eurozine

Caspar Melville, Michail Ryklin

On the trail of the red pilgrims

Russian philosopher Michail Ryklin's new book *Communism as Religion* explores how the militant atheism of the Bolsheviks, far from rendering religion obsolete, created a new faith. Here he talks to *New Humanist* editor Caspar Melville about the religiosity inherent in western European intellectuals' admiration for the Soviet Union, including Russell, Koestler, Benjamin, and Brecht.

Michail Ryklin is well known, you might even say infamous, in his native Russia. Along with his wife, the artist Anna Alchuck, he was the focus for an outpouring of very public hatred following her involvement with the Caution:Religion! exhibition (which Ryklin wrote about in the previous issue of *New Humanist*). His book about the exhibition and trial stirred up more controversy, as did his widely broadcast criticism of Vladimir Putin.

Since 2007 he has lived in Berlin to escape the malevolent gaze of state and public. In his new home Ryklin has built a formidable reputation. He has written widely for the intellectual press including *Lettre International* and *Osteuropa*, and several of his books have been translated into German to wide acclaim, including *With the Law of the Jungle: Russian Culture in the Era of "Guided Democracy"*, his book about the fallout from the Caution:Religion! exhibition, which won the prestigious Leipzig Book Prize in 2007.

His most recent book, *Communism as Religion: The Intellectuals and the October Revolution*, mines the work of a series of European intellectuals who wrote about their visits to Moscow in the heady years after the October Revolution as a way of illuminating the quasi–mystical hold communism had over a generation of writers and artists. It explores the thesis that communism, rather than being seen as an atheistic political system, is best understood as a form of religion, perhaps the most significant religion of the 20th century.

Over a crisp line to Berlin, where he lives in what he describes as "mild exile" (he can travel back to Moscow to visit his family but is not, he feels, welcome), he agreed to talk me through the central elements of the book, a diagnosis of the intense period of religious communism (which he dates as 1917–39) and its implications for our understanding of Russia today.

We began with Ryklin's idea of communism as a form of religion. Not a completely new idea. Why did he feel there was more mileage left in this perspective? "It is true," he conceded, "the idea is not entirely new. But the point I am making is different from what has been said before. Communism has been regarded by authors like Raymond Aron and some German authors as a kind of substitute religion, or a pseudo–religion, perhaps a parody. They concede that it has a resemblance to religion but no more than that. I argue, on

the other hand, that communism was in fact really a religion, perhaps the most important religion of the 20th century." But how can it really be a religion without a god? "Yes, this is true, and it is precisely this feature that attracted so many intellectuals towards it. Having been brought up within monotheistic traditions, many of these intellectuals were drawn to Russia after the October Revolution of 1917 because they were fascinated by the idea of a country making something without God. The revolution was seen by them as an event that would solve the puzzle of history.

"But at the heart of communism lies a paradox, which is that the renunciation of God is the founding article of faith. In the zealous belief that they had moved beyond the realm of God and faith into the realm of the scientific laws of history, the revolutionaries and their supporters reveal themselves precisely to be true believers.

"And here we need to be able to think outside of the categories we have grown up with. There are of course different definitions of religion. No Christian or any monotheist will accept the definition of communism as a religion because for them the presence of God lies at the very root of defining what religion is. But it is only the religions of the book –– Christianity, Judaism and Islam –– which share a common origin in the Old Testament, that put such an emphasis on God. This is not the same for Buddhists, for example, for whom God is not important or is a secondary item in religion, and this is true of other religious systems.

"There is a scientific and sociological definition of religion that is very different. This view –– as expressed in the work of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, as well as many anthropologists –– defines religion as a kind of totalising experience, something for which people are prepared to sacrifice everything and which makes sense of their entire lives. By this definition, of course, communism is religion. For millions of people the sense of their lives was defined by communism as a set of beliefs. Communism was real religion."

Ryklin's book focuses on the writings of six European intellectuals –– Bertrand Russell, Walter Benjamin, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Lion Feuchtwanger and Bertolt Brecht –– all of whom travelled to Moscow with high hopes for the revolution. Taken together these texts form a genre of their own, named as "returnee literature" by the French philosopher (and Ryklin's former teacher) Jacques Derrida. Each author visited Moscow between the October Revolution of 1917 and 1939, when, Ryklin argues, the religious age of Soviet communism expired in disappointment over Stalin's pact with Hitler.

But why would a Russian writer turn to outsiders for clues to the underlying logic of communism? "The experience these writers record was such an unusual experience, such a surprising experience, that it makes sense to single it out as a distinct genre. They record a kind of pilgrimage to the Mecca of revolution, their real–time perceptions of what was happening, and their doubts, during a time before the loss of innocence and huge disappointments of the totalitarian period. After 1939 we do not find texts that are so religiously inspired by this Soviet experience. I was very interested in why such a diverse group of people made this pilgrimage to Moscow and wrote these inspiring texts about the achievements of the revolution and the future of the revolution –– how can we explain this exaltation? This was my initial question."

