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Ernest Gellner and the land of the Soviets

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Ernest Gellner and the Land of the Soviets[1]

Happiness will originate from materialism, comrade Voshchev, not from meaning.

—Andrei Platonov*, The Foundation Pit*[2]

Ernest Gellner loved Russia and its remarkable intellectual life, and he engaged with the Soviet century deeply and with great vitality.[3] Soviet Marxism especially fascinated him – more than Western Marxism – and it inspired a powerful body of work on what he considered an experiment in the creation of a modern secular theocracy. Gellner's theorizations included attention to analytical Marxism, and to actually existing socialism as development ideology and as secular religion. And he offered an incisive account of the rise and demise of the utopian project, from its revolutionary heroism and Stalinist brutality, to the sleaziness and corruption of the years of stagnation, to its sudden collapse and the fears and possibilities of post-communism.

So what can we now make of Gellner's decades long engagement with the land of the Soviets and their utopia that failed? I can offer only schematic reflections on select pieces of his enormously original intellectual trail, but I begin with an observation George Orwell made in 1944 in a review of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Because very few English writers had an 'inner knowledge of totalitarian methods', or fully grasped what had truly happened within Soviet Marxism,

> England [lacked]…what one might call concentration-camp literature. The special world created by secret-police forces, censorship of opinion, torture and frame-up trials is, of course, known about and to some extent disapproved of, but it has made very little emotional impact. One result of this is that there exists in England almost no literature of disillusionment about the Soviet Union. There is the attitude of ignorant disapproval, and there is the attitude of uncritical admiration, but very little in between (1951: 150).

Gellner's work would offer a rare and brilliant something in between, so to say. Perhaps it was because, as Orwell suggested, 'to understand such things one has to be able to imagine oneself as the victim'; that is, one has to be a European (1951: 150-151). No doubt the upheavals of Gellner's Central European background allowed him to see Soviet totalitarianism with critical, knowledgeable disapproval. It also helped that he was never a true believer: as much as he understood the workings of Soviet Marxism, and as much as he adored Russia, he nevertheless experienced a life-long anti-Marxist phase. Indeed Gellner acknowledged that because he never suffered from Marxism's illusions, he was also saved its subsequent disillusionments (Gellner 1996: 4). And yet, Gellner's liberal, non-Marxist anti-totalitarianism was nevertheless rather distinctive. If he had no illusions about the dark side of the Soviet experiment, did he fully appreciate the poignancy and depth of its own internal and intimate disillusionments, and the

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[2] P. 4.
[3] I have been deeply influenced here by John A. Hall's (2010) biography of Gellner, and this is reflected throughout.

consequences of these? I have in mind not the critique of the disillusioned Left, outside of the Soviet experience, such as those who penned *The God That Failed* in 1949; nor that of those dissidents from outside the belief but inside the Soviet experience. Rather, I am interested in those believers and quasi-believers, the 'inner exiles' whose hopes, doubts and disillusionments offer a sketch of a moral order that complements Gellner's. In retrieving glimpses of these I hope to add light and shade to the impressive parsimony of what are, in my view, the most compelling arguments in Gellner's analyses of the land of the Soviets.

Prophets of meaning and production?

Gellner's thought seemed consistently attuned to the darker sociology of charisma, whether to the cruelties of nationalisms or to those of totalitarianisms. His sociology of modernity hewed closely to Weber's core substantive concerns: reason and rationalization, religion and belief, disenchantment as loss of meaning and bureaucratization as loss of freedom (Anderson 1992). Gellner's interest in the structure and place of the economy in wider historical social change also made him particularly attentive to the Bolsheviks as prophets of production. He had initially conceived of Soviet Marxism in Weberian terms, as an ersatz modern Protestant ethic, even along the lines of Hume's sociology of religion, with initial fanaticism eventually restraining through custom and routine (Hall 2010: 154). But in later reflections, Gellner came to question the view that Soviet Marxism simulated an ethic of production capable of successfully carrying Russia through late development (Hall 2010: 357). If Soviet Marxism as moral order had looked to be the Calvinism of collective industrialization, it ultimately failed to deliver on its own promises, not least because its fusion of political, social, ideological and economic hierarchies blocked the socioeconomic pluralism necessary for a modern industrial society (Gellner 1994: 30, Chs. 4, 10; 1993: 147).

