

Review Article

Russian Nationalism and the “Yanov Thesis”

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The Russian New Right: Right-Wing Ideologies in the Contemporary USSR
by Alexander Yanov, Berkeley, California, Institute of International
Studies of the University of California, 1978, 188 pp., \$4.50

This is a book about political succession in the USSR. Because so much attention has been given to Yanov's rather imaginative treatment of Russian nationalism, his contribution to the succession literature has been generally overlooked. But his approach to this topic is novel and intriguing, even though *The Russian New Right* is a badly flawed book.

Other studies of the Soviet succession problem have focussed almost entirely on the top-level CPSU elite and its prospects for the future.¹ The succession analysts have generally tried to guess which candidate, out of a rather small number of possible contenders, has the best chance of reaching the top of the greasy pole. The major premise of these writers, often left unstated, is that the succession will not bring any major change in the Soviet political order: the CPSU, and the ideology which serves it, will remain in power, and the national leader will be a familiar product of the party apparatus. Yanov has challenged this assumption by suggesting the possibility of a transformation of the political system sometime in the future — not merely a change in the leadership, but a basic change in the political order. He raises the spectre of a right-wing régime, motivated by a nationalist ideology, coming to power on the wreckage of the Soviet system.

More specifically, Yanov offers us a prediction about the evolution and possible convergence of two forms of “nationalism”: the nationalism of the “Dissident Right”, which has been opposed to the régime, and the nationalism of the “Establishment”. The Dissident Right, in Yanov's analysis, originated in the All-Russian Social Christian Union for the Liberation of the People (VSKhSON), which was founded in Leningrad in 1964 and was subsequently broken up by the political police. He then traces the Dissident Right through the samizdat journal *Veche* (edited by Vladimir Osipov), Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Gennadi Shimanov. Yanov is less detailed in his discussion of the “Establishment Right”, but he devotes a

chapter to the *Molodaya gvardiya** affair of 1968-70 and its consequences.

Yanov’s basic hypothesis is that these two movements, starting from different points, may converge to form a new “military-imperialist nationalism” (p. 19). This new nationalism may not only support the régime; it could eventually replace it. The successor to the Brezhnev régime thus could be a right-wing dictatorship which draws support from both the “establishment” and the “dissident” right. In a later article published in the émigré press, Yanov offers an even gloomier picture of this successor régime.² He conjures up the possibility of a Khomeini-like government coming to power in the USSR. It seems quite clear that, in Yanov’s view, the West is better off with the régime now in power (“soft” authoritarianism), than it would be with a right-wing, nationalist dictatorship (“hard” authoritarianism).

Now there are several major problems with Yanov’s analysis, which will be discussed in this review. One of these problems is that he is not really clear about the political character of this successor régime. Mostly he refers to the right as “neo-Stalinist” and suggests that its goal would be a return to the dictatorship of the Stalinist era. Yet he also hints that the right-wing régime could be a military dictatorship. But at least some of the rightists (including the Solzhenitsyn who wrote the *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*) want a more traditional authoritarian régime — something on the tsarist model.

The programme of VSKhSON was not a democratic document, but it was neither “neo-Stalinist” nor militaristic. The aim of the organization, as presented in the programme, was the overthrow of the Soviet régime and its replacement by a more traditional authoritarian order. VSKhSON would have protected the rights of the Church (so its programme might be called “theocratic”), but it would also have strengthened some individual rights. Yanov says, erroneously, that the VSKhSON programme would not have allowed any organized political opposition.³ Another problem is that Yanov has been highly selective in his choice of sources. Although early in the book he promises to support his argument with “documents”, some of his sources are just anecdotes. His analysis of genuine documents is somewhat haphazard.⁴ Furthermore, in positing a line of development from VSKhSON to *Veche* to Shimanov, Yanov ignores other writers who could be classified as “nationalists” but do not fit into his scheme. Vladimir Soloukhin, the most prominent (and most long-lived) representative of the “establishment” right is mentioned only once⁵ and then without any discussion of his ideas. Father Dimitri Dudko, who represents a different kind of nationalism, is also mentioned only in passing (p. 134). There is no discussion of the “village” writers (*derevenshchiki*) and their contribution to contemporary Russian nationalism. He almost completely ignores the role of Russian Orthodoxy and the relationship of the Church, Russian nationalism, and the “national

*The Komsomol journal (Young Guard), whose editor was eventually dismissed after publishing articles on nationalist themes — Ed.

revival". This highly selective methodology enables Yanov to marshal support for his hypothesis, but it also gives the reader a narrow and misleading view of the subject under investigation.