Taking the authors in the order in which they visited Moscow, Ryklin turns first to the great British rationalist philosopher Bertrand Russell, who travelled

with a trade union delegation to Moscow in 1920, two years before the Soviet Union came into being. He met and talked to Lenin during his stay, and when he returned to Britain he wrote his classic treatise *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. "Russell was part of a general disillusionment with capitalism after the First World War. They were angry and they believed that the state of things needed to be changed radically. Russell genuinely admired the Russian radical turn. He wrote that the Bolshevik Revolution could turn out to be more important than the French Revolution and he believed that the Russian social order was so rotten that it deserved to be abolished. What he could not accept was the violence. He was somebody who did not believe that you can bring up justice by means of violence and that was his main argument against Bolshevism."

Russell was also one of the earliest commentators to see the faith that lay at the Revolution's core. "Russell was a great critic of militarised religion, and he compared Bolshevism to Islam. As a hard scientist, a mathematician and logician, Russell could see through the claim that the revolutionaries were following scientific laws.

"He was one of the first to say that Lenin was a guy who pretends to be a scientist, who pretends to be somebody who acts according to the laws of history but, he says, he didn't see any sign of science. They are, Russell is sure, believers, fundamentalist, they are fanatics. He says that there is something interesting about their fanaticism, but it has nothing to do with the laws of history, which he anyway viewed as subordinate to science as a method of analysis. From the very beginning he understood that this was a problem of faith and not a problem of science."

If Russell brought a rationalist's eye to bear on the revolution, the gaze of Ryklin's next witness was determinedly romantic. In marked contrast to Russell's cool Anglo–Saxon empiricism, the German journalist and social theorist Walter Benjamin had a taste for mysticism and historical speculation. He made his journey to Moscow in 1926 aflame with the romance of revolution. He arrived in the city all but convinced to join the party and commit himself to the Soviet cause. But, just like a love affair, with familiarity the ardour cooled, and the more Benjamin got to know about the Soviet system, the less he fancied it, as he recorded in his *Moscow Diary*. "He was very disappointed," Ryklin argues. "He wanted to find a place for himself, as a journalist or a freelance intellectual. He wanted to be a European correspondent of a Moscow magazine and he needed the money because his family had lost their fortune in the huge German inflation of the '20s. But the revolutionary system was very rigid, the demands it put on its fellow travellers were very high, and the talents he possessed that made him a prominent journalist in Germany were not needed.

"The Revolution wanted propagandists, not independent intellectuals with their own ideas. Slowly he understood that there was no place for his project in Russia. It was a personal crisis. Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* is a very ambiguous document –– we see this inspiration that he felt and we see at the same time disappointment. Even though he was disappointed when he returned to Germany, he wrote that it was necessary to make this journey to Moscow if you wanted to understand Europe. When he returned to Berlin he declared that his optics changed. 'I have started,' he wrote, 'seeing my native city through other eyes, through other spectacles.'"

In contrast to the outsider perspective of both Russell and Benjamin, the Hungarian author Arthur Koestler was an insider, having joined the German Communist Party while living in Berlin in 1931. He was a party loyalist and might even have worked for the Russian secret police, the NKVD. He travelled extensively in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, collecting material for a book. In contrast to Benjamin's disappointed scrabbling, Koestler was astounded to find himself paid wages for a book which he had yet to write, the Russian authorities having identified it as a potential propaganda coup. Koestler returned to Germany and, from what Ryklin can discover, eventually produced a book, a glowing portrait of Soviet superiority, which only came out in German, and may, according to Ryklin, have never been published.

Ryklin has found records of payments made to Koestler for translation of the book into Ukrainian, Georgian and other languages, evidence of the way in which the Soviet state channelled payments to its compliant propagandists. Unlike Russell and Benjamin, Koestler's disillusion with communism did not set in while he was in Russia, but came later during his time in Spain during the civil war. "Koestler saw how the Soviet agents executed anarchists and other leftists –– his faith was shattered by this experience. Two of his friends who lived in the Soviet Union were arrested and he wrote a letter asking for them to be released. They were freed but the fact that he expressed doubts about the methods of the secret police was the beginning of the end.

"Then he did a lecture in Paris where he denounced the communist idea that the state should control its people. He argued that people should be allowed to think freely. This was completely unacceptable and he was excluded from the party. The nail in the coffin was the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939 and the show trials of prominent former revolutionaries that he wrote so scathingly about in his novel *Darkness at Noon*." The importance of Koestler's testimony, for Ryklin, is the way that he is able to write about the experience of enchantment and disenchantment with revolution from within; he is able to write about the blind faith involved in revolutionary zealotry having been blind himself; his is the perspective of the apostate.

