

By John J. Kulczycki

FOLLOWING DEPUTY SECRETARY OF State John C. Whitehead's recent visit to Poland, the Reagan administration is contemplating lifting economic sanctions imposed in reaction to the declaration of martial law in December 1981 and the crushing of the Solidarity Trade Union by the authorities, supposedly at the behest of the Soviet Union. Some sanctions were removed in 1983 after martial law ended, but the remaining ones—the denial of U.S. credits and most-favored-nation trade status—are crucial for the ailing Polish economy.

Last August the U.S. and the Soviet Union announced the signing of 13 exchange agreements with the goal of restoring cultural, health and educational contacts to what they were prior to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. In addition—though out of consideration for the farm vote rather than for foreign policy reasons—the Reagan administration proposed subsidized grain sales to the Soviet Union, an offer later declined. Thus, more than six years after the imposition of martial law, the people of Poland are left in their misery to contemplate the paradox of U.S. concessions to the country blamed for their condition while they continue to suffer the consequences of sanctions.

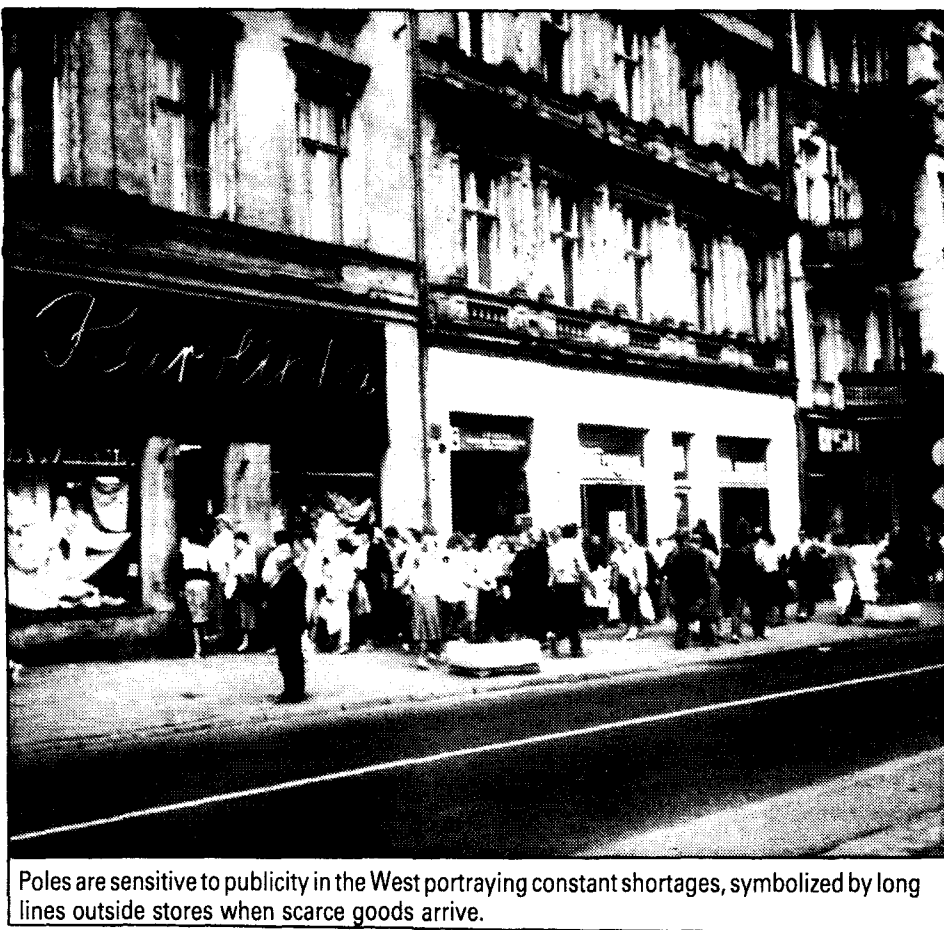
The Polish American Historical Association (PAHA), a national organization of scholars interested primarily in Polish immigrants to the U.S.—and most of them descendants of these immigrants—last summer took the first step in renewing cultural contacts with Poland that officially have not existed since the imposition of martial law. In July members of PAHA took part in a conference in Krakow, Poland, co-sponsored by the Polonia Research Institute of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

