

# Homo Sovieticus Amazon Book Review – 2017

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I have written about the ways in which Russians are different from we of Western European descent. Here is the [Marquis de Custine](#) writing about the Russians 175 years ago in Letters from Russia. [Here are my recent observations on Putin](#), and the levels of deceit and ineptitude that characterize the present invasion of Ukraine.

Here follows my 2017 review of a 1985 book by Alexander Zinoviev, five years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, at that time exiled in London, explaining the communist mentality. I think it applies pretty well to Putin today. At the end I have added the first few pages for your pleasure - it is a fun read. Here is what I wrote in my review:

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One can buy a great many books about the Soviet Union. These are attempts by former Soviets or expatriates to concoct verbal descriptions of what they observe about Soviet life.

But – just as dialogue is the most succinct and powerful way to develop characters in a novel, actually writing a book in the Soviet style turns out to be the best illustration of how Soviets thought.

True to form, the book has no particular organization. There is no table contents. There is no index. There are no chapters. There is no narrative flow. What is it then? It is a series of essays, mostly about a page long. Some of the essays are disquisitions, profound thoughts about life in the West, life in the Soviet Union, and so on. Quite a few of them use the same stock of characters: The Cynic, The Explainer, The Enthusiast, Lady, and other stock characters from the Soviet scene.

Some of us remember Soviet humor – the bitter jokes that circulated underground in the Soviet Union and were savored in America as an expression of how much superior we were to those poor benighted Soviets. Zinoviev includes one such joke is embedded in an essay entitled Meditations on the Bridge. He addresses the status of ethnic Russians if vis-à-vis the other ethnicities within the Soviet Union:

"However, my warlike mood soon changed into sober pessimism. Even though the West seems chaotic, frivolous and defenseless, all the same Moscow will never achieve worldwide supremacy. Moscow can defend itself against any opponent. Moscow can deliver a knockout blow on the west. Moscow has the wherewithal to mess up the whole planet. But it has no chance of becoming the ruler of the world. To rule the world one must have at one's disposal a sufficiently great nation. That nation must feel itself to be a nation of rulers. And when it comes to it, one that can rule in reality. In the Soviet Union the Russians are the only people who might be suited to that role. They are the foundation and the bulwark of the Empire. But they don't possess the qualities of a ruling nation. And in the Soviet empire their situation is more like that of being a colony for all the other peoples in it."

"Until the Russian people become the best educated, the most cultured, the most prosperous and the most privileged within the country, there can be no thought of world hegemony. More than that, once the Russian people have really become the most privileged and dominant nation in the country, they will still have to outclass the other peoples in all the most important nonmilitary spheres of life. And for this decades will be needed, if not centuries. Whereas the actual position of the Russians in the Soviet Union is that they are not even allowed equality with the other peoples, let alone preeminence. Incidentally, those Russians who have somehow raised themselves above their fellow nationals, will not permit the regeneration of Russia as a nation. In short, I so summed up my reflections, one can construct supremely felicitous plans, but one can't implement them because of a trifle that seemed hardly worthy of attention. Even before the war, my father

told me this story. In some institution a routine meeting was in progress. There were two points on the agenda: 1) the construction of a barn; 2) the creation of an abundance of consumer goods under communism. As they didn't have enough planks to build the barn, they moved on at once to the second question. Moscow would be able to build a grandiose world Empire. But alas, it doesn't have the planks to do it with."

Reading this book would be a sobering exercise for the neocons who tremble at the thought of a resurgent Russia under Vladimir Putin conquering Europe. No! It is not that Putin is a man of good will, or that they don't have abundant weaponry. They just are not, as Zinoviev says, "a nation of rulers." The Soviet Union's domination of the Eastern European satellites was tolerated for a while, but the Soviets were never accepted as cultural peers by the people they dominated. That is the feeling here in Ukraine today. Ukrainians fear the Russians, but they don't respect them. Denied the secrecy which cloaked government activity under that sorrows and the Communists, Russia could simply not effectively suppress subject peoples in an empire in the Internet age.

It seems that even if the Pentagon doesn't understand this, Putin does. He could have grabbed Georgia in 2008. He did not. He could use his base in Transnistria to take over Moldova. He did not – and he is rewarded by the election of a president who is confident he can do business with Russia. Lastly, Putin overreached in Ukraine. After easily annexing Crimea, where Russia already had a huge military contingent by treaty, he attempted by stealth to take over Russian-speaking Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts. Despite showering these Russian speakers with propaganda and infiltrating large numbers of Russians, he found it hard going. Ukrainians – including a lot of residents of those oblasts – put up a tough fight. The front lines have stayed put for 2 ½ years.

Winston Churchill wrote that Russia is "an enigma wrapped in a riddle wrapped in a mystery." The people think differently than Western Europeans. This book is valuable because rather than telling you how they think, it shows you how they think. And it's good for a lot of laughs along the way.

