Desperately seeking socialism: why the Soviet Union's left-wing dissidents matter today

written by Gabriel Levy | July 22, 2018

The following text appeared on OpenDemocracy, and features a review by Gabriel Levy of Ilya Budraistkis' book Dissidents Among Dissidents*, a new collection of essays published in Russian in 2017 by Free Marxist Publishers. It was originally published on People and Nature.*

This new collection of essays seeks to rebalance our understanding of dissent in the late Soviet Union, drawing attention to democratic socialists from the 1950s into the 1980s.

The "New Cold War" is the subject of the most politically compelling of the essays in this book by the Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis. He wrote it in the summer of 2014, as Russian troops streamed into eastern Ukraine to fight alongside the Russian-armed militia of the separatist "people's republics", and the Russian ultra-nationalists, mercenaries and volunteers who joined them.

August 1968, Prague. Wikipedia / Public Domain. Some rights reserved.

At that time, the existence of a "New Cold War" was already being treated in public discourse as an "obvious and indisputable fact", Budraitskis argues — but "the production of rhetoric has run way ahead of the reality".

To question the assumptions behind the rhetoric further, Budraitskis considers the character of the original Cold War, i.e. between the Soviet bloc and the western powers between the end of the Second World War and 1991, in the essay "Intellectuals and the Cold War". As he writes, the Cold War was a set of "principles of the world order", construed by ruling elites and then confirmed in intellectual discourse and in the everyday activity of masses of people.

The reality of continuous psychological mobilisation, and the nerve-straining expectation of global military conflict, as apprehended by society as a whole, became a means of existence, reproduced over the course of two generations, in which loyalty to beliefs was combined with fear and a feeling of helplessness before fate.

This proposition, that the Cold War was essentially a means of social control, in which masses of people were systematically deprived of agency, certainly works for me. I wondered whether Budraitskis knows of the attempts, made during the Cold War on the "western" side of the divide, to

analyse this central aspect of it — for example, the work of Hillel Ticktin and others in the early issues of the socialist journal *Critique* (from 1973). Here, Ticktin wrote on the political economy of the Soviet Union, interpreting it in the context of world capitalism.

Today, the Cold War's binary ideological constraints live on, Budraitskis argues. "The trauma of choice between hostile camps has still today not been overcome". As an example, he quotes the reactions to Russia's participation in the war in eastern Ukraine by, on one hand, Alexander Dugin, the extreme right-wing Russian "Eurasianist", and, on the other, the American historian Timothy Snyder. (See here and here.)

It is undeniable that elite-controlled public forums have increasingly been dominated by the two-sided, one-dimensional discourse of the Cold War. For Dugin, the military conflict in eastern Ukraine amounted to "the return of Russia to history". For Snyder, it was confirmation that Ukraine had finally to recognise that it was part of Europe. Dugin's anti-Europe and Snyder's Europe leave no room for a third way, Budraitskis asserts gloomily.

On this at least, I feel more optimistic. It is undeniable that elite-controlled public forums have increasingly been dominated by the two-sided, one-dimensional discourse of the Cold War. On the "left", this false dichotomy has been reflected in "geopolitical" stances that base themselves on the relative qualities of imperialist blocs, and deny agency to, or sideline, society generally and social movements particularly. But those social movements exist, and there are voices in the intelligentsia that reflect them.

Escaping the binary

From the late 1940s, both in the west and in the Soviet Union, the intelligentsia began to be transformed "from a group that was capable simply of implementing an ideological order, to one that was prepared independently to formulate it, make it more precise and reproduce it,"Budraitskis writes. In the Soviet Union, the intelligentsia was constrained by the state's imperialistic and chauvinistic approach to politics. That defined not only 1960s debates such as those about the scientific-technical revolution and "socialism with a human face", but even 1970s Soviet dissidents' discussions of the relationship between "national" and "universal-humanist" values.

It was "self-evident", and "required no special confirmation from above", that a "third way" for intellectuals, that escaped the "binary structure of the East-West conflict [of states]", was "impossible", Budraitskis argues. The proof, for him, is that as official "Marxism-Leninism" became completely discredited in the two decades prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, that collapse "could not then be understood otherwise than as the victory of one of the military-political blocs [i.e. the western one]".

