‘Nowadays I often cry’

An interview with Victor Martinovich

Victor Martinovich, Serge Sakharau
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Physical violence and political repression continue to torment Belarusian streets. Ongoing activism incurs a heavy, emotional toll. Could solace and stamina be found in literature, metaphysical reflections on the question of evil?

Victor Martinovich’s novel Revolution, published in October 2020, premiered somewhat covertly because many Minsk bookstores did not want to risk holding a book signing. Serge Sakharau spoke with Victor via Zoom about his recent experiences, five books to read now and the difference between bravery and courage.

Collage. Left: Photo by Rick Harris from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons Right: Photo via Pixnio

Serge Sakharau: What condition are you in these days?

Victor Martinovich: Likely the same condition as the rest of the country – you can’t sleep, it’s very difficult to read and it’s hard to believe what you see going on around you. When everything is happening in the streets, it seems like a horror film in which you have a starring role. It’s like a real-life version of Joseph Finder’s novel Paranoia.

That is not to say I’m bewildered or disillusioned – I expected that it would go this way. At the moment when everyone was very joyful, I did not rush to join them. Then again, I don’t feel particularly disillusioned or bitter now, since everything is turning out like I expected it would.

But the shape that things took – when people in so many areas have to look both ways before walking out of their homes, when you have to think, ‘should I really wear a red scarf over a white shirt?’ – resembles a mix of [the TV series] Black Mirror and A Clockwork Orange.

Everyone says ‘Orwell, Orwell’, yet I am reminded exactly of Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange and that novel’s cheerful fellows. And you are on the receiving end and yet you must remain a person, in spite of it all, and do something, say something – not just think
something, but say something.

**Serge Sakharau:** Are you trying to write something serious at the moment?

**Victor Martinovich:** No. It seems to me that at the moment only a robot could write a book. I am editing one text, which was written long ago, but even this kind of editorial work is incompatible with the events taking place around us.

**Serge Sakharau:** So, what triggers you nowadays? Telegram, your friends, the impossibility of going outside?

**Victor Martinovich:** I tried not reading the news. I tried to take a kind of ‘Zen’ approach and only read books, but then a shell explodes right next to you and you realize that the war is happening all around you.

Reading the news and recording it in your personal diary – these are more important right now than trying to analyze it. What is happening now has truly never happened anywhere else. Such things have not happened in Eastern Europe since 1968. I specifically looked into Poland during Solidarity and they put 10,000 people in prison. In our country we are already talking about 25,000 who have been detained at one point or another.

The thing is, it is affecting everyone right now. You can turn off the news, but when someone close to you or an acquaintance disappears, you simply must scan the lists of those detained. It is this mechanism, when you are forced to look through lists every Sunday, which is the kind of trigger that does not allow a living person any peace.

**Serge Sakharau:** Have you experienced this yourself?

**Victor Martinovich:** There was a situation in which they took away two design students with whom I had worked on a project. When they were released from detention and shared their stories, they made a strong impression on me.

In their cell (which was the colour of white bread), there was always a lot of food. Once someone thought to pass them an orange. They ate it, and then one of the girls wanted to throw away the peel. However, they understood that the orange is an image – its orange color gives them more life than anything in the world. They took the peels, laid them on a shelf and looked at them as if they were a Matisse or a Chagall.

This story is a real trigger. When you hear these kinds of stories from someone you know personally, it profoundly changes you. And, again, you are on an emotional seesaw. In the course of a day, you can go back and forth ten times between thinking ‘we are screwed, they will shoot us all’ and ‘he is finished, we will win’. It’s exhausting to fluctuate between hope and despair in a short period of time. The situation when they go into residential neighbourhoods – this kind of punishment has not been practiced anywhere since 1968 in Czechoslovakia. And it didn’t really happen even then. From overheard snippets of conversation, it’s clear that this kind of thing is now happening here.
Serge Sakharau: What does evil mean to you now?

Victor Martinovich: The question for me is whether evil exists separately from mankind. Can one imagine evil that existed before people and that it somehow suffuses them? Or is evil a kind of condition that a person falls into and then, having entered it, they begin to multiply it?

In my opinion, it is very simple: evil is the guys from *A Clockwork Orange*, who walk around with pump-action shotguns loaded with rubber bullets and throw grenades into the crowd. And then they are not questioned themselves (as in *A Clockwork Orange*); they are the ones doing the questioning. And no one knows who these people are; they don’t have uniforms or badges.

Evil is the kind of situation in which people who are supposed to protect you start acting in such a way that you simply don’t know whom to call on. To me, evil in Belarus has two characteristics. First, brutality: unmotivated, unlimited and unconquerable. After all, brutality can only be defeated by greater brutality. When people talk about what will happen later, I would suggest the question: ‘who will sort through all of this?’ Evil can only be cleared up with more evil. Who will be capable of even greater brutality?

The second characteristic is falsity. Now we are punished because we continue to think for ourselves and quietly confirm that ‘white is white’ and ‘black is black’. And whoever says this out loud is labelled a criminal.

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In the first place, it is not words but actions that are punished, and even such small actions like a silent demonstration without symbols. This has not happened since 2011 [the author is referring to the silent protests of 2011].

If I remember correctly, Mikhail Boiarin wrote on Facebook recently that we all lived in a fairytale Disney castle made out of Lego, but in the last three months we have started to take this castle apart. We took down the theatre, but the castle remains. We have taken students out of the universities, but the castle remains. We have taken medical personnel entirely out of the castle, but still it remains.

And, having dismantled it piece by piece, we’ve discovered that in the end the castle consists solely of a prison. That’s it – there was nothing else. We have lived in it for 26 years, turning a blind eye to it and living fairly safe, normal lives. We knew what was off limits, where we shouldn’t go and what we shouldn’t do.

