

By Rick Wilson
Translated by Pamela Ward

"It is not a question of destroying the values of the October Revolution. Rather we must restore and purify them; they must be reinforced and built upon. Only if there is a systematic and consistent democratization of the whole of our political and social life on a socialist basis will our country be able to regain its role and influence among the progressive forces of the world."

MIKHAIL GORBACHOV EXPOUNDING HIS ideas of *glasnost* and *perestroika*? No. Roy A. Medvedev in the early '70s—during the long, cold winter of the Brezhnev era. Yet, while Medvedev's writings are well known in scholarly and democratic socialist circles around the world, he is no darling of the Western media. Neither rabidly anti-socialist like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, nor a moderate liberal like Andrei Sakharov, Medvedev is a critical but loyal Soviet citizen, a Marxist and a socialist—even, with certain qualifications, a Leninist and a communist. In short, a democratic-sounding communist who tends to cause indigestion among corporate journalists.

Although he has often seemed a voice crying in the wilderness, Medvedev has lived in the thick of Soviet history. He and his twin brother Zhores, also a prominent author and dissident, now living in exile in London, were born in 1925 in Tbilisi, the capital of Soviet Georgia. Their father, Aleksandr Romanovich Medvedev, had been a Red Army political commissar during the Civil War and a teacher of Marxist philosophy. The most traumatic events in the Medvedevs' early life—ones that cast the dye for much of their later activities—was their father's arrest in the Stalinist purge of 1938 and his death in an Arctic labor camp in 1941. His father's arrest, Roy Medvedev says, was "frightening and completely incomprehensible, completely out of accord with the ideas of Leninism or Marxism or socialism. I understood that our lives had been visited by a great evil, but the extent of that evil I could not then understand." But he wanted to figure it out, so he decided to busy himself "with politics, with social science, to examine what is good and what is bad in our society."

Both brothers busied themselves with politics after World War II. Zhores became a prominent scientist and a leader in the assault on the fraudulent genetic theories of T.D. Lysenko. Lysenko enjoyed Joseph Stalin's blessing and retarded the development of Soviet science for decades. Zhores' *samizdat* publications incurred the wrath of the authorities, who committed him involuntarily to a psychiatric hospital in 1970. Released following protests by prominent scientists, Zhores was stripped of Soviet citizenship shortly thereafter and has been living abroad ever since. In exile, he has written several books, including *Nuclear Disaster in the Urals*, an account of a '50s nuclear accident that makes Chernobyl look like a firecracker, biographies of Yuri Andropov and Gorbachov and, most recently, a study of Soviet agriculture.

Roy Medvedev became a prominent educator and joined the Communist Party in 1956, the year of Nikita Khrushchev's famous "secret speech" on the crimes of Stalin—and the year his father was posthumously

Roy Medvedev talks about his 25-year fight for *glasnost*

ously rehabilitated. When the 22nd Party Congress issued a renewed call for de-Stalinization in 1961, he began work on what was to become perhaps the definitive account of the Stalin era, *Let History Judge*. Although originally intended for publication in the Soviet Union, the Central Committee denied it permission. Expelled from the party in 1969, Medvedev suffered more than 15 years of harassment and intimidation. Like his subsequent works on Khrushchev, Nikolai Bukharin, Stalin's cohorts and the

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prospects of reform in the USSR, *Let History Judge* has still not been published in the Soviet Union.

In 1971 Medvedev finished *On Socialist Democracy*. In it, he identified three tendencies in the party: reactionary neo-Stalinists (who enjoyed favor under Leonid Brezhnev), moderate-conservatives or centrists, and party democrats, whom he characterized as "a left-wing group within the party that proceeds from a communist, Marxist-Leninist position." This group carried with it the possibility of genuine socialism, Medvedev wrote, a claim that seemed utopian as late as 1984.

Then came Gorbachov. While it is too soon to make any final assessment of his official attempts to open and restructure and democratize the Soviet Union, his rise to power testifies to Medvedev's perspicacity.