This correction was certainly right. But Gellner's consistent Weberian view of Soviet Marxism as a charismatic meaning system still retains its intellectual force. His engagement with the inner compulsions and social powers of Marxism's ideology is one of the most forceful aspects of his thinking on the Soviet century. Bolshevism was rare in its ecstatic promises and heroic collectivist eschatology – and most especially in the depth of internal commitment demanded of its adherents. Chinese communism was derivative of this first emergence so it had a more self-conscious inflection; and Fascism demanded far less in terms of internal conversion. A crucial Weberian problematic was thereby crystallized in the Soviet experiment: could a charismatically organized society succeed in a modern scientific and technocratic age?

In *State and Society in Soviet Thought*, Gellner offered a forceful account of the Marxist theory of society in which, among other things, he worked through the implications of coercion being subordinate to or derivative of production (see discussion in Hall 2010: 201-204). My interest lies in Gellner's view of the Soviets as prophets armed with a materialist organization of meaning – a secular *umma* – and as ideologists of economic industrialism. Marxism's distinctive fusion of scientism and moral utopianism was attractive to the Russian intelligentsia's desires for unitary visions. Gellner wrote: 'the Russian people, if Russian literature is to be believed, have a certain predilection not merely for faith, but for positive social messianism. Marxism satisfied both these cravings' (1994: 140, 143). It appealed in a place that needed a recipe for overcoming weakness and catching up, and for scientific and moral attention to inequality, injustice and humiliation: 'it is tempting to say that Marxism was tailor-made for the Russian soul', a response to a need for westernization consistent with Russia's mystical-messianic and populist yearnings (Gellner 1994: 36). Without dismissing the importance of this

dimension of its appeal, however, as a social formation charisma also organizes politics. What if in its early charismatic moment, Soviet Marxism emerged not only as a secular-religious, developmental re-enchantment, but also as a political project? What if one of the doctrinal appeals of Marxist socialism for its social carriers was not limited to its class analyses or moral unity, but extended also to internationalism's implied political universalism, attractive in contexts of great social complexity in a nationalist and industrializing age? What if, in other words, the Bolsheviks were not only moral prophets of production, but also empire savers?

That Gellner paid insufficient attention to 'politics' is not an original or new critique, of course. Among others, Mann (1992) showed this in relation to Gellner's work on nationalism. But his focus on Soviet Marxism's analytical incoherence and its real world qualities as a meaning-infused moral order may indeed have neglected analysis of the early political utility of its *umma*-ness, beyond its obvious revolutionary power grab. Early Soviet Marxists were also multiethnic products of a multiethnic Empire: nearly two-thirds were ethnic minorities – Ukrainians, Jews, Latvians, Georgians, Armenians, Poles and others – seeking secularism in response to religious tensions and exclusions, an ethnically neutral politics to counter marginalization and Russification, and the 'good imperial ideal' where geopolitics and nationalisms were most challenging (Riga 2012). The ethnic Russians were peasants or workers, while the more numerous minorities were professionals or intellectuals, an ethnic-class alignment that also broadly characterized the Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Kadets. Soviet Marxism, in other words, drew from the two social groups that disproportionately sustained the political and economic costs of maintaining the Russian Empire in the half century before the Revolution: middle class minorities and lower class ethnic Russians. As such, it offered a political recipe for status protection and political rule over composite diversity in nationalism's 'fourth time zone', where industrialism's differentiated inequalities undergirded the very processes Gellner so extensively theorized elsewhere. Indeed, referring to an entirely different historical transition, Gellner (1988: 82) observed that in moments of deep social change, 'to a considerable extent the social base and need for some communal religion remains effective: hence a form of ritual which underwrites and reinforces social organization, rather than one which replaces it and consoles for its absence, also continues to be in demand'. Though a radical ideology of the Left, early Soviet Marxism was just such a communal religion – a conservative, charismatic underwriting of the new Soviet empire.

