

Translated by Alexander Amerisov

MOSCOW

Political and intellectual questioning is spreading rapidly in the Soviet Union, as the following transcript of a recent meeting at Moscow State University indicates. The meeting was addressed by A.I. Strelyanyi, economics and science editor of *Novy Mir*, one of the Soviet Union's most respected literary monthlies. Young Communist League members at the university made up most of the audience. Portions of the meeting were recorded, transcribed and smuggled abroad. Most of the transcript is reproduced here, with a few clarifying comments. —A.A.

STRELYANYI: SOVIET CITIZENS' TOTAL ABSENCE of rights in years past brought us to a very low level of culture.... We cannot live this way any longer. We need democracy. A well-known economist sent us [the editors of *Novy Mir*] a letter. He says that history will not forgive us if we don't overcome present conditions in a single leap: We are standing in front of an abyss, and one cannot leap over the abyss in two jumps. Doing it gradually is the greatest threat to *perestroika* [Gorbachov's social and economic reforms]. To try instituting reforms gradually will ruin not only Gorbachov but also the reforms themselves.

Perestroika has plenty of enemies. Take the article "Conniving Figure" [*Novy Mir*, No.2, 1987. Its thesis is that Soviet statistics can't be trusted]. We don't care who says what about this article. We are not writing for bosses. But 70 years of monstrous lies are still making themselves felt. At one of the meetings, Gorbachov himself criticized me for publishing this article.

After his criticism, my friends started offering me help in finding another job. "Still on the job?" they were asking. So far, as you see, I am still working, and will continue to print what I think is necessary and important. This is our Russian trouble—always anxiously to be looking into our bosses' eyes to find out whether they like something or not, how they will react to this or that.

Still, one woman highly placed in the Party, after reading "Conniving Figure," called me and asked for the sources one of the article's two authors used that allowed him to come to such conclusions—meaning the material will be seen at the top....

Our press has been lying for decades now. Everyone knows about the lies, but people still retain respectful awe toward the press. People still hope, but as long as the press is not independent, to ask much of it is unrealistic. Although the media has done a lot already...it does not function in our country on its own initiative. What we have is the result of a new attitude by a new leadership.

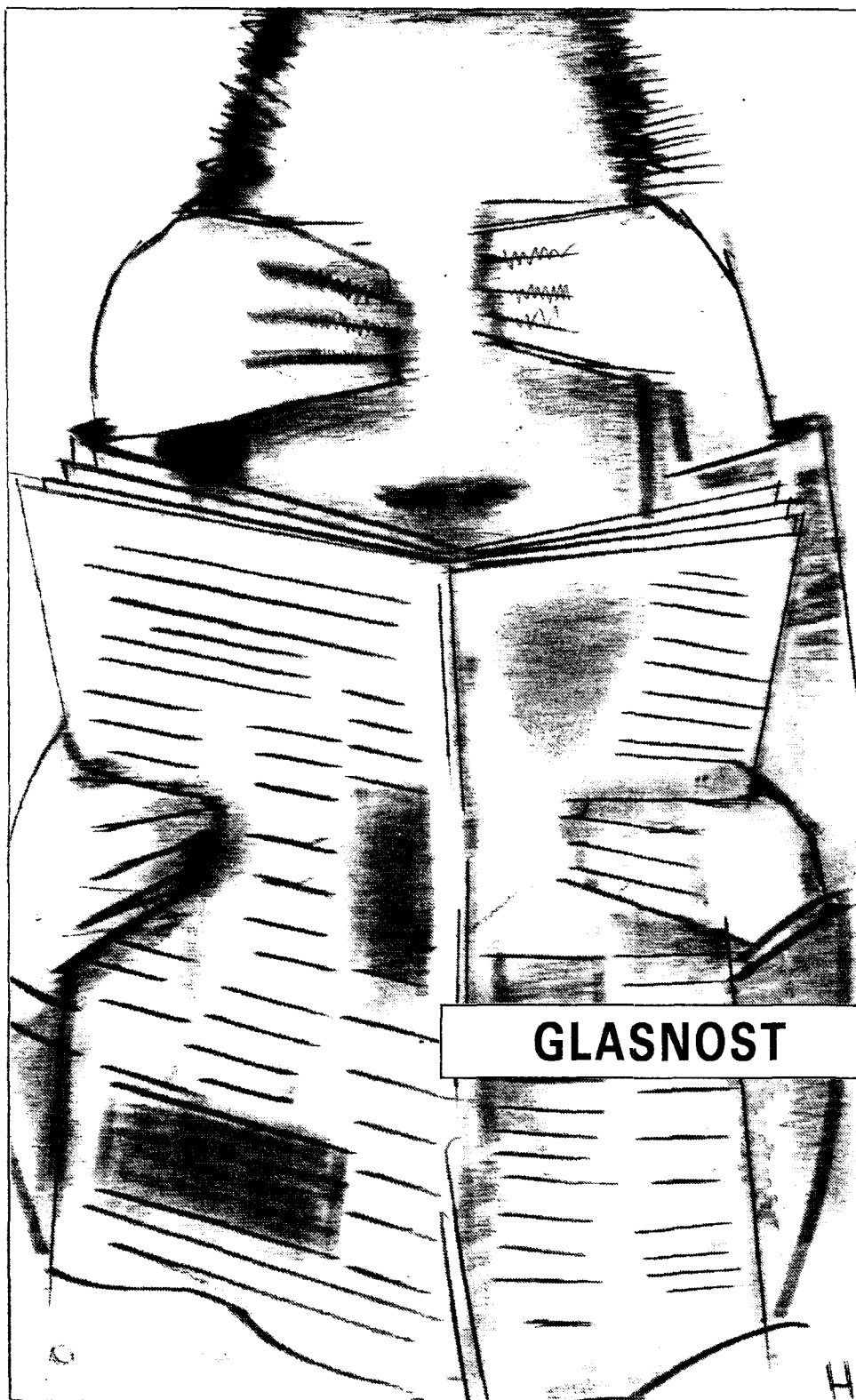
Question from the floor: Do you think the media should be independent of Communist Party oversight?

