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The sensation of liberty

by *Michael Weiss*

On the oft-forgotten historian Tibor Szamuely.

Letters published in the *New York Review of Books* usually take the form of invective (“In his woefully inadequate essay on Incan virgin sacrifice...”), not tribute. So it was a rare occurrence indeed to behold Robert Conquest’s amicable missive to this liberal journal of opinion in response to a footnote in John Banville’s March review of *House of Meetings*, Martin Amis’s new novel set in the gulag:

I am particularly glad to read in [Amis’s] acknowledgments the tribute to Tibor Szamuely, who understood Stalinism better than I did. I remember saying to him that I could see why Stalin had Marshal Tukhachevski shot, but why did he do the same to his old friend Marshal Yegorev? Tibor’s answer was “Why not?”

Someone who understood Stalinism better than Robert Conquest is surely worthy of our attention, and in the case of Tibor Szamuely that gnomic “Why not?” hints at great reserves of hard-won comprehension. The Soviet Union never lacked for brilliant dissidents from the ranks of the academy, which was at once a snare for their expansive talents as well as a catalyst for their political awakenings. Szamuely, however, lived a regrettably short life (he died at forty-seven), wrote exactly one book, *The Russian Tradition*, for which he should be bettered remembered, and came from what might be called Communist aristocracy. His biography seems more at home in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth, a fact he no doubt would have

appreciated as a scholar whose main task was to show how Russian history should be seen as a series of preludes and dress rehearsals for the October Revolution. How one pines to have him around today to dilate on the “managed democracy” of *Putinschchina*, a phenomenon he above all would have predicted.

Hungarian by heritage, Szamuely was born in Moscow in 1925, a nephew to his famous uncle and namesake, who was the gruesome head of Bela Kun’s secret police during the brief Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. The peasants whose corpses the elder Tibor, a personal friend of Lenin, ordered hung from telephone poles were known as “Szamuely fruit,” one of those gothic ironies ripe, so to speak, for reclaiming on behalf of the finer ornaments of this extraordinary Magyar-Jewish line.

The younger Tibor lives for a few years in England, his future home in romantic exile, before moving back to Russia in the mid-1930s, whereupon his father “disappeared” in the Great Purge. He served in the Red Army during World War II, then earned his doctorate at Moscow University. A research trip abroad meant leaving his wife and children behind as “hostages” of the state, lest he should be tempted to prolong his stay indefinitely. Around this time Szamuely decided life in a totalitarian society was not for him or his family. He began calculating their defection, the progress of which was severely hindered by his arrest and sentence of eight years to the Vorkuta labor camp in 1951. The circumstances of this episode—and the blind luck that got him out of both it and Russia—bear recounting.

Szamuely’s house was situated in close proximity to a chauffeured pick-up point of the Politburo thug and future premier Georgi Malenkov. The daily sight of this ungainly apparatchik so annoyed Szamuely that he indiscreetly let slip to someone that he couldn’t wait for vacation to avoid running into that “fat pig” Malenkov. Upon hearing the inevitable knock at the door some time later, Szamuely instructed his wife to write to her mother, who, it was rumored, had been having an affair with Matyas Rakosi, the Stalinist dictator of Hungary. That seemed to do the trick all right, if only belatedly. Without having to serve the full eight years of his *katorga*,

Szamuely was released at the personal intervention of Stalin himself and “rehabilitated,” which meant that he was sent back to Moscow without the imminent certainty of re-arrest—at least not for the same offense—hanging over his head.

Szamuely used this unexpected freedom to move to Hungary, where he became Vice Chancellor of Budapest University in 1958. It was here that, in another stroke of good fortune, he encountered a former Ghanese student of his who encouraged him to come and teach in the newly liberated Crown colony of the Gold Coast. (In Moscow, prior to his arrest, Szamuely had taught at an underground school that trained third-world revolutionaries; he thus made his most valuable contact in the progenitor of the very sort of regime he wanted to flee.) Ghana was now in thrall to the Kremlin, but its lingering ties to the British metropole gave Szamuely just the opportunity he needed to travel to London, this time toting along his wife and children, a feat he later claimed was small beer compared with the fantastic smuggling of his entire Borgesian library out from under the Iron Curtain.