Suspicion: At first PAHA greeted the Polish initiative for the joint conference with suspicion. The proposal came from Professor Hieronim Kubiak, a former director of the Polonia Research Institute and, more importantly, a former member of the Polish Communist Party's Politburo during martial law. And it came in the fall of 1985, when the authorities in Poland were carrying out a major purge of administrators of universities and other institutions of higher learning.

Under the circumstances, Professor Stanislaus Blejwas of Central Connecticut State University, then president of PAHA, opposed participation in the conference. But the majority of PAHA's members favored accepting the invitation—after formally protesting the actions taken by the authorities against Polish universities and insisting that the conference not be turned to political purposes by the Polish government.

Was this merely a face-saving maneuver to rationalize a trip to Poland? Formally, the conference was organized to mark the 60th anniversary of the Kosciuszko Foundation, an American institution that more than any other has fostered cultural exchanges between Poland and the U.S. At issue here was the purpose of cultural exchanges and their relation to politics. Even when two governments adhere strictly to the terms of agreements that promote scholarly contacts and the dissemination of culture, political considerations cannot entirely be avoided.

But in this case, Polish scholars, even those most opposed to their own government's



Poles are sensitive to publicity in the West portraying constant shortages, symbolized by long lines outside stores when scarce goods arrive.

Poles seek expanded contact with the West

policies, had nothing to gain from continued isolation from the West. One told me—when asked about the propriety of American participation in the conference—that the severance of contacts with Western scholars and cultural institutions only deepens their misery, adds to their losses.

Nor are these losses only on one side. At the conference's inaugural session, Blejwas, who went along with PAHA's majority, insisted on the importance of freedom of inquiry—perhaps more than necessary, considering the Polish propensity to read between the lines and the desire of every bona fide Polish scholar for the same freedom of inquiry. But he also asked if we Americans had not lost something during the long break in cultural relations with Poland, implying that we had. The open and friendly spirit that prevailed throughout the conference, to say nothing of the usual Polish hospitality that accompanied it, led participants on both sides to the conclusion that PAHA's decision to come to Krakow had been right, and that future contacts and exchanges should follow.

This is especially true now that the Polish authorities have freed virtually all political prisoners, including the leading figures of the Solidarity movement. This development seems to vindicate the U.S. policy of maintaining economic pressure through sanctions, but even if so, its continuation is difficult to justify. For some time now, Ronald Reagan has had few more enthusiastic supporters than those among the people of Poland. In large part, his popularity stems simply from an elemental response based on an old principle of East European politics: the enemy of your enemy is your friend. From the very beginning of his administration, Reagan has made clear his enmity to the Soviet Union. Polish fans of Reagan will above all tell you that he says the things they long to hear said about the Soviet Union.

Another part of the explanation lies in the traditional Polish view of America. Despite all the changes of recent years in the U.S., including high unemployment and barriers against new waves of immigrants, for many Poles the U.S. remains the land of freedom and opportunity. Even Poles who come here and find out otherwise are reluctant to contradict the myth to those that remain at home. Too many Polish immigrants have made it in America—or seem to have—for most Poles to believe that anyone who really tries cannot succeed.

View from Poland: Not only have Poles seen immigrants return to Poland with pockets full of dollars, they also have the word of their government how bad things are in America, which for most of them is *prima facie* evidence of how good things must be. Typically, Poles do not believe that the number of homeless in the U.S. has grown, unless they want to be homeless. Since the Polish media emphasize dissatisfaction

among blacks in America, many Poles, in their ignorance, mouth racist attitudes: if blacks are dissatisfied in the land of opportunity, where the streets flow with milk and honey, then they must be simply lazy or inferior. Little wonder that so many Poles love Ronald Reagan!

