Reviews

Underground Notes
by Mihajlo Mihajlov. Introduction by Vladimir Maximov. Translated by Maria Mihajlov Ivusic and Christopher W. Ivusic. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, xii + 204 pp., £5.25.

The question that burns in these eighteen or so essays, which Mihajlov has published in journals as various as *samizdat* papers and the *New York Times*, is not, as it might be, "What is communism?" or "Is Russian terror worse than the Yugoslav oppression under which Mihajlov still suffers?" but – "What is man?" It is not for Mihajlov an academic question but one which has to be answered before the 60 years of Russian communism and the 30 years of the Yugoslav and East European varieties can be assessed – and ended – and the role of the internal resistance, not only to its brutal oppressors but to Marxism itself, made clear. An answer about the nature of man must be at the heart of the dynamic which is necessary to build a new ideology (Mihajlov loves this word, which I have come to regard as pure disaster) stronger than Marxism. Marxism must be defeated in the world of ideas if it is to be robbed of its appeal. And until we have decided what man *is* and *is for* we are hampered in any efforts to prescribe alternative societies. Why should not man comfortably exist and even flourish spiritually under autocracies, particularly those dedicated to "progress"? What is the answer? These are the questions Mihajlov poses.

Mihajlov ranges through dissident literature to show a strange and, to western consciousness, almost inexplicable thing: the inner freedom and exalted soul-consciousness of dissidents in concentration camps, who faced death every day, and lived in total isolation from everything which had hitherto made life worth living – family, books, music, liturgy, work, the sweetness of ordinary human contacts without fear or tension. The spiritual release was not dissimilar to the experience of Christian martyrs preparing for death, but in the cases to which Mihajlov refers, it was the gift of a grace from above which enabled men to *survive* that which it

was impossible to survive. For many, its transcendent source could not be denied, and helps explain that which has puzzled so many of us in the West – how did so many dissidents survive torments of which they were expected to die, and come out stronger than ever? And is it because the Kremlin secretly recognizes the failure of the Gulag that the KGB resorts to drugging men to insensibility in Soviet psychiatric prisons?

Mihajlov is categorical. His main theme is that man is not the product of historical or natural forces, and cannot be conceived as a material element to be moulded this way or that by exterior pressures powerful enough to do so. Since the Enlightenment, and more since Marx and Engels, we have been putting the human soul into an intellectual straitjacket, and so destroying ourselves as free spirits and offering ourselves as slaves.

"As the experience of *samizdat* writers shows, it is on the soul that our fate and the existence of the world depends, and not vice versa (as some of us want to believe)." Then, "Never before has the question of personal immortality been posed so sharply to each man – not theoretically but in fact – as in the present totalitarian societies. If physical death is the end, then slavery is justified. Then it is indeed better to be a living slave carrying out the orders of the Party than not to be at all. And vice versa – if the soul, the 'I' of each of us, is immortal, then worship of outside violence is the loss of the soul, which is worse than the loss of life."

Again and again Mihajlov returns to the theme of the indestructible soul of man and its responsibility before God and other men, and out of his deepest conviction proclaims that "this incredible spiritual revolution, whose first shoots are presently beginning to appear, is definitely a positive, if indeed completely unexpected, result of the Russian Revolution. The changes in the human consciousness, which the spiritual revolution is bound to provoke in the future, are going to usher in a new historical era."

Mihajlov is all for democracy because, he argues, the mistakes of democracy are corrigible, whereas the mistakes of authoritarianism are greater and usually incorrigible. For this reason he castigates Solzhenitsyn's *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* for proposing a benevolent Orthodox authoritarianism which is totally opposed to the spirit of his other books, and which reveals a kind of readiness to surrender to tyranny. Djilas, too, comes under sharp criticism for his inability to shed so many of his Marxist presuppositions. For here too what he, Mihajlov, powerfully works to prove is that human freedom is not some ultimate gift of an impersonal historico-economic process, but has been possessed by man all along, is itself the *fons et origo* of all the sharp and jagged turns of history. Indeed he shows the folly of a notion of a "prize" at the end of history from the example of the Marxist search for "the kingdom of

freedom", which has produced the most inhuman unfreedom the world has ever known. He returns always to the concept of our collective responsibility for "what is" and our necessary guilt, even the guilt of dissidents, for the Gulag Archipelago.

I cheered silently at the end of *Underground Notes*. Why? Because I glimpsed through it, for the first time, the implacable nature of the opposition to Marxism and the truly spiritual dynamic of its emerging, intellectually revolutionary, "ideology".

Solzhenitsyn gave, accidentally, the other day, encouragement to Mihajlov's view in his speech at Harvard on 8 June 1978: "A fact which cannot be disputed is the weakening of human beings in the West while in the East they are becoming firmer and stronger. Six decades for our people and three decades for the people of Eastern Europe; during that time we have been through a spiritual training far in advance of western experience. Life's complexity and mortal weight have produced stronger deeper and more interesting characters than those generated by standardized western well-being." (*The Times*, 26 July 1978).

I have often wondered whether the leaders of the communist States take the Hegel-Marx-Engels dialectic seriously any more. If they do, the sense of the infinite fluidity of history, of the movement of unperceived historical forces, with the only certainty that everything turns into its opposite must surely cause them to tremble.

Underground Notes is compulsory reading for those who want to understand the new religious philosophy emerging from the underground. It made me see that dissidence is not peripheral but central – the beginning of a shudder of revulsion against Marxism and the Soviets. A cleaver is poised over the Kremlin. Perhaps over Belgrade too?

LESLIE PAUL

The Christian Peace Conference. Human Rights and Religion in the USSR by Laslo Revesz, *Conflict Studies*, No. 91, January 1978, Institute for the Study of Conflict, 17 pp., £2.

The story of western involvement in various Soviet-sponsored and manipulated international organizations is a complex one, and it is a mistake to draw inferences from one and then apply them to others. Laslo Revesz' account of the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) suffers from this simplistic approach. In particular it draws largely on a history of the CPC published in Hungary in 1971, which appears to be a *post hoc* rationalization to suit the East European thesis of much that had gone before. Those who were involved from the beginnings of the CPC in 1958 will remember that it sprang largely from the initiative of a group of Czech