Strelyanyi: Yes. We need media independent of the Communist Party bureaucracy and the state machinery. An independent press is a press that would inform us about the killed and wounded in Afghanistan, would give the measurements of radioactivity levels at Chernobyl every day, would tell us about grain purchases, would sit at the meetings of the ruling Politburo and tell us what was being talked about....

Voice from the floor: Such a thing will never be.

Strelyanyi: If we want to eat our own bread and not American, there has to be an independent press.

Soviet editor calls for free press as public discussion is on the rise



Question from the floor: Is a law on the press being prepared?

Strelyanyi: I don't know, because we still don't have *glasnost*. *Glasnost*, unlike freedom of the press, is not a right, but a privilege granted to people by the government for the time being. The successes of *perestroika* so far find their expression mainly in the difference between today's press and that under Brezhnev. But even there, differences are not that great.... Freedom is not simply the means to some end. Freedom is an end in itself.... The revolutionary character of *perestroika* means that people must be set free.... At present, our press is dependent on the Communist Party and the state bureaucratic apparatus.

Voice from the floor: This is bullshit.

Strelyanyi: You see how we are. An Englishman would have said, "Excuse me, I am not fully in agreement with you; I think differently." You, on the other hand, shoot from the hip. I am not against differences. The destiny of *perestroika* nonetheless depends on whether we go our separate ways, and

whether we end up on different sides of the barricade.

Question from the floor: Does the Party really need such confrontation?

Strelyanyi: Actually, under the brand-name "CPSU" [Communist Party of the Soviet Union], we already have two parties. [Strelyanyi probably refers to a deep division within the Communist Party between demo-

A.I. Strelyanyi of the literary journal *Novy Mir* tells Moscow university students that while *glasnost* is a privilege, granted by Gorbachov, freedom of the press is a right too long denied.

cratically minded liberal supporters of Gorbachov and so-called Russian Party or Russian National-Bolsheviks within CPSU who seem to have the patronage of Yegor Ligachov, a member of the ruling Politburo.]

Question from the floor: Right now all the changes are being orchestrated from above. What do you think about it?

Strelyanyi: Indeed, right now we see only revolution from above. We asked one of our people to prepare material for *Novy Mir* about "revolutions from above" from Peter the Great to Stolypin [Pyotr Stolypin—a reform-minded prime minister of Tzar Nicholas II early this century]. The conclusion—hesitation kills revolution.

Voice from the floor: Aren't you too categorical?

Strelyanyi: If nothing is changed, if there is no leap by the end of the '90s, the country's economy will collapse, just as it did right after the Civil War [1918-1921]. The winter [probably he means the winter of 1921] hit cities the worst and exposed all holes. A friend of mine, who is the first secretary of *obkom* [specifically, a boss of one region of the country, one of the several hundred extremely powerful top functionaries within the Soviet Communist Party, equivalent to a Bishop in the Catholic Church] is building villages around his city of a million people. He is being asked: what for? He keeps silent and just smiles. But to me he says: "Will it [economic collapse] be this winter or next?" This is the question that bothers him every night when he goes to bed. Just in case his city is freezing to death, he will be able to take people to these villages.

Question from the floor: Is it true that during his visit to France *Novy Mir's* editor-in-chief Zatygin said that censorship already was abolished?

Strelyanyi: This was a bit premature. Censorship exists, although to a lesser degree. Every publisher's office has a so-called political editor.... There is also a list of "forbidden subjects." ...We need to publish this list of "forbidden subjects" and open it for discussion. The secrecy around grain purchases! Secrecy from whom? From America? As if they don't know how much grain they sell us! This is not patriotism—this is an attempt to escape criticism.... The figures [on the numbers of killed and wounded in Afghanistan] are well known in the West to everybody! They are being hidden from us and not from the *dushmani* [the derogatory Soviet word for Afghan mujahadeen]. We must print everything...in every case we must ask the question: who profits from silence?

Question from the floor: Who constitutes the social support base for *perestroika*?