But the love affair has lost some of its bloom lately. Before the imposition of martial law, when the threat of a Soviet armed intervention loomed over Poland, I remember Poles telling me that they did not fear an invasion: "Reagan wouldn't let it happen." Now there are fewer illusions about the protection Reagan offers. Even his rhetoric has been diluted. Meanwhile, there is the spectacle of Reagan proposing U.S. subsidized grain for the USSR, while continuing sanctions against Poland—even though Cardinal Glemp and Lech Walesa called for their removal long ago, a view they reiterated to Whitehead during his visit.

There is also the matter of Polish pride, which can take on exaggerated forms to make up for feelings of inferiority. When Polish government spokesman Jerzy Urban suggested a collection of sleeping bags and blankets for the homeless in New York City after the U.S. sent powdered milk to Poland following the Chernobyl accident, probably few Poles donated blankets—other than the ones that they received at work and were instructed to "donate" at collection points so that the media would have a "photo opportunity." But the gesture amused those who tire of feeling that they are constantly the object of international charity. They believe that Poles can make it on their own, if given a chance.

One day in Poznan I saw a queue in front of a fabric store and learned that a shipment of cotton cloth of a fashionable style, which is usually not available, had arrived. When I tried to take a picture of the scene, one woman deliberately tried to block my shot and another shouted, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself!" When I asked why she objected, she simply explained, "Because so much nonsense is said about Poland in the West." Poles desperately want to be proud of their country and its achievements. They are particularly offended by the idea of "Polish jokes" as they are known in the U.S. But now they see more clearly than ever that for the present they are caught in the orbit of a power that holds them fast and no one, not even Ronald Reagan, can change that.

John J. Kulczycki teaches Polish history at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

A new monthly newsletter on Soviet society by Alex Amerisov.

Soviet-American Review

To subscribe, send \$36.00 for one year to:
Box S, 1300 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, IL 60657

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

☐ Please enter a one year subscription to *Soviet-American Review*.
Enclosed is my check for \$36.00.

The Stars at Noon

By Denis Johnson
Alfred A. Knopf, 181 pp., \$15.95

By Geoffrey Fox

SINCE BEFORE ODYSSEUS encountered Circe, people have delighted in tales of a voyager among strangers. The theme is enchanting, like Circe herself, because it invites us to project our inner fears onto external, alien beings. But these projected images can also shape our images of foreigners and outsiders in real life. In this way, for example, fiction about North Americans wandering the Third World has political, literary and psychological consequences—whether or not the author is conscious of them.

Denis Johnson's *The Stars at Noon* is a case in point. It is a modern voyage tale in the oldest picaresque tradition. Here, the nameless narrator is a self-absorbed wisecracking North American prostitute, and the quest of this political innocent is to escape a very sinister revolutionary Nicaragua, whose dangers are evoked in vivid, paranoid language.

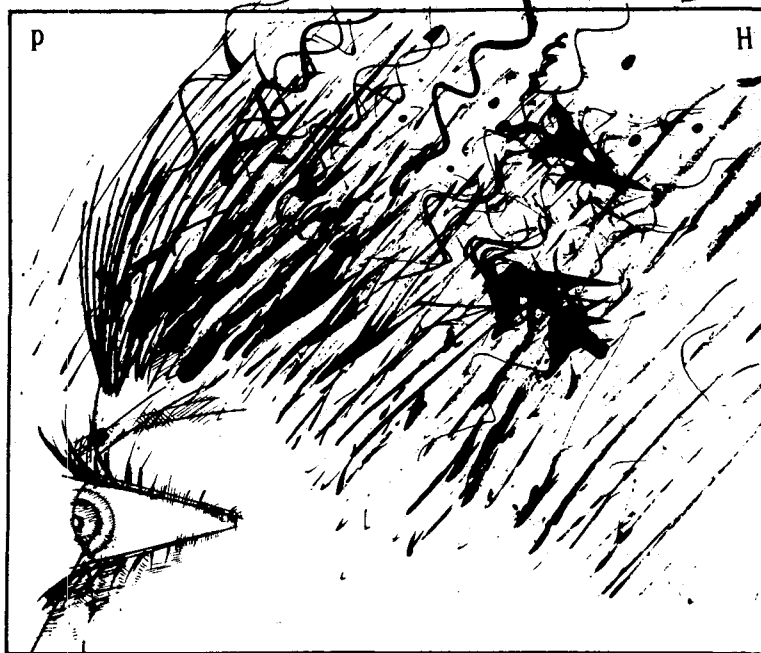
When the story begins she is in Managua, hustling her body for dollars to leave this "floundering greasy banana regime." Her original reason for going to Nicaragua was to stand vigil against the contrast with "Eyes for Peace" (an obvious allusion to "Witness for Peace"), but she soon got bored and quit. Her real reason for going, she says, was that she "wanted to know...the exact dimensions of Hell."