Opening up this political dimension of the Soviet Union's first decades perhaps draws greater attention than did Gellner's account to the consequences of nationalism and state consolidation. Latterly, Gellner worried about the potentially violent disintegration of the Soviet Union, but to my knowledge he wrote relatively little on how and why Marxism had held ethnic and national diversity – indeed an empire – together. 'The Czarist empire', Gellner wrote, 'was soon re-established under entirely new management and in the name of a uniquely new, formally secular ideology', allowing the Soviets to contain nationalist irredentisms with ease and with a fiction that was maintained until its collapse (1994: 116-117, 126). But did this fiction work with ease? What were the roles of state building and nationalism? The ethnic diversity of the early Soviet leadership stood in notable contrast to the mostly ethnic Russian shock troops of the Revolution. Russian workers and conscripts followed what would to them have seemed an obviously non-Russian leadership, many of whom spoke Russian with accents. This hints at the continued political weakness of Russian nationalism even three years into the War. But cultural difference between the elite and their followers was not new: Tsarism's Russian subjects were thoroughly accustomed to being ruled by the non-Russian Romanovs, even in the provinces and borderlands.

From the late 1920s, however, the Soviet elite changed markedly. The Central Committees of the early revolutionary years were notable for their ethnic and class diversity, but Stalin's consolidation of power systematically Russianized and proletarianized the leadership. This marked off the heterogeneity of early Soviet Marxism that was a product of the collapsing Tsarist Empire, from the Russianized homogeneity of 1930s' Soviet Marxism that was a product of the Revolution. It reflected, in other words, two distinct nation-building moments. The first involved ideologically re-constituting a diverse multiethnic empire on a universalist basis given emerging nationalisms; the second involved aligning it with Marxism's ideological content, e.g. erasing its diversity and recruiting ethnic Russians with 'clean' class backgrounds into the CCs. This was of course also reflected in the reversal of wider nationality policies: Bolshevik socialists were effective nation builders through the 'affirmative action' empire of the 1920s, and indeed the new empire's units were designed following an ethnic logic even more than a 'Marxist' one (Martin 2001; Hirsch 2005). But by the early 1930s, this ethnic embrace ceded to deportations, cleansing, and accusations of national deviationism and bourgeois nationalism. The German threat and worries of foreign influences in borderland areas mattered, but so too did the logic of nation-state building (Brown 2005).

The violent imposition of Bolshevik control over Ukraine – arguably the crux of the empire's nationality question – was emblematic of the end of the multiethnic political project. This involved the Red Terror at the end of 1918, the executions of SRs, Anarchists and then each other, the ruthlessness of the conduct of the Civil War, the ferocious anti-religious campaigns begun in the 1920s, the ideological war of 1928-1929, the 'grain requisitioning' policies and suppression of peasant revolts in the early 1920s, the collectivization and Terror Famine of the early 1930s, the first deportations of 1930-31 purging the countryside of kulaks, and the deportations, cleansings and repressions of the nationalities. In short, by 1932 a new Soviet elite had been forged under the weights of nation-state building, Civil War and peasant and nationalities unrest. Charismatic Soviet Marxism Russianized and in the process it changed its character.

The moral order and *kramola*

One of Gellner's central problematics was how Soviet Marxism managed to fused truth, power and society, and with what consequences. 'The great weakness of Marxism', Gellner concluded, 'may be not so much its formal elimination of the *transcendent* from religion, but its over-sacralization of the *immanent*' (1994: 40, emphasis in original). Soviet Marxism destroyed those institutions capable of opposing and balancing the state, that is, the social pluralism necessary for a modern industrial society. Without these, moreover, 'a Marxist society is left with no humdrum sphere of the profane into which to escape during periods of diminished zeal and enthusiasm' (Gellner 1993: 146). Indeed, in a review of Andrei Sakharov's memoires, Gellner made the point that Sakharov came to appreciate that the Soviet Union was losing the technological race because it lacked democratic institutions and intellectual freedom: 'it was this conclusive defeat in the technological and economic race which persuaded men of good will in the Soviet Union that change was essential' (1990b). And yet despite working in a tightly supervised and politicized environment – under Igor Kurchatov's control most famously – Soviet nuclear scientists had remarkable intellectual autonomy: leave the physicists alone, Stalin famously said, we can always shoot them later (Holloway 1994).

