Utopianism. However, to subsume Utopian visions under the general label of "Communism" would be misleading because, historically, Communism and Leninism have become the same thing for all practical purposes. And we know how far Leninism is from Utopia.

—The magnetism of power for Left-wing intellectuals strikes me as a good illustration of "la trahison des

clerics", in Julien Benda's sense of the phrase, but with the poles reversed. Its psychology has been explained often enough, yet I never cease to marvel at the keenness with which writers of history and students of politics are prepared to turn their backs on the detachment of their profession for the doubtful glory of occupying a ministerial chair and perhaps making (as distinct from writing) a tiny bit of history. True, the betrayal exacts its own kind of reckoning: I have yet to come across a book of any merit—not counting memoirs—that has come from the pen of an intellectual-turned-politician *after* his spell in office.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb are said to have remarked after their trip to the Soviet Union that they were profoundly impressed by the toughness of the Soviet comrades. While the Webbs were burning the midnight oil arguing the fine points of socialism with Bloomsbury friends and opponents, the leaders in the Kremlin were acting like men: *they* had people shot or sent to Siberia! *That* was making policy!

Civilians in uniform apparently make the harshest generals. Could the same be true of intellectuals?

KOLAKOWSKI: There is one side to the nature of intellectuals which finds fascination in power and even cruelty. Nazism attracted men of this type, but Stalinism did infinitely better because it could draw on the benefits of socialist phraseology. The intellectual's main fear is—and the Webbs are a good example—that he is not being heard, that he is talking to himself or a minute circle of like-minded readers. Hitching his waggon to a powerful cause is one infallible way of making sure that his voice *will* be heard. On balance, the intellectuals have learned from Stalinism. The penalties of their misplaced loyalty to Stalin have made them more cautious; but this is no guarantee that they will be more prudent when the next variety of salvatory ideology turns up. Utopia and despotism are powerful magnets.

You have mentioned that there is, in the political attitudes of the European Left, an undercurrent of feelings which betrays a residual pro-Soviet bias. This is true, and I am intrigued by the psychology which motivates it. There are, as I see it, two things involved. First, no one likes to disown his past as an unmitigated disaster. Second—and this flows from the first—the attractions of saying "Yes, the Soviet system has made many mistakes, *but* on balance it nevertheless represents an advance in human affairs" are great.

This is then linked to the self-righteous assertion that a man of the Left should avoid doing anything that might further the interests of "Rightist" forces in the world, and you have a ready-made recipe for pro-Soviet, or if you like, anti-Western and illiberal attitudes. When the chips are down, these people invariably come out on the side of the Kremlin.

—I have a certain sympathy with young people in search of a doctrine. Their vocational and professional training is one long demonstration that there is a body of knowledge which turns a man into a good civil engineer

<sup>4</sup> See Leszek Kolakowski's reply to E. P. Thompson, "My Correct Views on Everything", *The Socialist Register* (1974).

*or good doctor. So what could be more natural for them than to ask: and what is the body of knowledge that teaches us to create a just society? With the collapse of Nazism, Bolshevism, and Maoism, some of the most beguiling answers of our time have been exploded. So what is there now for young idealists to hang on to? I doubt whether the civilised scepticism of university professors can act as a substitute.*

KOLAKOWSKI: I wish I knew the answer. The West has become extremely suspicious of patent medicines. There is no single answer to our predicaments. One cause around which we might be able to build something like an ideology is liberty. This is denied in very large parts of the world, but people who are not denied it tend to take it for granted, and are reluctant to stand up for it unless they are directly threatened. It is difficult to convince them that unremitting vigilance is the price of liberty, and even if they do allow themselves to be alerted, they will find reasons for avoiding the issue and for procrastination. Afghanistan is a good example. "Kabul—well, it's a long way from Paris. . . ." But Cleveland, Ohio, is even further away. Does it follow that the Americans should think Cleveland to be as distant from Paris as the French believe Paris to be from Cleveland?

I can't, as I say, offer a remedy for the West's lack of a political strategy. Yet I don't believe the Soviet Union will take over Western Europe in the foreseeable future.

*—What makes you think that? The cards appear to be stacked against Europe both militarily and psychologically.*

KOLAKOWSKI: You are quite right to ask me for evidence. I cannot offer you very much. The Russians would not want to move in on Europe at the risk of global war, and that risk still exists. The moment that risk is weakened they might hope to get away with it. Furthermore, I don't believe that Communism is under all circumstances the beneficiary of war—

*—... even though you have written that since 1905 every war has produced benefits for the spread of Communism . . . ?*

KOLAKOWSKI: . . . Yes, in spite of that analysis. There is no law stating that Communism is the automatic beneficiary—that the expansion, hitherto, of Communism in the world is destined to end in the domination of the world. Let us imagine for a moment that we are in the 9th century AD and have enough of a global view to observe the spread of Islam. Well, its rapid expansion would have been the despair of a Christian futurologist working with the tools of extrapolation from known tendencies; for he could have forecast nothing but the impending conquest of the whole of Europe. On ideological grounds, too, our imaginary futurologist would have had reason to fear for Christendom, because the Islamic world-view was extremely powerful, dynamic, and fatalistic, not in the demobilising but in the mobilising sense of the word. Yet the drive exhausted itself.