Everything about the country repels her. Even the air gives her "some appreciation of what it might be like to inhale a shirt sleeve soaked in horse-piss." Things break down and, in a memorably chaotic scene at the telephone exchange, she longs "for the sight of U.S. tanks further chewing up the streets of this slovenly capital where it was possible only to get nothing done and nobody seemed to think nothing not enough...."

The various Nicaraguan officials she beds disgust her. She sees them as menacing mediocrities—overweight or impotent or useless.

Love is strange: Inexplicably, she falls in love with a visiting English oil executive who is not only nameless but, we are told, "faceless," "a giant nonentity" with features that are "pudding-like and ghostly." She says that "making love with him was like passing through a patch of fog."

The oil man, another political innocent with liberal leanings, has tipped off the Nicaraguan government to the probable existence of an oil field on the Costa Rican border. For this he believes he is being pursued by the Costa Rican secret police, the Sandinistas and possibly the CIA—who may all be in cahoots somehow with big oil. The murkiness of this dubious conspiracy is



New package tour: hell on \$5 a day

intensified by the narrator's perpetual alcoholic haze, occasional hysteria and terrible Spanish (the Englishman speaks none), so she is reporting things she herself does not comprehend.

The Englishman drinks, bemoans his fate in uncompleted sentences and waits for the prostitute to save him. He is not only nameless and faceless, but feckless. Together they buy a used car and head south. As the heroine says, "I've always been curious about the meaning of what followed."

"Questions hovered and were never asked. Why head for Costa Rica when one of us was wanted in that country? Why not find a lawyer, or write a letter to the *Times*, or what about the Brit putting a call through to somebody he could trust at Watts Oil in London, or contacting a relative, even his wife?"

Why, indeed? The author, through his narrator, offers no ex-

planation but is simply acknowledging the implausibility, perhaps hoping we'll let him get on with his tale.

Baffling climax: The story's climax comes when the two are captured and held by an unlikely team of the Sandinistas and the CIA.

Johnson uses wonderfully striking language to create the impression of Nicaragua as a scary place where violence and torture are ever-imminent.

After a night in an uncomfortable hut, she agrees to sign a paper, unread, which will bring unspecified bad things to the Englishman but help her get out of the country.

Both are then ferried across the river to Costa Rica, where the Englishman is hustled off to an unknown fate and the narrator goes to San Jose to resume renting her body to drunken American servicemen.

The Stars at Noon seems intended to be a salacious, tropical update of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to which it makes frequent self-conscious allusions—the events in *Stars* all take place in that year.

NICARAGUA

Johnson uses wonderfully striking language to create the impression of Nicaragua as a scary place where violence and torture are ever-imminent. But in fact, except for interludes of booze, sex and confusion, not much happens.

The oil man and the whore are just two gringos bumbling their way to the border because they're afraid of their shadows. And since her betrayal of her lover is as unmotivated as her being in Nicaragua in the first place, the grand climax carries none of the impact of Winston Smith's similar betrayal after succumbing to the torturers and their rats in 1984.