This created an enthusiastic and intellectually intoxicating atmosphere filled with purpose. Sakharov knew of the nature of the regime and of his complicity in gulag labor suffering and deaths, but as Gellner quotes him, this knowledge 'inflamed our sense of

drama and inspired us to make a maximum effort so that our sacrifices – which we accepted as inevitable – should not be in vain' (1990b). In the face of all he had seen, Gellner observed, Sakharov never fully repudiated Soviet Marxism's promise. Even in its most brutalizing moment, Sakharov remained typical of his generation of professional intelligentsia: he absorbed it without either questioning or full engagement, but nevertheless thought it 'produced a lot of rubbish intellectual thought' (Gellner 1990b). So a certain steady Enlightenment moderation never left him, Gellner concluded. And yet perhaps Sahkarov's journey was also rather emblematic of the costs that half-belief imposed on individual moralities: he accepted the very real sacrifices and deaths of gulag labor as necessary for tomorrow's socialism - a rather heroic stance, but later worried about nuclear testings' potential deaths hundreds of years hence (Sakharov 1990: Ch. 7, 8, 14).

Soviet life was lived all along in the space between heroic sacrifice and the accommodationist strategies of everyday survival, so the belief system could only ever be half-believed. Among other things, this was manifest in the manner of the system's collapse and in the character of its liberalizations. Because moral institutions had been disoriented first by too much faith, and then by too much doubt, it left a structure so rigid that 'when one thing went the whole thing went' (Gellner 1993: 147). The faith was universally abandoned in the absence of the strength of its convictions, so at some point the Soviet Union became an illegitimate ancien regime blind to its own illegitimacy (Gellner 1979a: 319-320; 1994: 38). Moreover, Gellner (1979a: 333; 1979b: 338) concluded, it is harder to liberalize from socialism than capitalism because in the latter privileges can be maintained as wealth, while in the former privileges are in virtue of one's position. The Leninist Party could not reform the Leninist Party, as Jowitt (1983, 1992) has argued: the consequences of Khrushchev's withdrawal of Soviet Marxism's 'combat quality' were experienced for the first time under Brezhnev – leaving a Party so rotted that it had no capacity left to sacrifice for anything.

Against all of this, Gellner understood Civil Society as an a-moral social order, indeed one almost universally desired by those living in the Soviet bloc (1994: 54, 137, 139-141). But he cautioned, 'it is perhaps for further historical research to determine just how totally [Civil Society] was destroyed, and to what extent talk about atomization of society in that [Brezhnev] period is an exaggeration' (1990a: 331, quote on 336; 1994: Ch. 1). Because the role of Civil Society and its atomization was so fundamental for Gellner, we should begin to take up his challenge. We might begin with Khrushchev's Thaw, the interim period between the Terror and the Stagnation, slightly under-theorized by Gellner, who viewed it as a period of admitting Marxism's 'deformations' but disavowing neither the faith nor its doctrines (1990a: 334-5; 1993: 142; 1994: 2-3). First, in declaring the class enemy defeated, Khrushchev ended *the* defining combative moral claim at the heart of the ideological crusade. Second, in confirming nuclear parity with the United States, he loosened identification with a Russified-Soviet nationalist competition with the West. But third, this identification was replaced by a policy of Russification-light: educational reforms in 1959 formally made Russian the language of inter-ethnic communication and parents were given the choice of language of their children's instruction. This choice was particularly appealing for urban minorities outside the titular nationalities: by the early 1980s most minority children were educated in Russian, interethnic marriages resulted in 'Russian' children, and on Census data Soviet citizens increasingly identified with the Soviet 'Russian' (Gorenburg 2006). Fourth, after decades of brutalizing sacrifice, in the early 1960s socialism's sunny future finally seemed to materialize: relatives newly released from labor camps came home; there was a dramatic and real rise in living standards; the enormous construction boom of cheap apartments was the beginning of the end of communal living; there was increased availability of cars,

televisions, refrigerators and small country houses; employment became were more stable with more guaranteed pensions, and so on.