If any of the foregoing makes you wish Szamuely had got around to writing one more book—his memoirs—then perhaps you’ll take consolation that these and other *trouvailles* were generously given to posterity by Sir Kingsley Amis in *his* memoirs. Such an impact did Szamuely’s learning and wit have on Amis, Conquest, and Anthony Powell that the blockish Mitteleuropean (“a ‘foreigner’ if ever one was to be seen among English people”) was soon invited to join their “Fascist” lunches at Bertorelli’s: prandial ground zero for cold war conservatism.

It’s not difficult to understand the attraction. A story in *Pravda* about a Soviet office drone who spends the length of his holiday looking for a part for the broken-down car that was to have transported him to bliss in the Crimea warranted this response from the émigré:

That's the sort of thing people in the West should know. Of course they should know about the famine too, and the purges and the camps—all that—and quite a lot of them do in a way, but for some of them it's too much, too big. They might find it easier to take in that in Moscow you can't get an electric-light bulb or a bar of soap.

Behind Szamuely's humor, in other words, lurked a profound fluency in the *Western* tradition, and here we come to what so enriches his anatomy of the Russian one.

The present volume opens with a pair of dire observations of Russia made by two visiting Frenchmen: the Marquis de Custine in 1839, who traveled to the czarist autocracy of Nicholas I, and André Gide in 1936, who finally made pilgrimage to the “workers’ state” he’d so admired from afar. The two chronicles separated by a century —one by a disillusioned Tocqueville, the other by a horrified fellow traveler—were virtually indistinguishable from each other. Both hit upon the same tropes: the grave uniformity of public opinion, the enthusiastic worship of a godly sovereign, the mingled envy and hauteur with respect to the West. That Russia had an elbow in Europe but was never a province of the Roman Empire accounts, in the author’s view, for its unique development.

Russia was founded at the end of the ninth century—the so-called apanage period—as a loose confederation of principalities with a nominal power base in Kiev. “Rus” might well have disintegrated from there had it not been for the Mongol (or Tartar) invasion in 1237, which, in the words of Pushkin, brought “neither algebra nor Aristotle,” but left an indelible footprint that one historian called a “peculiar system of state socialism.” The 250-year Golden Horde was characterized by three main features: complete submission before the almighty Khan; state ownership of property; and equality of servitude codified by law. Secret police, taxation, and the census all begin here, too, which is probably why Alexander Herzen once termed his greatest fear the advent of “Genghis Khan with a telegraph.”

The role of the czar, or ruler of “all the Russias,” grew out of the cunning but sycophantic Ivan I, the Grand Duke of Vladimir, nicknamed Kalita or “Moneybags.” He convinced the Khan to grant him singular proconsul authority, which would now be based along with the Metropolitan—the head of the Orthodox Church—in Moscow. Official Russian independence came in 1480, during the reign of Ivan the Great, but it wasn’t until that liberating figure’s appellative opposite, Ivan the Terrible, won Kazan, Astrakhan, and Siberia from the Mongols in the mid-sixteenth century that Russian autocracy was fully instantiated. Szamuely describes it as a Frankenstein hybrid of the “Muscovite seigneurial system, Mongol despotism and Byzantine Caesaropapism”—the worst of all worlds.

Marx, who remained wary until the end of his life of the revolutionary potential of Russians, remarked that the “bloody mire of Mongol slavery, not the rude glory of the Norman epoch, forms the cradle of Muscovy. Kalita’s whole system may be expressed in a few words: the machiavellism of the usurping slave.” The graybeard of the British Museum wasn’t alone in this opinion: later Russian Marxists like Plekhanov and Trotsky also refused to ignore the problematic Asiatic strains in the Russian tradition.

It’s no secret that Stalin, aptly dubbed the “Red Czar” by his biographer Simon Sebag Montefiore, greatly admired Ivan the Terrible. In one of the most transparent correspondences in history, conducted with his renegade and self-exiled advisor Kurbsky, Ivan laid out the case for unmitigated autocracy. He declared his slaves “subjected to me by God, to carry out my wishes”—a far more megalomaniacal *raison d’état* than what justified the divine right of kings in Europe. In another obvious parallel with the Kremlin mountaineer, the dread czar used the full martial resources at his command to war against perceived enemies foreign and domestic: he, too, was paranoid of internal subversion and murdered the old apanage princes, their descendents, and court attendants. He also founded the *Oprichniki*, or first Russian political police, then had even these *agents provocateurs* killed.