The heroine's unrelenting petulance will probably make most readers lose interest in her long before she completes her improbable quest. Her wisecracks contrast incongruously with the poetic images that crop up in her speech along with quotes from poets W. S. Merwin (a line of whose provided the title of the novel) and James L. White. There is little in her vulgar, tough-guy banter to suggest a woman's consciousness. Most often she appears to be the author, himself a poet, in drag.

The other gringos, the Englishman and the CIA man, speak like real people, but too infrequently and too unrevealingly to come alive. The real problem is with the Latin American characters, who seem to have been lifted not from experience but from other novels—Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*

and Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* possibly among them. At each remove, the impression becomes weaker. Stone's and Greene's novels are guerrilla thrillers, with the emphasis on violence and ideology. *The Stars at Noon*, however, seems merely intended to heighten the excitement of a gringo's erotic adventures.

In his earlier novels, *Angels and Fiskadoro*, Denis Johnson displayed great skills in dialogue, point of view and pacing. Here, although the descriptions are strong and euphonious, these other virtues are missing. This may be because he wrote the book in eight to nine months, as he told Jane Perlez in the *New York Times Book Review*.

"I felt rushed because I wasn't really steeped in the locale. The feeling of the locale was leaving me rapidly, so I wrote it fast. I wanted to give it the kind of sensation that it had left in me."

According to Perlez, Johnson wrote a novel rather than the article he had originally gone to Nicaragua to do because "people might take seriously what he had to say in nonfiction, a prospect that didn't sit easily. So he chose what intrigued him—the Central American atmosphere" for his "spiritual allegory about hell."

So, because he did not want to write seriously about a serious conflict, Johnson instead combined the clichés about the Latin American inferno with those about hellish communism. Whether he is serious or not, this is the kind of idea that encourages Col. North's friends to long "for the sight of U.S. tanks further chewing up the streets" of Managua and to wage war on the Nicaraguan peasantry. Because the tale of the voyager may affect the lives of real-life strangers, writers must be held accountable not only for their literary qualities but also for the understandings of the world that they convey. ■

Geoffrey Fox recently completed a novel, *The Liberators*, set in Venezuela.

The revolution and its discontents

Nicaragua: Unfinished Revolution

Edited by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer
Grove Press, 505 pp., \$12.95

By Jim Naureckas

QUICK—BEFORE THEY GET THE teflon repaired: now's your chance to exchange disinformation for information.

Nicaragua: Unfinished Revolution looks at what gets lost behind the contra debate—it's not just a battlefield, it's a society undergoing a fascinating and unique process. Editors Rosset and Vandermeer in-

clude selections from many sources to convey the diverse meanings that "revolution" has in the Nicaraguan context.

Not all readings are pro-Sandinista: contra voices are well represented by Robert Leiken, the Kissinger Commission and the U.S. government (including Reagan's declaration of a "national emergency," now in its 22nd month). These sections, and their rebuttals, demonstrate how shallow and devious American propaganda can be.

But the book is at its best when it transcends the U.S. terms of debate. Perceptive chapters comment on Nicaragua's developments in education, culture, women's issues,

even the environment—aspects little discussed even by our "progressive" media. One highlight is Father Miguel D'Escoto, foreign minister of Nicaragua, discussing how his politics are an expression of his Christian faith.

Readers may be surprised by the

Unfinished Revolution is at its best when it transcends the U.S. terms of debate.

democratic nature of Nicaragua's political culture—not only in the electoral sector but in the grassroots organizations and unions Nicaraguans refer to as "participatory democracy." It's not the only place in the book that suggests that the North American left may have more to learn from Nicaragua than they do from us.

The book is a useful tool for opponents of contra aid, containing such indispensable resources as the Latin American Studies Association's report on the Nicaraguan elections, and the congressional report "Who Are the Contras?" that documents the connections between Somoza's National Guard and the contra leadership. There's also a directory of solidarity organizations, a CIA comic book and much, much more. ■