Taken together, then, for the very first time in the Soviet experiment, the gap between what Russians were ideologically *meant* to be experiencing and what they were *in fact* materially experiencing actually narrowed. If life had been lived simultaneously on two scales – in the quotidian ordinariness of the everyday and in the Official Socialist Utopia – the combativeness of the latter was suddenly re-dimensioned. The cheap modern uniformity of Khrushchev's mass housing boom and the destruction of monuments to Stalinist grandiosity created neighborhood ordinariness underneath fading Official Patriotism (Boym 2001: Ch. 8). We are only beginning to get a richer sense of this period, but recent archival openings for the immediate post-Stalin era offer a more textured sense of the experience of the 'secret skepticism' of ordinary Russians (as distinct from that of intelligentsia dissident culture) that Gellner described. (The current Russian leadership was a product of this era: Vladimir Putin was in high school in 1968.)

The availability of Soviet prosecution records of ordinary citizens arrested for expressing discontent underscores the sociological significance of the period in terms of dissent. In *kramola*, a pre-nineteenth century political concept for sedition and grassroots dissent, one fantastic recent study offers detailed accounts of the subversive qualities of ordinary discontent from Stalin's death in 1953 through the 1970s, reaching its peak not under Brezhnev but under Khrushchev (Kozlov et.al. 2011). *Kramola* implies over-reaction on the part of the state to any suggestions of freethinking – Sakharov preferred to self-ascribe as a 'free thinker', not a dissident. This included: criticisms of Stalin; underground groups that appeared as 'conversation circles' of families and friends, with children imagining themselves nineteenth century revolutionaries; the diffusion of the Russian practice of writing anonymous letters of complaint to petition authorities or denounce the misdeeds of local officials and the 'gang of thieves in the Kremlin'; complaints about local goods and services, reflecting resentments of 'elite privileges as betrayals of the promise of workers' power'; and handwritten criticisms scribbled on voting ballots (Kozlov et. al. 2011: 3, 10-15, Chs. 4, 6). For these acts, people were punished, though over time there was greater use of 'prophylactic measures', e.g. official warnings. Despite a surge in the number of prosecutions in the late 1950s, when not only acts but also 'styles of thinking' were punished, repression in both the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras had a closer relationship to actual deeds – testimony, too, of the gradual exhaustion of the repressive apparatus from within, since it required more official effort to show 'counter-revolutionary' than 'anti-Soviet' intent (Kozlov et. al. 2011: 38-39, and 44-49 for data). An ordinary and an even thornier 'combat quality' surfaced. The capitalist class enemy was replaced by an older, and more banal, historic enemy replaced the class enemy: the local bureaucrat.

In short, a more sophisticated and complex understanding of civic life in post-Stalinist Russia Social emerges, one in which moral life in the form of *kramola* continued to operate underneath the weight of the Soviet *umma*'s constraints, as it had when the Bolsheviks were the nineteenth century *kramol'niki*. Beneath the grand scale of Totalitarianism and its well-publicized dissident intelligentsia – which the state had anyway successfully discredited in the eyes of most ordinary Russians – there remained a zone of ordinary existence with strategies of defiance, in the *sistema* of elusive unofficial networking, in its subtle survivalist devices, and in its *kramola*. This was certainly not Civil Society in the classical liberal, indeed, Gellnerian sense. But most Soviet citizens were being continuously 'mobilized' for one thing or another, and one senses that the experience of feeling 'atomized' may actually have been more acutely felt by intellectuals than ordinary Russians. Moreover, something of 'the social' underneath constraint survived and developed its own practices of social trust and individual morality. It was

enough liberalization that there a still something to oppose, and it was now possible to oppose it without enormous personal cost. Perestroika changed this by removing all constraint, bringing an accompanying sense of disorientation. During the mid-nineteenth century period of Great Reforms and serf emancipations, the great writer and social observer, Gleb Uspensky (1903), observed in the 1870s with great subtlety that the 'wretched state' of the newly emancipated village proletariat of the liberalizing era was due less to their material state than to their loss of moral orientation, to the kind of purposelessness that sudden relative freedom from constraint can bring.[4] This, too, was a feature of the liberalizations of socialism's moral order.

