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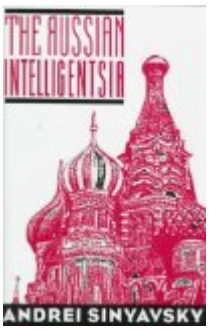
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrei Sinyavsky. *The Russian Intelligentsia.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. x + 98 pp. $21.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-10726-6.



Reviewed by Alan Kimball

Published on H-Russia (March, 1999)

As a contribution to the still ongoing scholarly debate about the Russian intelligentsia, Andrei Sinyavsky's little booklet might warrant little serious attention. It is built from three lectures sponsored by the W. Averell Harriman family and delivered at Columbia University in New York City not long before Sinyavsky's death. The Russian intelligentsia is the subject of endless inquiry, and we might not expect much gain from three lectures titled "The Intelligentsia and the People," "The Intelligentsia and Bread," and "The Intelligentsia and Democracy," running so few pages.

Lynn Visson's translation from the Russian seems quite good. I had considerable experience with Sinyavsky's Russian during his appointment as Lindholm Professor at the University of Oregon in 1994. Sinyavsky's Russian was deceptively clear. His narrative moved along in a familiar colloquial pattern, yet glowed with complex and striking ideas and images. The glow comes through Visson's Englishing of this great Russian writer.

A good "Index" guides readers to key words in the text and in the notes. Not all publishers have the strength of character required to index notes as well as text. Three cheers for Columbia University Press, despite the fact that some editor made the bad decision to spell "Russian" on the title page with a reversed capital "R." We have grown used to this cartoon suggestion that Russians don't know how to write very well. Their "R's," like so many other facets of their lives, are backward.

Some thoughtful person appended ten pages of "Notes" to the text which help define some but far from all proper nouns and to identify some but far from all quotes and literary references. Some of the easy identifications are in the footnotes--Kaganovich for example. Many readers will feel the need to have ID's for Petr Boborykin, Andrei Chernov, Kornei Chukovskii, Efim Etkind, and Dmitrii Furman, to name a few.

Mark von Hagen, Director of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, introduced the lectures with a solid, brief outline of Sinyavsky's important place in Russian letters. One might fault von Hagen only for not positioning Sinyavsky more solidly in the Paris-based Russian emigre community and in the new relationship to

his homeland that Gorbachev's perestroika allowed. His and Mariia Vasil'evna Rosanova's apartment was a destination point for many Russians coming abroad for the first time in the late Gorbachev and early Yeltsin years. Von Hagen paid homage to the bibliography of Sinyavsky's fiction, but neglected to inform his audience of Sinyavsky's role in the journal ***Sintaksis: Publitsistika, kritika, polemika*** (edited by his wife Rozanova and published in Paris) and his participation in the debates on Yeltsin's Russia in the Russian press since 1993.

Readers need also know that Sinyavsky and his wife traveled several times back to Moscow beginning in 1992, visiting friends, arguing, testing the old neighborhoods for good pirozhoks and signs of change. "During the last few years," he said in the lectures, "my wife and I have spent a good deal of time in the Lubyanka Prison archives reading through the files on my case" (p. 78). He overheard a fellow at a nearby table shout out, "I didn't sign that! I didn't sign that!" Officials still would not release key documents to Sinyavsky.

Sinyavsky's lectures cannot be understood without knowing more about ***Sintaksis***. A good portion of the citations in the lectures came from this journal. For several years ***Sintaksis*** provided a forum unavailable back home, not unlike the emigre Alexander Herzen's ***Golosa iz Rossii*** in the previous century. The index to Sinyavsky's Columbia University lectures lists one reference to the journal, but there are three of some importance (pp. 9, 55, 70). No footnote identifies the journal.