In fact, Yanov never explains what he means by "nationalism". Because of this conceptual failure, his whole analysis is confused. At the outset he fails to distinguish between two ideas that ought to be kept distinct: nationalism and imperialism. Of course, historically these two phenomena have been closely related. Nationalism may degenerate into imperialism, and the ideologue of imperialism may appeal to national pride or national prejudice in order to win support for his programme. But nationalism and imperialism are not only *different*, they are often *opposites*. Nationalism has appeared in history, most often, as a reaction against imperialism. Nationalism is the ideology of a people who feel that their culture and even their national existence is under threat — and the threat usually comes from some form of imperialism.

It is this sense of threat which has given rise to Russian nationalism in the contemporary USSR. The nationalists perceive that their Russian identity is endangered, and the threat comes from the supra-national policies of the Soviet régime.

From the outside, this sense of threat is not easy to comprehend. It often appears that Soviet policy is made by Russians, and that Russian interests and Soviet interests are more or less identical. The basic facts to support this interpretation are quite familiar. The predominant nationality among the Soviet leadership is Russian; Russian is the "national" (*gosudarstvenny*) language of the USSR and anyone who is ambitious to rise in the Soviet bureaucracy must not only know Russian but must, in some sense, become "Russianized" and adapt to Russian values. The histories of the non-Russian minorities have been rewritten to interpret their absorption into the Russian empire as "progressive" and positive in its results.

But from the inside, the perception is rather different. We should not forget that the common language, which allows Russians to occupy positions of leadership in (for example) Georgia, also allows Georgians to serve in the central bureaucracy in Moscow. Russians perceive a serious threat to their culture in this increased social mobility which allows an influx of Georgians (and Estonians, Jews, and so on) into European Russia and threatens to smother Russian culture in the name of something which is higher, supra-national, "Soviet". The general use of Russian by members of the other nationalities is viewed, by some Russians, as diluting and debasing the purity of their language. Perhaps it is true that Russians exaggerate the threat and underestimate the power that ethnic Russians enjoy in the régime. But this perception of a threat to Russian national culture is deeply felt, and we cannot comprehend the recent growth of Russian nationalism unless we also understand this sense of threat.

Yanov, however, takes a much narrower view of contemporary Russian nationalism, and seems to equate it with a vulgar racial prejudice:

Today the existence of Russian nationalism is an open secret. On every street corner, in front of every beerstand, in every store and every bus, a Ukrainian can hear the contemptuous epithet *khokhol*", a Jew, the annihilating "zhid", a Korean, "koso-glazy" [slant-eyes], an Uzbek, "ishak". [p. 3].

Since Yanov takes this view of Russian nationalism, it is rather surprising that he makes only a casual reference to "A Word to the Nation" ("*Slovo natsii*"), a reactionary and racist manifesto signed by "Russian patriots" which appeared in samizdat in 1970.⁶ Yanov offers no analysis of the content of this document, preferring to report what can be overheard at Soviet beerstands. Certainly one can hear these racial and ethnic slurs in the USSR. This fact is not, however, very convincing evidence for the existence of a right-wing Russian nationalism which is strong enough to come to power.

Yanov's failure to grasp the essence of contemporary nationalism is obvious from his use of the term "Russophilism" (pp. 14, 57 *et passim*) as a label for the movement. The term which Osipov used was *rusofilstvo*.⁷ Like all nationalists, the *rusofily*, of whom Osipov is a good representative, have an idealized vision of the past. But what do they understand by the past — Imperial Russia (*Rossiia*) or Holy Russia (*Rus*)? Osipov's use of the term "*rusofilstvo*" certainly suggests that he is thinking of "Holy Rus" rather than the empire. Surely this is an important distinction which Yanov's spelling conceals.