The Terror and the Squalor

Hall (2010: 357) notes that Gellner understood Stalinism and the periods of heroic sacrifice within the terms of Marxism's morality. So how – and when – did the big moral idea become corrupted, meaningless ritual?

> Faith survived random and mass terror, and indeed found a confirmation in it; the final, total transformation of the human condition was confirmed in blood. But faith did not survive the squalor in the economic sphere. The vision of the *nomenklatura* murdering each other was acceptable, but that it is bribing each other was not. The squalid, grey, sleazy inefficiency of the productive process in the Brezhnev era really eroded the faith. (Gellner 1993: 146-147).

The period of the Squalor's comparative inefficiency was the real moment of demoralization. The Terror was not only 'a compensation for the lack of more humdrum legitimacy', but it also confirmed the validity of the faith (Gellner 1979a: 325). Gellner's account of the respective roles of the Terror and the Squalor in the Soviet century is one of the most forceful arguments in his thinking on actually existing Soviet socialism. I suggested above that the years between Stalinism and the Squalor or the Stagnation were significant in terms of understanding the 'atomization thesis' and the workings (and loosening) of moral constraint, both of which perhaps remain under-theorized in Gellner's account of the Soviet century. We might similarly want to deepen the significance of the 1920s in relation to the Stalinist decades of heroic sacrifice. By better grasping the prior moral collapse of charismatic Bolshevism – arguably one of the Terror's permissive causes – we might open another dimension of Soviet Marxism's most socially brutalizing moment, and shed light on its most 'squalid'.

Although a full sociological account of the inner geography of the Bolsheviks as a collective elite through the 1920s has still to be written, charismatic Bolshevism changed its character certainly by 1930 or 1932, though most historians see a decisive shift in 1928 or 1929. I noted the coercive nation-state building involved in the first decades of imposing and consolidating Bolshevik rule in the new empire, but this is worth exploring further. Many were deeply affected by their personal experiences of the front in 1917-1921, particularly in the so-called violent provinces in Ukraine. But there was much more: executions of comrades and political opponents (Anarchists, SRs, and others), betrayals, violent rages, incapacitating alcoholism (Preobrazhenskii, among others), suicides (nearly as many as during the purges of 1937-1938), drug and cocaine addition and its violent rages (Dzierzynski, but more widely among the Cheka elite),

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[4] I thank Svetlana Klimova, who is working on Uspensky and civil society, for bringing him to my attention and for conversation on his thought.

impossible family lives, extortions, arrests, forced exiles, imprisonments, tortures of fellow comrades, profound personal crises, the first 'show trials', painful depressions, episodes of debilitating remorse for mass killings (notably Piatakov, for a terrible massacre in Crimea, see Graziosi 1992: esp. 113-114, 120-126). Many had to testify to their faith or find themselves in prison or exile: in 1922, Piatakov – himself a later victim of the purges – presided over the first 'show trials' of the SRs, using the tactic of 'unmasking', in what would become a key feature of Stalinism more than a decade later (Graziosi 1992: 109-110, 118).

The totalizing nature of the ideological changes, the deadly debates of 1927 to 1929, and the devastated social world of the late 1920s are captured in Platonov's terrifying 1930 dystopian novel, *The Foundation Pit*. As Socialism's ideological mass grave (the foundation pit) is built, its material significance fades in direct proportion to growing ideological dogmatism. Platonov had been a Bolshevik, a True Believer as Gellner might say, and among the Soviet writers of the era with the most intimate knowledge of the peasantry in the 1920s as a land reclamation expert for the People's Commissariat of Agriculture. By describing the experience of collectivist morality from within the new Soviet linguistic idiom, he furrowed out its lies; not the lies of Soviet Marxism's political narrative as theory, but of the ways in which the narrative was experienced. Characters think, question, doubt, wonder and speculate, just at the historical moment when 'thoughtfulness' became counterrevolutionary and dogmatism began to structure daily life; its dystopianism sheds light on Socialism's erosion from the shrunken intellectual atmosphere inside the experience of the Belief (Clowes 2004: Ch.9).