The article "1937" appeared earlier in ***Sintaksis***.[1] Compiled by Sinyavsky with his friend and partner Efim Etkind, page after page of photocopied text from Soviet newspapers were devoted to this bloody year. Sinyavsky revealed that he and Etkind "noted with sadness that all our writers had disgraced themselves. Literally everyone. Irate articles and articles with artistic twists, by Olesha, Platonov, Zoshchenko, Iashvili, Babel, Tynianov, and so forth, called for the destruction of the vermin, the enemies of the people. The letters signed collectively and published next to these articles also included Zoshchenko, Paustovsky, Antokolsky, and Pasternak among the slew of signatories" (pp. 7-8). Etkind was shocked as he went through clippings. He briefly considered leaving some out, but most went in. Sinyavsky identified one exception: "Jewish poet Perets Markish and his gory verses." Sinyavsky said, "We felt sorry for his son, Simon Markish, a friend from university days who is now a professor at the University of Geneva" (p. 9). There is no footnote identifying Markish or son.

It would be unfortunate if a failure of footnotes or the editor's introduction caused David Remnick in ***New York Review of Books*** (April 9, 1998) to offer the misinformed opinion that Sinyavsky's lectures presented "deeply flawed judgments based on surprisingly erratic observation," judgments "curiously incomplete," and "analysis based on emotion, conspicuous omission, disorientation, and anecdote." Not everyone understands how connected with the homeland this famous exiled writer of fantastic fiction had become in his last years. But, of course, he remained Sinyavsky/Tertz. He did not become Robert Kaiser or Hedrick Smith.

All that said, the book on its own still does not make a very big splash in the sea of intelligentsia studies. But the book should not be taken this way, for two central reasons. First, the author is Andrei Sinyavsky and, second, the book is not really about the Russian intelligentsia.

Sinyavsky was the author of famous works of fantasy, but he was also the author of ***Soviet Civilization***.[2] In fact, certain passages in the lectures (e.g., p. 60) are repeats of passages found in ***Soviet Civilization*** (p. 71). Should we judge Sinyavsky among the scholars of Russian cultural history? I think not. What should catch our attention here is the place of Sinyavsky along that long skein of Russian thinkers who have agitated themselves about "the intelligentsia and the people" because

they lived the problem, not because it was a subject that interested them academically or journalistically. Sinyavsky's contribution here is not to the secondary literature on the intelligentsia but to the primary documentation illustrative of the tense relationship of the Russian intellectual elite and the great mass of "half-educated" Russians. These late words of Sinyavsky should be put in context, for example, with those of Dostoyevsky at the Pushkin commemoration or of Blok in 1908 and again in the revolutionary year 1918.

In his lectures as Lindholm Professor at Oregon, he repeated time and again, often provoking lively debate, that he did not like civilization. He considered it the enemy of "culture." It became clear that he was working with something like Wladimir Weidle's notion of horizontal (folk) and vertical (elite) cultures. He felt that Stalin had torn down the vertical and unleashed the horizontal cultures. In 1994 he repeated his somewhat arch judgments on the working people earlier expressed in *Soviet Civilization*, the section titled "The role and place of the Intelligentsia" (pp. 134-42). He observed that Party leadership and those writers who supported them in the Stalin era were "themselves mostly intellectuals. But intellectuals who ... moved over to the camp of the victorious class, from where they criticize and denounce the intelligentsia" (p. 134). Notice how at this point he referred to "victorious class" rather than "victorious state." He meant the working class, and to nail down his point he wrapped up this chapter with a section titled "The Man of the Masses" (pp. 142-52).

These passages ring with Ortega y Gasset's disgust for the "revolt of the masses." He characterized the simple working person, the "new Soviet man" as a half-educated, assertive, complacent, impudent, and arrogant ignoramus or "self-satisfied slave" (p. 145). The proletariat does not understand the complexities and subtleties of life. At least Lenin understood that if the "lady cook" were to run the state, she would have to learn how to govern. The lady cook would have to "transform herself into a new-style intellectual capable of fielding complex political questions" (p. 152). Stalin was happy to encircle himself with uncouth thugs.

The meaning of Yeltsin's attack on parliament and the reaction of the "lady cooks" of the post-Soviet world pressured Sinyavsky to resolve the tension lurking in all his thought on these matters. He loved the arcana of a highly educated literary elite, but he also loved the simplicity of everyday folks. He loved Pushkin, but mainly mainly in that everyday life way of just walking around the block, shooting the breeze. Now he saw that the intelligentsia, even the "almost sacred" Dmitrii Likhachev, could support Yeltsin's politics. Was this because Yeltsin was shooting at the people, not at the intelligentsia? Was this because Yeltsin was the designated creator of a new and better purpose in Russian life?