Yanov does distinguish between different manifestations of nationalism (p. 19). But in his analysis, these are different phases of development through which any Russian nationalist movement must pass: (A) "liberal", (B) "isolationist-totalitarian", and (C) "military-imperial". From this typology of nationalism, Yanov deduces the central premise of his book, that any right-wing opposition movement must inevitably evolve toward support for the régime, "until finally it identifies itself with the régime" (p. 36).

Now this is a highly dubious proposition. It is the case that at various times, non-Communist movements have sought support from the régime and have tried to identify with its aims. Such a tendency is the essence of "National Bolshevism". We can see this tendency in the writings of Ustryalov and the contributors to *Smena vekh*. We also see it in the "renovationist" or Living Church movement (*obnovlenchestvo*), which might be thought of as a manifestation of "National Bolshevism" within the Orthodox Church. Similar tendencies can be perceived in the contemporary USSR. Shimanov is a modern representative of the National Bolshevik tradition.⁸ But the fact that such groups have existed in the past, or exist now, is in no way evidence for the hypothesis that any right-wing opposition group must drift toward support for the régime.

Indeed the examples just given (which are not mentioned by Yanov) seem to show that his thesis is wrong. While the National Bolsheviks and the *obnovlenchestvo* leaders may have evolved toward support for the régime, in the end they were not accepted by the régime but were destroyed. Why should we not assume, *contra* Yanov, that a similar fate awaits any other non-Communist group that seeks the embrace of the Soviet régime?

It is curious that Yanov, who describes himself as an historian, ignores Ustryalov as well as some other possible precursors of the "Russian New Right". He does give some attention to Berdyayev, in his chapter on VSKhSON, but only for the purpose of discrediting him. Yanov takes several quotes, out of context, from just one of Berdyayev's books, in an attempt to show that Berdyayev was a supporter of Fascism — and to argue that, since VSKhSON was influenced by Berdyayev, VSKhSON was a Fascist organization. Berdyayev, writing in 1924, foresaw the development of a "syndicalist monarchy" in Russia with "features of Caesarism".⁹ But Berdyayev was not alone, in the 1920s, in having a pessimistic view of parliamentary government, and suggesting the development of some form of corporative representation (sometimes called "functional representation" to distinguish it from the Italian model). That hardly makes Berdyayev a Fascist. In any case, this statement alone cannot be taken as evidence that Berdyayev approved of Caesarism, or of any particular Caesar. Yanov might well have noted another passage from the same book, where Berdyayev said: "My ideas are often misinterpreted and completely erroneous conclusions are drawn from them."¹⁰

What evidence is there of growing influence of Russian nationalists with the régime? Even by Yanov's own standards, there is not much evidence to support his thesis. He describes Polyansky as the principal spokesman for the nationalist cause within the top-level political leadership. Yet Polyansky had been dropped from the Politburo and sent off to be ambassador to Japan when Yanov wrote. Rumours in the USSR frequently associate G. V. Romanov, first secretary in Leningrad and a member of the Politburo, with the "right-wing" cause. But Romanov appears to have been passed over in the most recent manoeuvring for the Soviet succession. In fact, there is no reason to believe that any present member of the CPSU leadership has championed the nationalists. Except for Shimanov, all the dissident nationalists who remain in the USSR have now been forced into silence. Ogurtsov and the other leaders of VSKhSON, and also Osipov, had been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment before the book was written. Since then a new organization with strong nationalist leanings, the Christian Seminar, has been broken up by the KGB and its leaders sent to labour camps. Father Dimitri Dudko was apparently pressured into a public recantation of his views, and although he remains at liberty, he seems to have withdrawn from public activity. More recently Anatoli Skuratov and Leonid Borodin have also been arrested.

