

## *A Retreat from Utopia*

**Chronicles of Wasted Time: The Green Stick**, by Malcolm Muggeridge, *New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973. 284 pp. \$6.95.*

*I used to believe that there was a green stick buried on the edge of a ravine in the old Zakaz forest at Yasnaya Polyana, on which words were carved that would destroy all the evil in the hearts of men and bring them everything good.*

—Leo Tolstoy

THE STALINIST INTELLECTUALS of the 1930's, as George Watson informed us in the December, 1970 issue of *Encounter*, are nowadays something of a joke. How could such intelligent men of the world as George Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb support Stalinist Russia? Could they have been deceived? Mr. Watson's view is that the evidence "does not bear out the myth of innocence and deception." Indeed, the evidence demonstrates that the Western apologists for Stalinist Russia "were attracted to the most violent system on earth because it was just that." To them

the Soviet dictatorships looked like a highly disciplined system that could, and should, conquer the world: the God that failed was a savage god. Between 1933 and 1939 many (and perhaps most) British intellectuals under the age of fifty, and a good many in other Western lands, knowingly supported the greatest act of mass-murder in human history.

Born in 1903, Malcolm Muggeridge, one of the finest prose stylist of the English language today, grew up with the century, and through his father, a pioneer Socialist, and his wife, Kitty, he became acquainted with many of the Western intellectuals who viewed Stalinist Russia as a socialist utopia.

His witty and illuminating comments about his conversations with these apologists lend much credence to Mr. Watson's contention that the Stalinist intellectuals "knowingly supported the greatest act of mass-murder in human history." Mr. Muggeridge directs some of his sharpest criticisms at Sidney and Beatrice Webb, George Bernard Shaw and Marcus Hindus.

Shaw and the Webbs, he tells us, were impressed with Stalinist Russia, because of its "financial soundness and rectitude." Sidney Webb, it seems, was disturbed that under capitalism "there might be as many as thirty or more varieties of fountain pens," whereas in the U.S.S.R. one would find only one. This, argued Mr. Webb, was a "much more satisfactory arrangement." Beatrice Webb was most impressed by Stalinist Russia's "participatory democracy," which, she insisted, "was perfectly exemplified in the system of representation laid down in the Soviet Constitution." The Soviet system, contended the Webbs, was not based upon a dictatorship; they argued, rather, that the Soviet system was merely "hierarchical."

Perhaps one of the most outrageous examples of the promulgation of falsehoods concerning Stalinist Russia concerns the case of a correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse*; the correspondent, it seems, was rewarded by Communist officials because he had somehow induced the French Premier, Edouard Herriot, to believe, when he visited the U.S.S.R., that the milk shortage there was due to the large amounts that were allocated to nursing mothers. Shaw, Hindus and Harold Laski also were given to much nonsense in their pronouncements; they were, according to Mr. Muggeridge,

the clerks of Julien Benda's *La Trahison des clerics*; all upholders of progressive causes and members of progressive organizations, constituting a sort of Brechtian ribald chorus in the drama of the twentieth century. Ready at any moment to rush on to the stage, cheering and gesticulating. [These were the] fall guys of history. . . . I was to speculate

endlessly about them, rail against their credulities and imbecilities, ridicule their absurdities and denounce their servility before the nakedness of Soviet power.

Shaw, for example, declared that he was delighted to find "there was no food shortage in the U.S.S.R." Harold Laski, for his part, sang the praises of "Stalin's new Soviet constitution," and Marcus Hindus, an American of Russian-Jewish extraction, wrote best-selling books about the immense humanitarianism of Soviet officials. "Future historians," Mr. Muggeridge sardonically observes, "may well comment that the road to world revolution is paved with best sellers."

Mr. Muggeridge's trenchant observations about the Soviet Union and the Stalinist intellectuals are valuable, for they are the observations of a man who, accompanied by his wife, went to Russia in 1932 expecting to find Tolstoy's "green stick," but who instead found hell-on-earth:

Kitty and I were confident that going to Russia would prove to be a definitive step, a final adventure. Our plan was . . . to fetch our son and live there evermore. We wanted him . . . to grow up in a sane world. . . . We were fully prepared to exchange our British passports for Soviet ones; indeed, we were looking forward to making the exchange . . . (T) o my great delight, Kitty was pregnant again, so that our next child would be born a Soviet citizen. It all seemed wonderful.