*—The Turks did not have a powerful Moslem pressure group (or "fifth column") in Rome or Paris, whereas the Soviets arguably have.*

KOLAKOWSKI: True but neither did Christendom have its religionists in Constantinople as a powerful force—as we have our "fifth column" (if you like) in the shape of the whole populations of Eastern Europe.

We are *not* facing an irresistible force, no matter how effectively Soviet disinformation may have manipulated us into believing that the cards of history are stacked against us. Democracy has the great advantage that it can mobilise the resources of self-correction, while the despotic variety of socialism corrects itself only as a result of major catastrophes. The strength of despotism, on the other hand, lies in the circumstance that it can conceal its failures, and it really *is* stronger by the sheer fact of *appearing* to be stronger. But, to repeat, in the last analysis the main source of Soviet strength is Western incomprehension of those great and growing internal tensions which threaten the fabric of the Soviet system. If the Soviet leaders suspected for one moment that the Western world knew what *they* know about their system, their worries about the staying power of the Soviet Empire would increase immeasurably.

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# MEMOIR

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## Goronwy Rees

### A. J. Ayer

MY FRIENDSHIP with Goronwy Rees went back nearly fifty years. I place our first meeting early in my second year at Oxford; Goronwy was in his third year. I cannot now remember whether he still had rooms in New College or was living in lodgings. I was introduced to him by Martin Cooper who had recently “discovered” me. One link between them was that they were both well-established members of Maurice Bowra’s circle, of which I then stood barely at the fringe. Many years later, in his book *A Chapter of Accidents*, Goronwy wrote of the difficulty which he had experienced in adapting himself to the social climate of Oxford as it then was; but I saw no signs of this. I was struck, rather, by the self-confidence to which he seemed to me obviously entitled by his good looks, his charm and his quick mind. I learned from Martin that I had made a less favourable impression upon Goronwy, though he gave me credit for intelligence. Even on this score I soon let him down by publishing, in some undergraduate magazine, an ill-written and insincere article in praise of bull-fighting. I remember his advising me rather sternly, on our next meeting, to stick to philosophy where I knew what I was about, and not to stray into literature. He himself was already at work on his first novel, which was only moderately successful, but he always knew how to write.

Goronwy was elected to All Souls in the autumn of 1931 and we continued friends, on a rather casual basis, for the remainder of my time as an

undergraduate. I hoped to join him at All Souls in 1932 but was unsuccessful. Instead I went to Vienna on a few months leave from Christ Church, my old college which had appointed me a lecturer. In the meantime Goronwy had gone to Berlin to gather material for a book on Lassalle, which he eventually decided not to write. In Vienna my wife and I went frequently to the cinema and I still vividly remember the surprise and pleasure with which we identified Goronwy, in some German feature film, impersonating a kilted Highland officer. I believe that he played some other small parts but this was the only one that we had the luck to see him in.

For a few years we were out of touch until 1935 when I was able to reconcile being a Research Student of Christ Church with making my home in London, and Goronwy was also established in London as an assistant editor of *The Spectator*. He persuaded the literary editor Derek Verschoyle to send me a number of books to review, for which I was very grateful. He visited us now and then at our maisonette in Foubert’s Place and I occasionally saw him with Elizabeth Bowen or Rosamund Lehmann, but we met most frequently to play tennis in Battersea Park with Martin Cooper and the novelist Ralph Ricketts. At that time Goronwy was deeply involved in the international literary movement which was urging resistance to Fascism. I too was involved but rather as a Soho politician than as a literary man.

Goronwy and I both passed through Sandhurst as officer cadets, but he was a stage ahead of me. By the time I went there as an apprentice to the

IT IS now a year since our dear and valued editor GORONWY REES died in London (on 12 December 1979) at the age of 70. Our readers will surely not take it as sentimentality if we report that his desk here in our editorial office remains unoccupied, his regular monthly column still irreplaceable. We continue to mourn his passing, to suffer the loss of his wit and wisdom; and the following appreciations on the first anniversary of his death recapture the personality and intellectual spirit of this extraordinary man whom we were privileged to know, to work with, and to publish.