The 1920s witnessed the moral exhaustion and costs of decades of sustained revolutionary radicalization, the descent into what Graziosi (1992: 119) has called the 'progressive barbarization' of the cultured Bolshevik intelligentsia of Tsarism. This collapse and generational transition within the ideocracy changed the moral frames of Soviet Marxism. Platonov's new Party 'Activist' was surrounded by 'poor people who had grown thin from uninterrupted heroism', and by the 'socialist children' who would be beyond the reach of an old, wounded and legless war veteran, a 'freak of imperialism' (2010: 7, 78). In the same way that Koestler's Old Bolshevik, Rubashov, was a Europeanized product of the Tsarist Empire's intelligentsia, but the 'party man' who interrogated him was a product of the Revolution, of Platonov's newly trained and enthusiastic 1920s ideologues. Rubashov suffered 'mental bankruptcy', because as Orwell put it, he 'is not only alone, he is also hollow', a former hardened revolutionary worn down by so remarkably little (1951: 155-156). But Graziosi (1992: 126-127) rightly hints at the historical anachronism at the heart of *Darkness at Noon*: the reasoning it attributes to the Old Bolsheviks in 1936-1938 was that used in capitulations ten years earlier –the mid-1920s Bolshevik world that Koestler knew well.

In other words, the internal collapse of charismatic Bolshevism through the nation-state building 1920s profoundly shaped the moral climate and the possibilities of the 1930s and 1940s. Theorizing Stalinism as 'charismatic impersonalism', Jowitt (1992) argued that the Leninist Party represented a fourth form of legitimate modern authority missed by Weber, whereby the bureaucratized Party itself becomes the routinized object of heroic ecstatic commitment and sacrifice. Gellner's account elides most of this, in my view, in favor of analytical conciseness. And yet the character of Soviet Marxism and its original believers changed so drastically, that the political artifice began to sociologically resemble the fearful complicity of despotism more than the inner compulsions of charisma's moral legitimacy. Of course much turns on whether we understand the Terror's *apparatchiki* more survivalists that as ideologues, and we will know more as additional scholarly studies on newly released archival materials come out. But it seems to be slowly confirming the view – indeed Sakharov's view – that the *General'naia Liniia*

rested more on personalization, idiosyncracy and ad hoc inventions than on derivations of Marxism. Beginning with the significance of Stalin's 1927 decision to collectivize agriculture and accelerate industrialization despite much internal dissent, and through its catastrophic consequences, according to a recent biographer, the archive evidence suggests that this was Stalin's own conviction, formed idiosyncratically within the term of Marxist morality as he individually understood it (Kotkin 2014). Stalinism harnessed bureaucratic power despotically not charismatically, in other words; enforced enthusiasm is hardly enthusiasm. Still, if the moral boundary was in aims and not methods, the 1936-1938 Terror seemed nevertheless to have shaken Soviet citizens profoundly, causing the Party to retreat into sterility and to a revival of the nativism and russocentrism that had been previously closed off (see discussion in Brandenberger 2012: Ch. 9, 10).

But in the struggle over Soviet Marxism's diminution of inner life, to some degree or other Soviet citizens lived simultaneously within the scale of ordinariness and that of the Great Ideological project through the entirety of the Soviet project. Gellner (1990a: 344-345) observed that Soviet Marxism's failure 'to provide rituals and solaces for individual tragedy, alongside its collectivist eschatology also makes its contribution'. In my view this needs as much attention as his emphasis on its final squalor and inefficiency, or its failure to deliver promises and the resulting cynicism. 'We hate our squalor', Platonov's character says, but it is the suffocation of meaning by materialist existence that is most punishing – not least because 'inner meaning would have improved productivity' (2010: 3). For Gellner, much was lost in decades of ordinary cynicism, in the Brezhnevite Squalor when the tone of the system

> …became more cynical and corrupt, and, from the viewpoint of the messianic soteriology of Marxism, more routinized, disabused, doubly secularized, so to speak. This cynicism could not be expressed in public, so those who consciously articulated it to themselves had to indulge in this like a solitary vice' (1990a: 334-5).