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First few pages of the book, just a taste. You can buy it easily, or jump through hoops and download it free as an ebook.

## **THE FIRST ALARM**

I came to during the night and immediately sank into a delirium. It was as though I was being dragged along somewhere.

'Where are we going?' I asked soundlessly.

'To the Court of Judgement,' the Voice soundlessly began to thunder.

'Which one?'

'The Last One.'

'What should I be judged for, if every moment of my life was preordained by you?'

'For your life.'

'What can I pay for it with?'

'The payment for life is death. Your time has come. Pay up!'

'Don't hurry me. Perhaps I can still pull through. I haven't yet drained life's bitter cup to the dregs.'

And They let me go. And I sort of got over it, and began to think about all sorts of nonsense.

## TO WISH OR NOT TO WISH

I often have a wish to get something done; but I very rarely have the wish actually to do what I want to get done. Don't imagine that this is a piece of dead sophistry. It is living dialectics. Now I'll formulate my thought in a different way, so that you will even be disappointed by its banal clarity: I want to do something, but I don't want to make the effort to accomplish what I want. You see how simple it is? Incidentally, it's the same with all the 'eternal problems', classed as the deepest and most complex by the greatest thinkers of the past and their miserable regurgitators of the present. One has only to put the thing in a rather different way and at once it turns out to be all uselessness and futility. For instance, take the eternal Problem Number One: 'to be or not to be?'. For the Russian it comes out in the form: to b[ooz]e or not to b[ooz]e?'. And there can't be two opinions about that: of course, b[ooz]e. And seriously, by God! Then start boozing again. Then some more. And then begin all over again. In the Russian language one can also formulate this Problem Number One in another way: 'to be[at] or not to be[at]?'. And again there are no two ways about that: be[at]. Of course one must beat. And above all, in the face! In the West, of course, they don't understand this, because you can't translate Russian problems into Western languages. If you try to do that, all the romantic nuances disappear and all the psychological profundity.

The wish to do nothing arises in me even more often. But then I make titanic efforts to accomplish my wish. And I always succeed. Western thinkers see in this 'typical Russian laziness'. And they are wrong, as always.

## A POLITICAL NOVEL

Now I have the wish to write a novel. And indeed why not? All Russian émigrés write something. Am I any worse than them? And so, a novel, a romance. Moreover, in the original sense of the word 'romance': about love. But about a special kind of love: between the Soviet Union (Moscow, in short) and the West. But what kind of love could that be, you wonder indignantly, if . . .? Yet this 'if' also allows one to discern genuine love. Love until death do us part, one could say. If you read the epigraphs at the beginning you ought to understand what it's about. And if you missed them, read them without fail. It will only take a minute, and you will pick up enough wisdom for the rest of your life.

The love between my heroes is not only genuine love, it is also contemporary love: the homosexual kind. Moreover, Moscow is the active partner. Ask any Soviet man what Moscow is doing to the West, and you will hear something that supports my previous statement. Citizens of Western countries will say the same thing, they just use less indecent expressions. But our attitude to this union is radically different. The West thinks it's a healthy one and experiences the most voluptuous satisfaction. We have feelings of shame and disgust. True, not for ourselves, but for the West.

## EVIDENCE OF AN EYE-WITNESS

An acquaintance of mine worked for ten years in a Western country as a spy. Not long ago they found him out, by accident. When he was drunk he made a bet with his boon-companion, a local journalist, that he could organize a protest-demonstration on any subject whatsoever that the journalist cared to choose. The incident received publicity and they asked my friend to leave the country. They did this reluctantly and in a languid kind of way, because the country wanted to stay friendly with Moscow. When he reached Moscow my friend said (naturally, he was drunk again) that 'all those defectives' (he was referring to Western Leftists, pacifists, neutralists and intellectuals) 'should have their . . .!' And he went on to use the very words which I was ashamed to spell out earlier.

## PHILOSOPHICAL CONVICTIONS AND BEHAVIOURAL STEREOTYPES

And here's yet another mystery for you: what I'm saying here doesn't express my convictions. And, what is more, it's only an apparent mystery: I haven't got any convictions. I've only got a more or less stable reaction to everything I bump up against: a behavioural stereotype. Convictions are something Western man has, not

Soviet man. Instead of having convictions the latter has a 'stereo-type of behaviour'. This doesn't presuppose any convictions, and so it's compatible with every sort of conviction. When you confuse convictions with behavioural stereotypes without convictions, you get many misunderstandings, and strange ideas arise among Westerners about Soviet behaviour. If somebody else were to say what I am saying, I would start arguing with him. If you want to get at the truth, the first thing to do is to get into an argument with yourself. But I say this not from conviction, but in order to be witty, because I am not concerned with the truth either.