Yet the "Yanov thesis" continues to find support among western observers of Soviet affairs.¹¹ It is true that Yanov's views have been extensively criticized in the émigré press,¹² but this criticism has not come to the attention of the general public in the West.

The Yanov model appears to support a policy line that most of the western governments have agreed on over the past decade: détente, expanding trade relations with the USSR, and political support for the Brezhnev régime as a stabilizing factor in Soviet society. There appears to be general agreement that a truly democratic régime in the USSR is totally out of the question (at least for the near future), and the possible alternatives are all worse than the present political order. Perhaps this analysis has been popular because it justifies a course of policy that the western powers wish to pursue.

Nonetheless, there is no real evidence to support Yanov's analysis. Of course it is always possible that some future Soviet leader will find it expedient to appeal to nationalist sentiment, as Stalin did. But that is not what Yanov is predicting. It seems highly unlikely that any future régime could allow Russian nationalism to become the dominant ideology. The Soviet régime is imperialist as well as authoritarian, and to an imperialist régime, nationalism in any form is potentially revolutionary. No imperialist régime will tolerate the uninhibited development of nationalist ideas.

¹ See Myron Rush, *Political Succession in the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and the most thoughtful work of this genre, Jerry F. Hough, *Soviet Leadership in Transition* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1980). Neither Bialer nor Hough mentions Yanov's analysis of the succession problem.

² A. Yanov, "Diabol menyayet svoi oblik (SSSR: Liberalizatsiya ili stalinizatsiya?)", *Sintaksis* 6 (1980), pp. 88-110.

³ The programme (point 49) specifically provided for protecting the rights of the opposition. *VSKhSON-Programma, sud, v tyurmakh i lageryakh* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1975), p. 75.

⁴ At one place in the book (pp. 65-71) Yanov quotes several passages from *Veche* and gives, as a source, *Volnoye slovo* No. 15. However, issue No. 14-15 of *Volnoye slovo* (1974) does not contain material from *Veche*.

⁵ Yanov reports that Soloukhin was seen wearing a ring which carried the image of Nicholas II (p. 12). This is typical of the anecdotal method of the book.

⁶ AS No. 590. Published in *Veche* (Munich) No. 3 (1981), pp. 101-131. An incomplete English translation appeared in *Survey* 17 (1971), pp. 191-199. On this manifesto, see *Khronika tekushchikh sobyüi*, No. 17.

⁷ "Borba s tak nazyvayemym rusofilstvom, ili put gosudarstvennogo samoubiistva?", *Volnoye slovo* 17-18 (1975), p. 19. This article originally appeared in *Veche*, No. 7 (1973). It is reprinted in Vladimir Osipov, *Tri otnošeniya k rodine* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1978), pp. 112-147.

⁸ The essence of National Bolshevism is acceptance of the Soviet state as the heir of the Empire and the embodiment of the Russian national tradition. Shimanov and Ustryalov would disagree on many questions but on this point they would probably be in agreement.

⁹ N. Berdyayev, *Novoye srednevekovye: razvmsheniye o sudbe Rossii i Yevropy* (Berlin: Obelisk, 1924), p. 53 (quoted by Yanov, p. 25; part of this passage from Berdyayev is badly mistranslated in Yanov's book).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹ See, for example, Yelena Klepikova and Vladimir Solovyov, "The Secret Russian Party",

Midstream, October 1980, pp. 12-19. See also the earlier article by Vladimir Solovyov and Yelena Klepikova, "Rossiya: politicheskaya dislokatsiya i prognozy na zavtra", *Novoye russkoye slovo* (New York), Oct. 6, 1977.

¹²Boris Paramonov, "Paradoksy i komplekxy Aleksandra Yanova", *Kontinent* 20 (1979), pp. 231-273; Mikhail Argursky, "Zootekhnik Barbu", *Novy zhurnal*, 137 (1979), pp. 166-179; M. Bernshtam, "Veimarskaya komandirovka", *Novy zhurnal*, 139 (1980), pp. 240-266.

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