"Koestler writes that he understood the religious nature of his communist beliefs after he has repented communism. He says the precondition for being a communist believer is to see oneself as non–religious. You understand the religious nature of your belief after you are no longer a believer. During the act of faith, however, you understand yourself as merely helping to put into play the inevitable logic of the unfolding laws of history."

As a counterpoint to Koestler the apostate –– who devoted the rest of his life to a very public opposition to communism –– the German playwright and radical Bertolt Brecht remained a life long fellow traveller. Ryklin turns to Brecht to throw light on the way that communism–as–belief was powerful enough to blind its adherents to the inconsistencies and atrocities of Stalinism, even when they were visited on their close friends, or even themselves. Brecht is a case study in blind devotion. Though his private diaries contain guarded criticism of the Soviet system, he was never less than totally loyal in public. He believed that any system that had been able to do away with the concept of private property was by definition superior to those bourgeois democracies that allowed or even encouraged economic inequality. "This", says Ryklin, "was an article of faith that he never doubted. He was a blind believer in the revolution forever because of this."

He managed to cling on to this faith in the face of the amplifying excesses of the Soviet regime. Even after his close friend and translator Sergei Tretyakov was arrested in 1937 (he threw himself down the stairs while in prison in a final act of defiance), and Carola Neher, one of his favourite actresses, was sent to a labour camp where she died, Brecht remained grimly loyal. He was lauded in Moscow, and used by propagandists at every opportunity. Among Ryklin's informants, Brecht was the one who owed most to the Revolution in terms of its impact on his work. His style and outlook were totally changed by the Revolution and he, along with the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, became the prime translator of the radical spirit of October 1917 into the early revolutionary style of 1920s modernism.

The primary Brechtian principle that audiences were to be made uncomfortable, that audience identification and conventional plot were to be sacrificed for a challenging objective presentation of social relations, was inspired by and paid homage to the transformative spirit of revolution. But history, rather than following the laws of inevitability, proved once again to be a puzzle. In 1932 Stalin issued his notorious decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organisations" which declared experimental modernism to be decadent and bourgeois and instated Soviet Realism –– neoclassical, heroic, representational, uncritically optimistic –– as the official aesthetic of Stalinism, an art which inspired the people and would supposedly hasten the onrush of communist utopia.

So while Brecht talked up Stalinism around Europe, and he was garlanded with awards by Stalin (he got the Stalin Peace Prize in 1955), his plays were not actually performed until the twilight days of the 1970s and 1980s, and were regarded by the official dogma as anti–revolutionary.

Though Brecht clung on to his dogma like the most fervent religious zealot, Ryklin is insistent that by 1939 the religious phase of Russian communism was over. Faith was replaced by terror. While Stalinism thrived on religious pageantry –– the cult of his image, the adoration at official shrines like Lenin's tomb, the Revolution Day parade, all were patterned after religion –– the genuine devotion of the people became less and less important. One reason that devotion to revolution faded was that by 1939 Stalin had slaughtered every single one of the original apostles of revolution. Another was the new organisation of Soviet society. "Stalinism", argues Ryklin, "relies not on faith but on control. The equality of the first phase was replaced with a strict hierarchy of committees, secret police, spies. All designed to control society. Stalin had a phrase for it –– revolutionary vigilance. What this meant was the condition of universal denunciation –– people lost faith in the revolution, in their neighbours and themselves."

For Ryklin the legacy of this remains strong in contemporary Russia. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has gone through a re–evaluation of its own history and come to some surprising, and for Ryklin disturbing, conclusions. "Lenin has lost any influence on Russian society now. He has been declared an enemy of religion, and that means he is an enemy of Russia, a real atheist, a dangerous person, a terrorist. Stalin, on the other hand, is believed to be somebody who was never really against the Orthodox Church. There is no historical proof for this, just the desire to see Stalin this way. He is widely regarded as the greatest politician in Russian history, instrumental in defeating the Nazis, the most important event in the 20th century for Russians. The pact is forgotten, the mass murders are dismissed as part of the big modernisation project preparing for the war, explained away as something that was necessary.

Lenin has been blackened, made a scapegoat. Stalin has been scrubbed clean."

For Ryklin a new form of Russian belief is emerging that fuses Orthodox Christianity with Russian nationalism and Stalin's cult of personality. In place of a belief in the superiority of socialism is a sense of Russian exceptionalism and a paranoia, a holdover from Stalinism's "universal denunciation", which views every other country as a threat. "These are the myths that many millions in Russia today believe," says Ryklin with a certain weariness. "They believe that the rest of the world hates Russia, because Russia is good and the rest of the world is bad."

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