I read this passage hoping for more caveats and qualifications. I accept that the western liberal narrative about the "collapse of communism" in the 1990s became ubiquitous and overwhelming in those spaces — journalism, academia, etc — that in the west are called public opinion. But surely there were dissenting and critical strands in the intelligentsia — particularly if understood in the wider way that it used to be in Soviet times — both in the west and in the former Soviet states.

In Russia, those public spaces were taking shape, uncensored, in a new way. Immediately before and after the collapse of the USSR, Russian journalism was in its heyday, lashing out at corruption and the horror of the first war in Chechnya, before corporate control and Putin-era censorship tightened the screws. In film, the reckoning with Stalinism began, running from Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985) to Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt By The Sun* (1994). In literature, Viktor Pelevin's *Generation "P"* (1999), magnificently, turned Yeltsin's regime into an absurd phantasmagoria.

These are just the (perhaps rose-tinted?) memories of a western leftist who started travelling to Russia at that time. But I want to know how this rich, chaotic ferment fits in to Budraitskis's argument.

The dissidents' history

The centerpiece of Budraitskis's book is a longer essay, "Dissidents Among Dissidents", that traces the history of socialist trends in the Soviet dissident milieu between the mid-1950s and the Gorbachev reforms of the mid-1980s. It is a fascinating and valuable piece of work.

Budraitskis describes how a "wave of social discontent" in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s, echoing the workers' revolts in Hungary, Poland and the German Democratic Republic — from large-scale riots in Chechnya (1958) and Kazakhstan (1959) to protests and attacks on Communist party offices in Murom and Aleksandrov (1961) and culminating in the Novercherkassk rebellion (1962) — formed the background not only to the twentieth Communist Party congress (1956) and Nikita Khrushchev's post-Stalinist "thaw", but also to the emergence of the first big wave of socialist dissident groups. They were mostly made up of students and young workers in larger cities, they always met in secret, were usually isolated from each other, and their activity was almost always cut short by arrests.

There had been precursors, in the last years of Stalin's rule, such as the "Communist Party of Youth" (formed in Voronezh in 1948) and the "Union of Struggle for the Cause of Revolution" (formed in Moscow in 1951). These student groups were soon crushed by arrests and long prison sentences. But the "thaw" of the late 1950s and early 1960s brought such public forums as gatherings in Moscow for poetry reading and discussion at the statue of Vladimir Mayakovsky, and a corresponding widening of political activity.

The meaning of socialism, then and now

In the early 1970s, the conservative wing of the Soviet dissident movement, with Alexander Solzhenitsyn at its head, lurched politically to the right, and Budraitskis's account of this was for me one of the most interesting passages.

In 1974, soon after his forced emigration, Solzhenitsyn launched a broadside against the idea of socialism in general, and the socialist dissidents particularly. One of his chief targets was the historian Roy Medvedev, who from the late 1960s, influenced by "Eurocommunism", had advocated "the democratisation of the economy, education and structures of power", aims that he believed could be pursued both through samizdat (illegal publications) and through official channels, including pressure on elements in the Communist Party.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Heinrich Böll's home, Germany, 1974. CC BY-SA 3.0 Dutch National Archives / Wikipedia. Some rights reserved.

Budraitskis describes how tensions between Medvedev on one side, and Solzhenitsyn and the physicist Andrei Sakharov on the other, came to a head over, among other things, the wording of an appeal to the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in defence of the socialist poet Pablo Neruda. Medvedev scorned a sympathetic reference to Pinochet's "epoch of Chilean renaissance and consolidation" (which had of course been founded on the killing and torture of thousands of his opponents).

In a collection of essays *From Under The Rubble* (1974), Solzhenitsyn denounced "cleaned-up" Marxists whose differences with the official line were "insignificant". He clearly had Medvedev in mind. The latter responded in samizdat that, for Solzhenitsyn, "in general there is no difference at all between the idea of socialism and its implementation in reality"; socialism had won out in countries such as Russia and China precisely because the suffering of millions of people there under capitalism had been so severe. Budraitskis writes:

> For a significant part of the samizdat readership, though, these conclusions were hardly convincing. On the contrary, Medvedev's position was considered to be comfortable and collaborationist, by comparison with the uncompromising author of *The Gulag Archipelago* [i.e. Solzhenitsyn].