With this idea in mind, I wrote to Roy Medvedev in August 1987 to elicit his views on current Soviet developments. I mailed two copies, one via Zhores in London and one to Roy's Moscow address. The second letter was an experiment: had *glasnost* penetrated the Soviet postal service? It hadn't.

Four months later came the reply, including a handwritten letter in English from Zhores and a typewritten answer from Roy in Russian.

The letter began with an apology for the delay:

"I did not get the original letter at my Moscow address because everything regarding me remains severely controlled. I don't get mail from foreigners or, for the most part, from anyone else. My reply to you, therefore, is tardy because I am not able simply to put it in the mail. Though my situation is growing better, there is still a 'postal blockade.'"

"Support from people in the West has been very important for me. But many types of people also support me here in the Soviet Union."

Here are Medvedev's answers to my questions:

Does Gorbachov enjoy enough party support to carry out his reforms?

Gorbachov, of course, has sufficient support within the party. Without such support he would not be able to stay in power. But there are still many opponents to political reform and to Gorbachov's faction. And among Gorbachov's supporters and in his "coalition for change," there are influential politicians who did not wish to go as far with these reforms

as Gorbachov has. Therefore, every move forward involves complicated political and interparty struggles. Many reforms are already impossible to turn back, but some are not fully accomplished. It is necessary to spend much time on a more drawn out path.... Likewise the anger brought out in October at the plenary session of the Central Committee at which Boris Yeltsin was dismissed for his dramatic, but not especially timely or successful, statement shows that the movement forward is not weakening but is amplifying different types of friction and obstacles. The months following the 19th Party Conference (June 20) will in many regards be decisive.

[At the October Central Committee meeting referred to, Moscow Party leader Yeltsin made a speech denouncing the slowness of reforms and offering his resignation. In November, he was fired and himself denounced for, in Gorbachov's words, "putting his personal ambition ahead of the interests of the party." Observers are still trying to interpret the meaning of his downfall. He has since been reappointed to a lesser but influential position in the state construction industry.]

Many people in the West view Afghanistan as a stumbling block for progress in the Soviet Union, just as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels warned that a socialist state could "force no blessings" on an underdeveloped nation without undermining its own gains.

Of course, Afghanistan is a very big problem in both the foreign and domestic policies of the Soviet Union. But progress in democratization, *glasnost* and *perestroika* coexists simultaneously with the search for solutions in Afghanistan. The problem was born with the complete incompetence of the Soviet leadership in 1979. This is related to the U.S. attempt to establish a strategic alliance with China, which was directed against the USSR. The American-Chinese union against the USSR did not hold up, but it is now necessary to withdraw Soviet forces, as the U.S. did in Vietnam. The goodwill and combined efforts of several sides are needed to reach a reasonable compromise.

Is there resistance to *perestroika* among ordinary citizens?

Many ordinary workers, rural people, students, schoolteachers, doctors and scientific workers oppose *perestroika*. It would have been easier to conduct reconstruction after the tyrannical regime of Stalin than after the corrupt and lazy do-nothing apparatus of the Brezhnev era, when for 20 years everyone became used to working poorly. [Reconstruction proceeds] with more difficulty when indifference pervades than when people felt themselves to be better off and were interested and talented. First it is necessary to raise work standards, sometimes even to go for temporary sacrifices in consumption. Prosperity arrives later. It is easier to make changes in cultural spheres than in the production of automobiles and computers.

How is *glasnost* affecting you?

For me it is not especially significant, but

there are some changes. Recently I received my first official invitation to lecture about Stalin and Stalinism to an audience of teachers of the Russian language from Socialist and Western countries, which meets every year in the USSR.... Several influential scholars from the areas of the social sciences wanted to renew acquaintances with me that had lapsed since the beginning of the '70s. I did not insult people who in the '70s avoided me. They are now starting to lead in useful work and require support.

Do you think people like Bukharin and Leon Trotsky and other old Bolsheviks murdered by Stalin may someday be rehabilitated?