In his first famous piece, "On Socialist Realism," Sinyavsky wrote about the so-called "superfluous man" and the threat he posed to power and dominant concepts of "Purpose." "He [the superfluous man] is neither for the Purpose nor against the Purpose--he is outside the Purpose. Now this simply cannot be; it is a fiction, a blasphemy. While the whole world, having defined itself with regard to the Purpose, is divided into two antagonistic camps, he feigns not to understand this and keeps mingling his colors in vague and ambiguous schemes. [I take these last few words to be an example of Sinyavsky's direct but glowing prose.] He proclaims that there are no Reds and no Whites but simply people, poor, unfortunate, superfluous people...." [3]

If the lectures at Columbia were not really about the intelligentsia, then what? Perhaps they represent a movement toward the "poor, unfortunate, superfluous people" as he sought to resolve the tension in the phrase inherited from Aleksandr Blok's 1908 essay "Narod i intelligentsia." The lectures were a reflection on the impact of a mili-

tary attack on an elected parliament. After Yeltsin ordered the shelling of the "White House" in October of 1993, a large portion of the intellectual elite of Russia (and for that matter of the U.S. as well) applauded him. (Remnick's newspaper suggested that Yeltsin attacked parliament to defend democracy.) This served to draw Sinyavsky's attention to the massive deception and exploitation carried out by Yeltsin and his supporters. This served to shed light on the pathos of Russian everyday life observable both in the press and on several personal visits home.

The authentic subject of the lectures is something like this: "A great emigre author returns to his native land in a time of his erstwhile tormenters' comeuppance, but he is saddened by what he sees." The fullest articulation of his topic comes on page 66: "When I speak about the lust for power of today's intelligentsia and of its guilt before the people, I am referring only to the privileged part of the intelligentsia, what I call the court and government intelligentsia: people who are well known." These have been called "subcontractors to the authorities" (p. 68). Sinyavsky quoted with approval Russian journalist Gleb Pavlovskii's assertion that "Yeltsin" is a "collective pseudonym" behind which what might be called Russia's true "hard liners," these subcontractors, hide their mischievous ways, protected by those great powers that support "Yeltsin" with their own rather than Russia's interests at heart (p. 77). Pavlovskii is not identified in a footnote.

Many "Western" commentators could benefit from serious further reflection along one line of thought suggested in the lectures. Sinyavsky was struck by the profound confusion of democracy and market economics in the Russia of Gaidar, Sachs, and Aslund (pp. 29-31). Sinyavsky's voice, here and elsewhere, harmonizes with the choir of dissent in Yeltsin's Russia, a choir which the U.S. readership does not often hear. The Moscow reformer and critic of the intelligentsia, Boris Kagarlitsky, has been very much in tune with Sinyavsky over these years.

Two dramatic trans-personal events stunned Sinyavsky and shaped his personal life. First, Khrushchev's expose of Stalin in 1956 revealed certain truths that set Sinyavsky on the path of thought and action that soon produced his "On Socialist Realism" and led to exile. He had still a full life ahead of him.

The second event was Yeltsin's attack on parliament which revealed certain truths about the intellectual elite of Russia and the nature of the emerging post-Soviet "Civilization." Where was Sinyavsky headed after this second dramatic event? We cannot be sure, because he had only four more years of life as Yeltsin mobilized his special forces against parliament and famous intellectuals cheered him on.

Notes

[1]. *Sintaksis*, no. 19 (1987), pp. 140-86.

[2]. Andrei Sinyavsky, ***Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History*** (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1988).

[3]. Andrei Sinyavsky/Abram Tertz, ***"The Trial Begins" and "On Socialist Realism"*** (Berkeley Calif.: 1982), p. 190.

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Citation: Alan Kimball. Review of Sinyavsky, Andrei. ***The Russian Intelligentsia.*** H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

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