It was precisely at this time that the dissident milieu began to see the use of Marxist language — which was completely dominant in Soviet politics and academia (where Medvedev worked) — as negative in and of itself. "In oppositional ideological discussions, Marxism was taken to be a 'Soviet language', which it was indecent to use."

This issue starts, in my view, to get to the heart of the problems faced not only by Soviet dissidents, but by anyone who wants to understand socialism in the light of the Russian revolution and the Soviet experience. My fervent plea to Budraitskis would be to develop this theme further.

The underground dissident groups of the 1960s and 1970s about which Budraitskis writes, who had neither Medvedev's privileges nor Solzhenitsyn's fame, braved the danger of arrest and imprisonment precisely to try to recover the meaning of "socialism". Having so inspired 19th-century workers' movements, and the Russian workers, peasants and soldiers who made the 1917 revolution, this idea had — by the post-war period in the Soviet Union — had its meaning completely mangled. The lifeless "Marxist" prose of every school textbook was the butt of a thousand jokes. This language had indeed become indecent. I remember clearly how, when I first visited the Soviet Union, in 1990, I declared myself a socialist to militants in the newly-independent trade union movements — and they looked at me as though I had two heads. The positive connotations of the word in my naive western mind simply did not register with their life experience of "socialism".

The socialist idea had been trashed; the meaning of words had been turned inside-out. This was the problem that — unknown to me, and probably unknown to those workers too — the dissidents had been arguing about in the 1970s. Today, in the time of the "socialist" Bashar al-Assad and the "communist" Xi Jinping, it remains unresolved.

Budraitskis's essay on the centenary of the Russian revolution, "A Heritage Without Inheritors", did not bring clarity to this issue. He argues that "the aim of the transition to socialism did not arise out of the dynamic of class struggle itself" — rather, it was posed as a Kantian imperative. "The Leninist party took upon itself this moral burden: the transition to socialism in a country that was by any definition unprepared for it." Fair enough. But what was this "socialism" that the Bolsheviks was trying to build? What was the corrosive effect of this "socialist construction" on the understanding, in Russia and beyond its borders too, of socialism as an aim?

To my mind, the search for a meaningful soul of socialism is more effectively pursued in Budraitskis' research of the dissidents. He explains how *State and Revolution* by Vladimir Lenin became a key text for the socialist dissidents of the 1960s. That most hopeful and democratic of Lenin's pre-revolutionary attempts to discuss what a future socialist state might be like was — unlike many more far-sighted and utopian imaginings by 19th century European socialists and anarchists — officially

published, and therefore widely available, in the Soviet Union.

The Leningrad dissident Mikhail Molostvov, who formed a discussion group in 1956 and was soon afterwards sent to a prison camp for seven years, recalled in his memoirs a worker who went around libraries, underlining in copies of State and Revolution passages calling for the regular election and recall of all officials, and for their pay to be limited to the average. Another dissident of that generation, Boris Vail, met workers in his prison camp who had been arrested after re-covering officially published copies of Lenin's book with jackets picturing barbed wire.

These stories reminded me that Solzhenitsyn's early novels — which, notwithstanding his lurch to the right in the 1970s, remain for me a profound contribution to my understanding of Stalinism — are full of references to these very issues. In *The First Circle*, he riffs on Lenin's musings in *State and Revolution* about every cook being able to participate in state administration. Stalin's thoughts, as imagined by Solzhenitsyn, were that Lenin had made promises that turned into a rod for Stalin's back. Every cook will be able to run the state? What on earth was he [Lenin] thinking, concretely? That every cook on Fridays won't cook, but will go and work in the district executive office? A cook is a cook: she has to prepare meals. But directing people — that is a great calling, which can be trusted only to special cadres, specially selected cadres.

Characters in *The First Circle* (chapter 90) discuss the mind-bending "just inequality" (?!) that characterised the Soviet Union. In Cancer Ward, Pavel Rusanov, the personnel officer and bully who personifies the Soviet "workers' state", is subject to a withering denunciation by the central hero, Oleg Kostoglotov. What do you know about work, he asks, when you have such lily-white hands?