Bukharin and all who were regarded as "right" deviationists will soon be completely rehabilitated. Gorbachov's speech on November 2 seems an important step toward this. When our press observes the 100th anniversary of Bukharin's birth this year, a memorial to him will be established. But Trotsky's position has changed much less. The situation here is more complicated, from both the historical and ideological point of view. Trotsky has merit, and he was important in 1917 and in 1918-20. Some changes in the evaluation of Trotsky are already occurring.... But many people both among politicians and cultural workers deserve to be remembered in larger measure than Trotsky.

They are the concern of my books on history, which I think will sooner or later be published in the Soviet Union. They have largely been written from the perspective of Soviet rather than Western readers. Already five of my books have been published in Yugoslavia and seven by the Communist Party publishing house in Italy.

One reviewer wrote that your work was an attempt to salvage the honor and history of the October Revolution from the Stalinists.

Of course, I hope to be able to help save the moral and political honor of socialism, which was born in the world after the October Revolution. The birth was extremely difficult, and the child brought forth was viable but not especially attractive. To correct that situation is hard, but possible. In every revolution the foundations of both progress and rebirth are laid. But revolution is only the beginning and is less difficult than all that must be done [afterward]. □

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By David Moberg

SMYRNA, TENNESSEE

FOR TWO YEARS GLADYS BAINES TRIED TO get a job at the new, state-of-the-art auto assembly plant that Nissan built just outside this lackluster little town in middle Tennessee. She had done hard factory work most of her life, and the Nissan job would mean going from \$5 an hour to more than \$11 an hour.

"I went out there to stay 'til I retired," she says. "That job meant everything to me. I could support my family, send my kids to college. But they stripped everything from me."

Everything included not only her job, but her health. In the summer of 1985, as she recounts her story, she was being trained for a new assembly job. But that day a couple of people were absent. Since the Nissan plant had far fewer workers to provide relief in such situations than most auto factories, she was suddenly forced to do an unfamiliar job with the speed typical of the Smyrna operation. Working under trucks she was assembling, she felt something give out in her back. Despite the pain, she kept coming back to work, as the company doctor treated her for a pulled muscle.

"They said I had no right to go to my own doctor," she recalls. "They said I'd have to go to one of their 'brought-out' doctors."

By October doctors had hospitalized her and diagnosed a "bulging disk" in her back as the source of the nearly crippling pain. In May 1986 they said she could go back to work, but only to do light duty work. But Baines has never been back to work. By June of that year, her workmen's compensation insurance was exhausted and the insurance she now has won't cover the continuing expenses of her injury.

Nissan's management "keeps saying they have no light duty work," she says, "but they put other people on light work. They just do what they can to get rid of you. They tried to get me to quit. I had been told that after you are injured they'll try to get rid of you. I thought it was talk, but it was the truth."

For a long time she kept quiet, hoping that she could get back on at Nissan, since she couldn't get work at any other factory with her injury. "I didn't want to lose my job," Baines, now 41, said. "They had me scared to death a long time. But I thought if I didn't stand up for myself, who would? I decided the workers there need a union. They need it bad, and I never was for it before. If this company gets away, as they have, destroying hundreds of lives, what's the future for our children?"

Baines' story and many like it belie the early image of the Nissan plant. Announced in 1980, Nissan's \$848 million stamping and assembly plant for trucks—and later cars—was supposed to be not only technologically advanced but a model of humane management, treating workers as "our most important resource" and giving them a voice in important decisions.

And it was supposed to be non-union. So far it has been, from the non-union workforce that built the plant and launched construction worker protests to the 3,200 current employees, including the 2,400 "technicians," or production workers. There are also 400 subcontracted positions, many of them the light duty ones injured Nissan workers could but aren't allowed to do.