And yet, perhaps this cynicism was also a form of critique, of *kramola*, not only a solitary vice – and not only during the Squalor, but throughout. Cynicism is not disillusionment, which is passive and resigned, even nostalgic for what might have been. Cynicism also contains a forceful moral claim aimed at power. It is hostile and aggressive, springing from a politics that imposes an alienation from one's own experiences, in the way in which Platonov's young Nastya asks, 'why are you dying, mama? From being bourgeois – or from death?' (2010: 49). It is less aimed at the failure of the political promise, than at those political lies that turn the meaning of the hard surface of experience into a lie.

Reflections: the post-Soviets

In 1989, Gellner (1990a: 349) observed the 'success *fou*' that theatre adaptations of Bulgakov's 1925 dystopian novel, *Heart of a Dog*, were enjoying in Moscow, hoping that its resonance in Gorbachev's Russia was not due to its pessimistic message. Of course Bulgakov's 1920s dystopianism, like that of Zamyatin, Platonov and Krzhizhanovsky (whose work was also published in 1989) described the world of the New Soviet Man of the 1920s, satirizing the imagined gains of scientific materialism at the cost of meaning, and the latter's the revolt of the heart. The unique problem of Soviet science fiction, of course, had always been that there could never be an imagined utopia from which to be critical, no place or time from which to critique the present Utopia. The imaginative solution of the Stalin era was 'close aim' science fiction, set more narrowly in *tomorrow*'s industrial achievement and in *this* solar system, not in distant futures or distant galaxies;

today's post-Soviet science fiction dystopias are mostly written by ethnic Russians in Kharkiv and Kiev. What would Gellner think of this? His commentary on these years of post-communism is truly missed. He might write, for instance, of the current fashion which has post-communism moving on to its 'post' post phase, perhaps even to post-Totalitarianism's ironic moment. I imagine that he would relish the fact that in re-appropriating (rather than erasing) historical crimes, a group of Moscow artists had proposed turning Karl Marx's bust in front of the Bolshoi Theatre on its head, 'in homage to what he himself did to Hegelian dialectics' (Boym 2001: 90).

Still, post-communism has a certain kind of uncontested finality. Gellner (1993: 152; 1990a: 336) feared that its moral-ideological vacuum might be filled by nationalisms. And Russian nationalism may be doing this for those generations born in the 'post' era, in its cultural retrieval of an anti-Western and distinctively 'Russian' subjectivity, located in pre-revolutionary Russia or in a pre-WWI Soviet pastoral. But the socialist promise also still resonates for many in Russia. The loss of utopia – of the future that never was – has been deeply painful to many Russians of certain generations. Its effects continue to be experienced, not least in a continued political cynicism and a concomitant longing for those decades of familiar stability into which the experiment had mundanely – if not entirely successfully – routinized. There are many who miss the mundane simplicity of late socialism, with its 1960s trams and trolleys, Soviet films and popular culture of the 1970s; a middle-aged population longs for the stability and relative normalcy of their youth, when the future was merely extended. Both the nationalist and socialist aspirations poignantly imply a return to eras of more or less constraint.

Gellner sensed much of this even in the very early 'post' days. He understood Soviet Marxism from a position outside of both its enchantments and its profoundest disenchantments. He found intellectual alignment with the liberal dissident experience, or those from within the Soviet experience who had likewise never believed – or never fully believed – and who had lived it mostly as its victims. So to the richness and originality of his work, we might perhaps add the particular disillusionments and sense of loss of Soviet Marxism's 'inner exiles'. On return from his last extended year in Moscow, he observed a marked discontinuity in moral climate among the political elite of the late 1980s, one in which they could say and do things previously unthinkable. Even so, he thought, deep ambiguities regarding the demise of the socialist experiment nevertheless continued to exist: the 'repudiation is not complete', Gellner concluded in a talk at Cambridge in 1989. This may still be true. But then, the loss of 'the socialist generation' has been 'tantamount to the destruction not only of all the past but also of the future' Platonov observed – in 1930.

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