In these books, written and published both in samizdat and in the west by the end of the 1960s, Solzhenitsyn had, clearly, already broken free of the constraints of official Soviet "Marxism" and its contorted language — at a time when he had not yet developed a clearly anti-socialist ideology. Did the socialist student and worker dissidents also make such a break? Or did they, like Roy Medvedev, remain constrained in a linguistic, and therefore to some extent ideological, framework, set by officialdom? Budraitskis' fascinating quotations from their political manifestos, many of which characterised the Soviet economy as exploitative and its political regime as hierarchical, left me wanting to know more.

There are related questions, about the extent to which the prison camp writers, of which Solzhenitsyn was the best known, influenced the small groups of students and workers that Budraitskis has researched. To what extent did those groups integrate the camps — that in many ways were a world apart — into their understanding of Soviet society and economy? Had they read Solzhenitsyn? And Varlam Shalamov? I imagine he was far closer in spirit than Solzhenitsyn was to the left-wing dissidents — in his socialist humanism, in the way that his politics were shaped when he was young in the workers' movement of the 1920s, and even in the bleak pessimism of his later writings.

Here too, I am looking with the eyes of an outsider, who read these books not in samizdat but in the comfort of my London home. But I am perhaps not the only western reader for whom Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov were stepping stones, and who needs to try to join these up with the stepping stones that Budraitskis is pointing to.

Analysis in the underground

Budraitskis' focus on the small underground groups, who were far less visible than the internationally-known dissidents, is welcome. Those who considered themselves socialists almost all characterised the Soviet system as an exploitative one with class divisions, he explains. Revolt

Pimenov, who with Boris Vail established a dissident group in Leningrad in 1956-1957, drafted theses asserting that in the USSR, “the state has become the only capitalist, the only landlord and the only thinker”. For Pimenov, Budraitskis writes, the Soviet economy was “state capitalist”; state property could not be socialised property; and state property and socialism were mutually exclusive. Another Leningrad group, organised by Mikhail Molostvov, while declaring Stalinism and Trotskyism both to have taken a bureaucratic road, nevertheless advanced a political programme that, unlike Pimenov’s, clearly saw the road ahead through reforms, advocating that “the mass of working people are brought into the management of the country”.

Some of the left-wing dissidents — if I have understood Budraitskis’s account correctly — saw the USSR, for all its reactionary characteristics, as a stepping-stone towards a truly socialist society. For example the Union of Communards, set up in Leningrad in the 1960s, entitled its main platform document “from the dictatorship of the bureaucracy to the dictatorship of the proletariat”, and included an epigraph by Lenin advocating a republic where there would be election and recall of all officials, and “no police, no army and no state bureaucracy”.

Andrey Sakharov joins Revolt Pimenov during his 1989 election campaign in Syktyvkar, Komi Republic. Source: Bohemian Petersburg.

Another significant aspect of the socialist dissidents’ politics was their internationalism, which in the 1950s underpinned their support for workers’ revolts in eastern Europe, and in 1968 for the “Prague spring”. Budraitskis underlines the role of socialist dissidents in Ukraine and other non-Russian Soviet republics, whose attempts to combine ideas of socialism with those of national liberation from Russian imperialism would stand in sharp contrast to the increasingly strident nationalism of Solzhenitsyn and other right-wing Russian dissidents.

The end of the Khrushchev political “thaw” in the mid 1960s opened a new chapter in the history of the dissident milieu. The hopes among the most reformist elements for the “self reform” of the Soviet bureaucracy had been dashed. Socialist dissidence, Budraitskis argues, continued in two parallel trends: one that worked in the dissident milieu and human rights organisations in the big cities, including prominent figures such as Roy Medvedev; the other comprising “underground socialist groups, continuing in the traditions of the ‘thaw’”.

In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, such groups appeared and reappeared repeatedly, across the Soviet Union: Budraitskis writes of groups in Chisinau (Moldova), Odessa (Ukraine), Tallinn (Estonia), Voroshilovgrad (now Lugansk, Ukraine), Ryazan, Saratov, Petrozavodsk, Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod) and Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg), as well as in Leningrad and Moscow. “Practically all of them took positions of Marxism and ‘cleaned-up’ Leninism, considered the [Communist] party to have degenerated and the USSR to be some type or other of exploitative society.” This was the background against which the clash between Medvedev and Solzhenitsyn was played out.