Most importantly, Ivan expropriated the boyars from their allodial estates, claiming that all the land was his personal property. In exchange for lifelong military service, the czar would dole out plots to these robbed aristocrats, who were now reduced to the status of tax-paying slaves. This bizarre quasi-feudalism was known as the system of *pomestie* and, according to Szamuely, “was in fact none other than the nationalization of land.” The *pomestchiki* were not feudal lords in the proper sense of the term because they had no legal obligations to their vassals, nor did their “king” (the czar) have any obligations to them. They exercised total authority over all their temporal holdings—human beings included—which officially belonged, in perpetuity, to their sovereign. To give a sense of how backward such a state of affairs was for all parties concerned, free peasants would often *elect* to become personal slaves, or *khology*, in order to avoid paying taxes—a loophole that was ended with the Statute of Bondage. It permanently bound all peasants to the land until their fateful emancipation as a class in 1861.

In a stunning section that compares the American and Russian economies of slavery, Szamuely, without quite succumbing to moral equivalence, explains that Russian slaves not only accounted for more than ninety percent of the population, but also had to pay taxes, could be conscripted into the army, and were at the literal disposal of their masters; “they were not merely unfree, they were un-people.” This scarcely prevented reform-minded *littérateurs* from hypocritically defending the barbarism at home while deploring the plantocracy abroad.

The theory of Pan-Slavism and the messianic aura attached to the Orthodox Church did little to minimize this purblind national self-regard. As rulers of the “third Rome,” the Caesars of Muscovy governed not only by absolutist precepts, but by theocratic ones as well. Church and state were inseparable: the czar was considered the vicar of Christ on earth, and the priesthood was yet another one of his servant classes. Szamuely describes Russia at this time as a world-empire-in-the-making, with imperialist intentions akin to Manifest Destiny, the white man’s burden, or

mission civilisatrice. Indeed, Andrei Gromyko and Edvard Shevardnadze would, after 1991, claim that Soviet expansionism had similar global designs, only that these were foreordained by the tenets of Marxism-Leninism.

The irony of “the most enslaved nation in Europe showing mankind the way to full liberation and to genuine spiritual and physical unity” was not lost on amused Western observers. Nor, perhaps, on that most Westernizing czar, Peter the Great, who only inaugurated his sweeping policy of reforms out of a pragmatic martial motive—he didn’t want to lose another war to Sweden’s Charles XII. Rather than liberalize Russia, Peter transformed it into a more top-down slave society, whereby an educated bureaucratic-officer class grew ever more alienated from the benighted hoi polloi: “Foreigners at home,” noted Herzen, “and foreigners abroad, idle onlookers—spoiled for Russia by their Western prejudices, and spoiled for the West by their Russian habits.”

Peter merged slavery with serfdom (and levied taxes against both groups), oversaw a twenty-five percent drop in the population, issued internal passports for travel that prefigured Soviet “papers,” and, in groping towards preliminary industrialization, made factories and companies compulsory enterprises with monopolies of production and a lone consumer—the state. Still, successive generations of Russian radicals revered him. The great literary critic Vissarion Belinsky—the father of the *intelligentsia* and the first Russian socialist—put it best:

Peter is clear evidence that Russia will not develop her liberty and her civil structure out of her own resources, but will obtain it at the hands of her tsars as so much else. True, we do not as yet possess rights—we are, if you like, slaves; but that is because we still need to be slaves. Russia is an infant and needs a nurse in whose breast there beats a heart full of love for her fledgling, and in whose hand there is a rod ready to punish it if it is naughty. To give the child complete liberty is to ruin it.

This symbolism of an adolescent people was also part of the tyrant’s own justification for his rule:

Our people are like children, who would never of their own accord decide to learn, who would never take up the alphabet without being compelled to do so by their teacher, who would at first feel despondent. But later, when they have finished their studies, they are grateful for having been made to go through them. This is evident today: *has not everything been achieved under constraint?*

Catherine the Great would add to the glory of native self-abasement: “National pride created, among a nation ruled autocratically, a sensation of liberty that is no less conducive to the great deeds and to the welfare of the subjects, than to liberty itself.”

However much modern sympathies gail at such condescension, consider that almost *every* popular uprising in Russian history undertaken on behalf of the underclass was met with indifference, suspicion, or open hostility by that same underclass. Most peasant rebellions were staged *in the name* of the czar, not against him, and were often led by illiterate pretenders to the throne. Dostoevsky’s literary circle—the Petrashevists—preached a gospel of phalanstères on a sprawling nobleman’s estate, all the while being viewed with suspicion and disdain by the agrarian toilers. So too did the propagandist Pytor Lavrov, a close friend of Engels, advocate “going to the people” to educate them about the twin virtues of Socialism and Justice. This plan culminated in the farcical Mad Summer of 1874: no thanks, said the people.