Strelyanyi: Gorbachov is too slow with expansion of the social support base for *perestroika* and this very well may result in the destruction of our cause and Gorbachov himself. *Perestroika's* social base now consists of highly qualified blue-collar workers, the scientific and technical intelligentsia, a portion of the literary and humanitarian intelligentsia, a segment of the upper-level Communist Party apparatus and economic managers. □

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By Rachel Sternberg

MEXICO CITY

LAST WINTER WHEN BIRDS HERE FELL DEAD from the sky, the authorities remained silent until 10 days into the crisis. When they finally spoke, it was to reassure the public that only two species were affected, that these were migratory birds tired and hungry from their long trip, that they had ingested pesticides along the way. In short, smog in the Valley of Mexico was but a minor, if decisive, factor in their demise.

It was a typical if not brilliant display of what Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) does best these days: damage control. Party leaders, struggling to pull the economy out of crisis, must hang on politically until their next presidential candidate—the certain victor—is safely chosen. For them it is an uncomfortable fact that the seat of government is not only the largest city in the world but also the most polluted (see accompanying story).

This was the second consecutive winter that birds had dropped dead. Laboratory analyses found lead, cadmium and mercury lacing their tissues. Their death belied government boasts that its year-old 21-point ecology program was a success, and nearly spoiled the effect of an ambitious 100-point program unveiled only two weeks before. The "100 Necessary Actions" were aimed at cleaning up air, soil and water in Mexico City and throughout the country. Some measures

dealt with the conservation and restoration of natural resources, others with the control of pesticides and detergents. For the capital there were plans to control auto emissions, factory wastes, garbage, sewage and noise.

Local ecologists have politely acknowledged the program as "serious," but no one expects it to be carried out. In May the government announced that 37 of the points were already in "full execution." "We're not so cheerful," says Manuel Fernandez, president of the Mexican Conservationist Federation. "The 100 points are...100 points. There is no timetable, no system of accountability, no enforcement mechanism." One might add that there isn't even a budget.

"The problem of pollution in Mexico reflects the pollution of the political system," says Homero Aridjis, president of the Group of 100, a collection of prominent artists and intellectuals who formed in 1985 to defend the environment. "Factories pollute because the inspectors in charge of making sure they don't are extorting money instead. Automobiles pollute because the traffic police ask money from motorists.... The problem will not be solved unless Mexico as a country makes a political change. There has to be more democracy, more plurality of political parties, respect for the vote of the citizen."

During thermal inversions, the horizon turns brown and the mountains that surround the city vanish from view. Even on good days, clouds of exhaust fumes envelop major boulevards, causing sore throats, burning eyes and aching heads. Environmental toxicologist Tom Dydek compared Mexico City data on suspended particles, nitrogen

dioxide and hydrocarbons with U.S. data. His findings? The air of Mexico City—on a good day—is as bad or worse than the air inside New York's Lincoln Tunnel.

Of all the local environmental atrocities, air pollution is the most politically volatile. However much garbage may be generated, whatever the strains on the sewer system, only air pollution is seen and felt by everybody. The children of the well-to-do are no more protected from bad air than are the children of the poor. In fact, families rich enough to live up in the hills on the outskirts of the city found themselves wrapped in the thickest smog during the valley's thermal inversions, when warm and toxic air rises as high as it can beneath a lid of cold air.

Lead, with its well-documented effects on the central nervous system, is a particularly emotional issue. U.S. researcher Stephen Rothenberg recently completed a pilot study on 50 Mexico City newborns. Nearly 70 percent had blood-lead levels higher than 10 micrograms per deciliter—a level associated with poor physical and mental development up to at least the age of three.

The government, predictably, plays down the health angle and refuses to admit that bad air may be killing people. It is true that people are not dying as they did in coal-burning London of 1952, when 4,000 lives were lost in five days, and the cause was clear. The secretariat of health says pollutants merely exacerbate prior health conditions. Others respond that if such exacerbation leads to death, then pollution is indeed fatal. Ecologists tend to get people's attention by citing large and unsubstantiated numbers—

up to 100,000 deaths per year.

It's clear that at best the government doesn't know and doesn't want to know the actual figures. One foreign researcher investigating the health effects of heavy metals, for example, was told by the government to drop the most controversial part of his study. Only in the past year have health officials begun epidemiological studies on pollution or examined possible links between air quality and mortality.

One genuine problem is separating the effects of pollution from other widespread health problems, such as malnutrition. Unhealthy people cannot withstand as much abuse as healthy people can. Some five million poor city residents who lack drinking water and plumbing are particularly vulnerable; so are workers who live in the shadow of smokestacks.

The government claims to have reduced levels of four major air pollutants. Yet critics say that the measures taken so far amount to mere tinkering with a complex machine that needs to be overhauled. For instance, the state oil company PEMEX last year introduced two new gasolines—one low-lead, one lead-free—to replace its high-lead brands. Lead emissions did fall, slightly, but levels of ozone and cancer-causing unburned hydrocarbons rose.

What needs fixing is bigger than Mexico City itself. Without solving rural problems it will be impossible to halt the city's anarchic growth. "Counterreform" agrarian policies dating to the late '40s have increased the misery of *campesinos*, while lower infant mortality rates have increased their num-