The Soviet dictatorship relied heavily on controlling and limiting the flow of information (and in this respect at least can not be replicated in the 21st century), and the dissident groups worked in suffocating isolation, often learning of each other’s existence only in the prison camps. Budraitskis’ essay is the first I know of by a post-Soviet socialist to start to summarise, compare and think about their experiences collectively — something that was hardly possible at the time. I hope it will soon be translated into other languages, and that the discussion of the dissidents’ legacy will be conducted not only in the former Soviet countries, but internationally, where their heroic battles to recover the

meaning of socialism from its Soviet imprisonment are no less significant.

Ilya Budraitskis comments: how circumstances defined the possibility of a 'third position'

I may say that I am doubly grateful to Gabriel Levy for his response to my book: this is a review not only by an attentive and educated reader, but also by a politically engaged person, a socialist activist who almost three decades ago witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Levy's political position helped him to evaluate that dramatic process in all its diversity and contradiction: on one hand, the atmosphere of social animation, the intensive searches for democratic alternatives to the Soviet system, the widespread mineworkers' strikes, and the rapid growth of the independent trade unions; and, on the other, the brutal primitive accumulation, the destructive transition to the market, the mass impoverishment, and the beginning of the evolution of the post-Soviet political regime, the results of which we are still living through today, with all the consequences.

This experience gave rise to questions which, in essence, have for the past two decades not been seriously considered on the Russian left. What were the objective reasons for the collapse of "really existing socialism"? What can we, and must we, counterpose to the historical and political speculation on the Soviet legacy both by the authorities and the liberal opposition? And finally, how can we establish a relationship between our own historical continuity and the Russian socialist tradition of the twentieth century?

My collection *Dissidents Among Dissidents* obviously did not exhaust these questions, but I hope that it helped to pose them correctly. The texts included in the volume, including the outline of the history of the Soviet Union's socialist dissidents, are in one way or another related to establishing the possibility of a "third position" between uncritical apologetics for the Soviet system and aggressive anti-communism.

Today, the rhetoric of the "New Cold War" — the second time it's returned more as "farce" than "tragedy" — brings back the logic of an enforced choice between two opposing camps, a logic to which so many intellectuals in the past, from Sartre to Sakharov, were subordinated. Attempts to get away from that choice, and from the loss of political independence that it signified, were all too often seen as evasions of responsibility, as indifference to the real struggle for social emancipation or for human rights (which in the binary logic of the cold war were made to stand in opposition to each other).

In this way, the possibility of a "third position" came to be defined not as a once-and-for-all dogma, but by the force of concrete circumstances. The socialist dissidents, who criticised the Soviet regime from the left, acted under the constant pressure of these circumstances — not only repression by the Soviet regime, but also the "right turn" in the mood of the intelligentsia, so evident from the beginning of the 1970s. (The issue of the contradictory social and political character of the Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia is the subject of another of the essays in my collection.)

The collapse of the USSR resulted in the collapse of the Soviet intelligentsia as a social group, with all the consciousness specific to it. The striking cultural artefacts of the late 1980s and early 1990s that Gabriel mentioned essentially reflected this phase, of both the disintegration of the intelligentsia's way of thinking, and the fragmentation of social consciousness in general. From the epoch of glasnost (with its bold engagement with the traumas of the past, that had previously been forbidden), the intelligentsia moved to the postmodernism of the 1990s. The other side of that coin often turned out to be dogmatic political judgments — above all, with respect to the eternal ghost of the "Soviet", which blocked the transition of post-Soviet Russia to global modernity and "normality". (I wrote about this in the article "The eternal hunt for the Red Man", also in my book.)

It seems to me that the ideas presented in *Dissidents Among Dissidents* may be of significance not only for Russian leftists but also in the context of current discussions internationally of the political nature of modern Russia and its relationship with the Soviet past.

Note from the author: If others wish to join this discussion, please email me with contributions, which – within the usual guidelines (see here) – I'll be happy to publish.