The Nissan challenge: Now the United Auto Workers (UAW), building on the frustrations of workers who feel the Nissan promise has been betrayed, are trying to organize the factory. With the rapid expansion of

Japanese auto and parts manufacturing in the U.S., the Nissan challenge is especially important. The UAW had to pull back its drive at Honda in Ohio last year, but succeeded in winning a contract at Mazda's new Michigan factory—partly because Mazda, unlike Honda and Nissan, did not fight the union.

Nissan carefully screened the 100,000 original applicants and trained its new hires extensively. Management introduced a grab bag of devices to build team spirit. It promised no lay-offs and promoted involvement circles to discuss problems (and combat unions, says UAW chief organizer Jim Turner) that now involve about 500 workers. There is a 10-minute morning meeting for each work group (the original Japanese-style songs and calisthenics were quickly dropped), rotation of jobs within a work team (in theory), informal managerial dress, occasional pizza and beer parties for workers and quarterly meetings of all employees. Disciplined workers have the option of going before a Peer Review. In 1984 *Fortune* magazine called the plant one of the 10 best-managed factories in America.

But as production stepped up, so did problems. There were increasing complaints of excessive workloads, inadequate substitutes for absent workers, harassment of outspoken workers, arbitrariness and favoritism, and injuries—especially from "repetitive traumas" to wrists and arms. Workers increasingly concluded that if they complained they would be assigned to the worst tasks or even forced out of their jobs. A few of them approached the UAW, which began holding educational meetings. Last year it launched a serious organizing effort; several hundred came to a January kick-off of a union card-signing drive.

Despite the Japanese ownership, Nissan's Smyrna plant was originally run by Marvin Runyon, a former Ford executive. And even though Runyon said he adapted some tactics from the Japanese, he insisted it was not a Japanese-style factory. Although often described as more worker-oriented than traditional U.S. factories, Japanese auto factories are intensified traditional assembly lines, not the more innovative, worker-paced team efforts of Swedish auto plants. Turner argues it does not resemble most contemporary Ford plants, with their superficial employee involvement, as much as hard-driven U.S. auto factories of the past.

Now the Nissan operation faces new pressures. Although it will declare its first profit this fiscal year ending in March, sales are lagging and there is a backlog inventory of at least four months sales. Runyon, who last spring said he would stay on another 15 years, mysteriously left his \$686,000-a-year job last fall. The UAW insists that the comparatively heavy management overhead burdens production workers, and other industry observers blame use of old Ford management style for the failure to reach top industry efficiency standards. Turner says that a Louisville, Ky., Ford truck plant requires a total of 19 employee-hours per truck, compared to 25 or 26 hours per truck at Nissan, if all factory overhead employment is included. But comparable union-organized plants have many more production workers than Nissan.

MIT researcher John Krafcik says that the Smyrna plant is inefficiently large and burdened with more high technology than it probably needs. But its productivity is comparable to Japanese Nissan plants and its quality ratings very high. Runyon said his plant beat the Big Three in productivity but did not match the most efficient transplants,



Members of the in-plant United Auto Workers organizing committee (left to right): Mike Williams, Lisa Br...

apparently including the unionized NUMMI plan in California (a joint GM-Toyota project). Krafcik doesn't see any management need to keep out the UAW. "It won't make a grain of difference in their productivity whether the union is there," he said. "If you compare NUMMI to Nissan or Honda, their productivity capabilities are on a par. Mazda, which is unionized, is going to have eye-popping levels of productivity."

Work that never stops: Workers on the line, in any case, say they feel extreme work

pressure. "It's not what they led us to believe when we were taking our training," says Kenny Kemp, a 28-year-old body shop worker. "We thought the jobs wouldn't be too bad for a person to do, and people would be treated fairly in a good working environment. But when you leave each day you are so tired and overworked, you don't feel like doing anything else. The work is real hard for anybody. I used to work pretty hard at a job I had, used to farm and cut my own wood at home. This is much harder—harder than

Despite Nissan's anti-union paranoia, "It won't make a grain of difference in [the plant's] productivity



Nissan Motor Mfg. Corp.