Even the Decembrist Revolution of 1825 wasn’t quite the democratic upheaval it’s made out to be. It was a palace coup plotted by a handful of abolitionist veterans from the Napoleonic wars whose draft constitution, *Russkaya Pravda*, was an authoritarian and imperialist document (Moldavia, the Caucasus, Mongolia, and parts of Central Asia were to be annexed). The Decembrist leaders had to lie to their soldiers to get them to participate in the abortive regime change, telling them that it was to restore the deposed Czar Constantine over his vicious younger brother, Nicholas I. Their rallying cry, “Long live Constantine! Long live the Constitution!” was taken up by the rank-and-file only because it was assumed that the word “Constitution” referred to Constantine’s wife!

Those who have read or seen Tom Stoppard's brilliant dramatic trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*, know what sacred and foundational events the Decembrist tragedy and the failed 1848 revolution in Paris represented for the enlightened men of Herzen's ilk, the so-called "Generation of the Fathers" of the 1840's *intelligentsia*. As distinct from that dubious designation, "intellectuals," the Russian *intelligentsia*—a word coined by the forgotten novelist Boborykin—represented a social class unto itself, consisting largely of failed students, lapsed seminarians, and magnanimous aristocrats.

Impelled by a world-historical sense of guilt for the plight of their inferiors, these selfless *intelligents* argued for extreme change and abhorred any legalistic measure of reform. Gradualism was to them a luxury Russia couldn't afford. As Herzen wrote in his *Open Letter to Jules Michelet*, "We are too oppressed, too wretched to make do with a half-liberty. You have your commitments to consider, your scruples to restrain you—but we have none of this, no commitments and no scruples—it is merely that for the moment we are powerless." Thus the very pursuit of absolutes that had enabled despotism now threatened to dismantle it with the same all-or-nothing resolve.

Herzen's humane Populism, which sought to build a kind of folksocialism on the *obshchina* or village commune model that had existed for centuries, soon gave way to the ruthless Jacobinism of the "Generation of the Sons," embodied by Pyotr Zaichnevsky, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, and the charismatic conman-murderer Sergei Nechaev. Chernyshevsky, whom Nabokov satirized in *The Gift*, wrote what is widely considered to be the worst novel ever written in any language, *What Is to Be Done?*, the title of which was taken by Lenin for his early pamphlet outlining the agenda of a revolutionary vanguard party governed by principles of "democratic centralism." The *intelligents* of the 1860s—or *raznochintsy*, meaning "men of diverse rank," due to their university backgrounds—agreed that it would require professional revolutionaries to overthrow czarism *without the support of the masses*.

Szamuely credits a man of the subsequent swell of Russian thinkers, Pytor Tkachev, one of the first Eastern students of Marxism, with being the “bridge between Cherneshevsky and Lenin” and the “precursor of Bolshevism.”

In his illuminating debate with Lavrov, fresh from the late failure of propagandist hopes, Tkachev argued that capitalism was developing apace in Russia and would soon become the handmaiden of the *kulaks*, or wealthy peasant class. State power must be seized immediately by a conspiratorial elite, which would then transform it into an engine of revolutionary power. The masses could be won over in due course. Lavrov replied rather as Rosa Luxemburg would do to Lenin in *their* extraordinary debate about means and ends once the Bolsheviki had entered the slipstream of despotism:

The belief that a party, once it has seized dictatorial power, will then voluntarily renounce it, can be entertained only before the seizure: in the struggle of parties for power, in the turmoil of overt and covert intrigues, every minute will create a new imperative for the preservation of power, a new insurmountable obstacle to its renunciation. Dictatorship is torn from the hands of the dictators only by a new revolution.

In 1830, the sixteen-year-old poet Mikhail Lermontov wrote a poem that is the verse equivalent of Burke’s anticipation of an opportunistic general rising from the carnage of post-1789 France. “A year will come for Russia, a dark year,” it began, when royalty would be no more, corpses would fill the countryside, and famine would be universal:

Dawn on thy streams will shed a crimson light;
That day will be revealed the Man of Might
Whom thou wilt know. And thou wilt understand
Wherefore a naked blade is in his hand.
Bitter will be thy lot; tears flood thine eyes,
And he will laugh at all thy tears and sighs.

Thanks to one meticulous historian, it seems less prophetic than it should.

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