According to Mr. Muggeridge, he and his wife believed that landing at Leningrad "should be different from landing anywhere else; more like the arrival of Bunyan's Pilgrim at the Heavenly City, with trumpets blowing, and shining ones waiting to welcome him." Actually, however, "it was just like arriving anywhere; passports suspiciously examined, bags all opened and their contents gone over; then a final check to make sure everything was in order."

Heavily influenced by the reports about

Russia from the Webbs, the Muggeridges had become fascinated with the new Communist state in Russia, and they thought they were about to enter and join the kingdom of heaven on earth—only to discover starvation, cruelty and utter disregard for the truth. By the time that they returned to Britain in 1933, their dreams had been destroyed; they no longer believed that “one of the most thorough-going, ruthless and bloody tyrannies ever to exist on earth could be relied on to champion human freedom, the brotherhood of man, and all the other good liberal causes. . . .”

Why did such intelligent men as Shaw, Laski and Webb defend Russia? What could have motivated such staunch upholders of free speech and human rights, such scarred and worthy veterans of a hundred battles for truth, freedom and justice to chant the praises of Stalinist Russia? “It was as though,” Mr. Muggeridge sardonically remarks, “a vegetarian society had come out with a passionate plea for cannibalism, or Hitler had been nominated posthumously for the Nobel Peace Prize.”

Famine, torture and political and religious persecution permeated Soviet life, but these considerations did not cause such professed humanitarians as Shaw and Webb to lose their faith in Stalin and his régime; indeed, Mr. Muggeridge likens their faith in Stalinist Russia to the faith the Christian has in his God. How is it, asked Dr. Johnson in *Taxation no Tyranny*, that we hear the loudest cries for liberty coming from the drivers of slaves? One might just as well ask how was it possible for such guardians of freedom, justice and brotherhood of man as Shaw and Julian Huxley to support—in Mr. Muggeridge’s words—“one of the most thorough-going, ruthless and bloody tyrannies ever to exist on earth. . . .”? How indeed?

Almost two decades ago, the French social philosopher Raymond Aron came out with *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. In that work Mr. Aron furnished a plausible explanation for the support given the Stalinist tyranny by Western intellectuals. He ar-

gued that the Soviet régime provided them with a religion and a hope that paradise could be recreated here on earth purely through human endeavor. “Under the Soviet régime,” Mr. Aron told us, “the head of the State is identical with the head of the Church.” Marxist ideology—in the same manner as the transcendental faith of old—determines all that really matters; this ideology “justifies authority, and it promises, not to the individual but to individuals in the mass, a just retribution in the historical hereafter, that is to say the earthly future.”

However, though Communist authorities “endeavor to impart a political character to the activities, or at least to the language, of the ‘popes’ or bishops,” argued Mr. Aron, “they do not encourage a religious interpretation of the historical ideologies.” For “it is in the West rather than Eastern Europe that certain believers find it difficult to distinguish between the drama of the Crucifixion and the drama of the proletariats, between the classless society and the Kingdom of Heaven.” For many Stalinist intellectuals, then, Communism was a sort of political attempt to find a substitute for religion in an ideology erected into a state orthodoxy.

The Stalinist intellectuals wanted to attain—to use Norman Podhoretz’s phrase—“redemption through politics.” They believed that with the death of God, the needs of the heart demanded a new religion, one that twentieth century man would accept; they viewed themselves as the preachers of a new religion which offered the hope of redemption and, moreover, the promise of heaven on earth.

Malcolm Muggeridge was one of those Western intellectuals who envisaged Stalinist Russia as a socialist paradise. When he arrived there he expected to find Tolstoy’s “green stick,” but he was soon disabused. He returned with his wife to Britain despairing of any expectation that, “in earthly terms, anything could be salvaged; that any earthly battle could be won, or earthly solution found.” Once dur-

ing his stay in the Soviet Union, however, he did find some solace. "Peeping in through a broken window of the church with the newly painted front," he tells us, "I saw that it was used now for storing tools, as well as some of the fallen slogans from the nearby clearing, neatly piled for use for the following summer." But "at the back where the altar had been there was still the faint outline of a cross to be seen." In its survival Mr. Muggeridge read "the promise that somehow this image of enlightenment through suffering, this assertion of the everlasting supremacy of the gospel of love over the gospel of power, would never be obliterated, however dimly and obscurely traced now, however seemingly triumphant the forces opposed to it might seem to be."

Reviewed by HAVEN BRADFORD GOW