Now it is impossible to know what is not allowed, which is a sign of the times. Now you shouldn’t live in Novyia Baravaia because they might turn off your water and heat. Tell me, as a citizen, what should I not do? Is it forbidden to walk the streets on a Sunday because you might get a couple of fractured vertebrae? Is that it?

Serge Sakharau: Which cultural figures surprised you, in a good or a bad way?
**Victor Martinovich:** I like how Sasha Filipenka conducted himself. He writes and expresses his thoughts clearly. I liked how [Mikalai] Pinihin [the former director of the Janka Kupała National Theatre] conducted himself - that was a discovery. His actions and those of all the members of the Kupała deserve respect.

I don’t hear enough of [Siarhei] Mikhalok’s voice. He has recorded a few videos, which, it seems, contain more of Mikhalok than of Belarus in 2020. His voice has been lacking for me, all the more so because everyone listens to Changes and Warriors of Light and they cry, and it would be very important for Siarhei to say something to us.

Photo: Chris Boland (www.chrisboland.com). Source: Flickr

For me, Svetlana Alexievich’s voice has been lacking. She has said a few things, but it would be better if she could do so more frequently, since intellectuals should participate in what is going on. They are the people who can call a spade a spade.

But, from another angle, Mikhalok has done all that needs to be done. That is why this isn’t a criticism but rather a discussion about what everyone is expecting. Even Maks Korzh [a Belarusian singer] has become a symbol of protest. All of those people like Denis Dudinski might have lived as they had previously, but they also realized that they could not do so and that closing one’s eyes had become very difficult. There were no more excuses.

There was a moment recently when I was walking through an underpass near the Philharmonic. Six men were standing there and they began singing *Mahutny Bozha* [the Belarusian national hymn] operatically and in harmony. These were not amateurs. They were from our great institutions like the Opera Theatre.

I stopped and felt tears welling up, because it was very beautiful – they sang extremely well. It was obvious that these performers ought to be singing on stage, but here they were singing in an underpass. Now you don’t even need to name names – everyone is trying to do their part.

**Serge Sakharau:** Do you cry often nowadays?

**Victor Martinovich:** Yes. I often feel my eyes welling up. This is the condition in which we all find ourselves. It’s hard to remain hardened to it unless truly made of iron.

**Serge Sakharau:** What should people read now in order to understand that good things are good and bad things are bad, in order not to confuse the two?

**Victor Martinovich:** In view of the uniqueness of what is going on, there are no books about the situation and there won’t be any either. Nevertheless, it is interesting to read Alexievich’s teacher Ales Adamovich, because you feel something of an echo, not his plays or his novels, but rather in his commentary, which was intended for a broad audience.
Last year I met with Ivan Krastev and he said that the Soviet Union in 1990 looked like a forest. It was as natural as nature. But what can one do with nature? And then it fell apart in a day, just like that. It is the same thing here.

I find consolation in the literary figures of Perestroika. One of the authors that I am reading now is Andrei Bitov, the philologist and literary scholar, who at the end of the 1980s started speaking the plan and simple truth.

And I remembered many things that have become a part of us collectively. For example, Bitov reminds us that Dostoevsky’s most important work is not Crime and Punishment or The Brothers Karamazov but rather The House of the Dead. This was the first example in Russian literature of the concept of katorga [forced labor] entering into the cultural discourse, but thirty per cent of Russians had already experienced it. We should absolutely read The House of the Dead because Dostoevsky wrote about that prison in which we indeed live.

My universal salvation is Seneca’s Letters from a Stoic. This is such an amazing book. You open it to any page and see things that are just as relevant today. He was a stoic, a teacher of the people who poisoned him and simply witnessed a great deal. He was a combination of Jesus Christ and an Indian guru, but he didn’t behave like a guru. He wrote about the fundamentals of life, about what makes a person and about good and evil.

Serge Sakharau: What should you read when you don’t feel certain that you are still in your right mind from all that is going on?

Victor Martinovich: In those moments you should close your books, close your laptop, put away your phone and go outside. When you walk for a long time, everything falls into place. Most importantly, when you turn it all back on again, you start to be tormented by doubts.

But if you remain face to face with yourself, all the markers are there, all the signs; they are deeply rooted within us. So many thoughts come to mind when walking somewhere (from Malinauka [a metro station in Minsk] to Victory Square). When you arrive, you have put everything back in its place, and only then can you start reading.

A book is no substitute. What’s more, knowledge does not cancel out stupidity; it merely gives it ammunition. Knowledge is necessary for only one thing: to be able to tell wrong from right.

This is why all the religions of the world agree on a fundamental set of principles. For example, in Hinduism falsehoods can be understood differently (in Christianity falsehood is formulated as ‘do not bear false witness’, meaning ‘do not lie as a witness in court’). But what is good and what is evil are programmed into us on the level of the heart, make no mistake.
That is why we need to close all the books and screens and find the answers within ourselves, because no book will really help you, particularly when there are no books about today’s circumstances. There is beauty in that.

We are alone in our doubts, hopes, joys and expectations that we will win. After all, the most important question now is the difference between bravery and courage. Early on, we had many brave people, but now few courageous ones remain, despite the latter being more important than the former.

**Serge Sakharau:** How are they different?

**Victor Martinovich:** Bravery and daring – these are words that describe a readiness to carry out a great deed. You are marching head-on against the enemy position – that is bravery and daring. It is a readiness to take deliberate but nevertheless reckless action.

Courage is the readiness to accept with dignity the consequences of bravery. Courage is the long-term struggle for results.

For us, courage is now more important than bravery, because the situation will not be overcome with bravery. It requires courage – to live with all of what is going on and not run away, not close one’s eyes under any circumstances, to notice, see and remember.

And to do something.

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