If a man has convictions it is a sign that he is not intellectually mature. Convictions are only a compensation for not being able to understand a given phenomenon quickly and accurately in its concrete manifestation. They are a priori guides to how one should behave in a concrete situation without understanding its concreteness. A man with convictions is rigid, dogmatic, tedious and, as a rule, stupid. But more often convictions have no effect on people's behaviour. They merely beautify vanity, relieve unclear consciences and cover up stupidity.

## **I AND MOSCOW**

I am a Soviet émigré in the West. The words in the West' could really be left out, because a Soviet émigré in the East is a logical impossibility: we are always in the East and don't need to emigrate there. But all the same I'll leave these words in because many Western people, afraid that the Soviet Army will arrive in their midst, are doing a bunk to the East. They imagine that we too can do that.

I now live in the West; and I feel as if I had been cast out into a Russian province at the back of beyond. That gives one something to think about. For me only one place in the world is a capital: Moscow. Everything else seems provincial. Moscow is the capital not only of a state. It's the capital of history. So when I left it I made a real bloomer: I fell out of history.

## **I AND THE WEST**

'Why do you want Western Europe?' a local asked me. 'You've got too much land already. Get all you can out of Siberia, but leave us in peace.' We wish we could,' I said, 'but look at it from our angle. In Siberia it's cold, slushy, empty and there are swarms of midges; while you have beauty, comfort and wealth. Which is better? Don't shunt us off into Siberia, we are fed up to the back teeth with it. We want to come here, to Europe. And then in time we'll send you to Siberia.'

'But we won't let you in here,' he cries, frightened and indignant.

'You're the first and perhaps the only person to talk like that,' I say. 'But you're too late, alas! We're already here.'

## **DENUNCIATIONS**

The mechanism of my wishes is very cunningly constructed. As soon as I began to think of writing a novel my *arriere-pensee* whispered: why a novel? Perhaps it would be better to write a denunciation? That's more like it, you'll say. After all, it's more your style. But here I must disappoint you: I have never written a denunciation in my life. You don't believe me? An acquaintance of mine (not the one I mentioned earlier, but another), never wrote denunciations either. But then he was a KGB officer and people wrote denunciations to him. I wasn't a KGB officer. But I had occasion to study denunciations as part of my work, so I have some experience of them. I'm a specialist in denunciations, but not a denouncer. I am a theorist in the field, not a practitioner.

It is undeniable that we have lost the reverent and tremulous attitude to denunciations that we used to have. They have lost their revolutionary-romantic tinge. And it's no longer possible to say what their role in the history of our times has been. But the denunciation has retained a very great epistemological significance. It is the only branch of human culture in which people can achieve some competence without any training or literary ability. To write denunciations there is no need to be a member of the Soviet Writers' Union. And, as

they sing in a popular opera, all ages are susceptible to denunciation. (\* This is a reference to Gremin's famous aria in the last act of Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin, based on Pushkin's novel in verse. Pushkin wrote, 'All ages are susceptible to love.')

At one time there was such a spate of denunciations to the KGB that its officers couldn't keep up with them on their own. They had to call in outside specialists to help. Hundreds of them, including myself, were brought in. You cannot imagine the size of the piles of unread denunciations alone in the central offices of the organs of State security, nor how many had piled up in the republics, provinces and districts and in the files and safes of individual operatives. And how many had been readied for action! How many perished in the war! How many were destroyed! What a mighty amount of human energy, feeling and thought went into the whole business of denunciation!

My task was to select from many thousands the ones which deserved attention and chuck away the rest; or, as it was then called, 'write them off'. I read the denunciations of innocent children in the morning of their lives; of decrepit old men wise with experience; of sober young careerists; of alcoholics out of their mind in their hopelessness; of prominent academics, of housewives, of young and pure virgins, of old debauchees, of Party officials, illiterate cretins, professors, pensioners and artists. They were all as alike as coins of the same value, or bugs. It was just as if denunciation was lodged in our genes from the start, instead of being, as we know, the most elevated product of human history. And then I realized that the denunciation is the most profound, comprehensive and sincere form of personal self-expression.

It is a pity that thousands of tons of denunciations were destroyed during the years of liberalism. The oeuvre of a vast population in its most interesting historical period disappeared without trace. Of course, denunciations will continue to be written in the future. But not on the same scale, nor with such an expenditure of intellect and passion, nor with such ingenuity of invention as there was then; it is sad indeed that this will never be repeated!

## **DOUBTS**

But why write in the form of the now morally discredited denunciation if we've invented another crystal-pure literary genre: the Official Report? Here we have no need to wrestle with our consciences and suffer (if we ever did suffer) when they politely ask us to write a Report about a journey, a meeting, a conversation. And there's no need even to ask us, because we all know that to write Reports about everything is our sacred duty. Why on earth didn't they get round to this in Stalin's time? There is an unusually simple explanation: there weren't enough typewriters and paper. One can write denunciations on scraps of paper with pencil-stubs. Reports are unthinkable without decent paper and typewriters.

## **WE AND THE WEST**

That acquaintance of mine who was thrown out of a Western capital wrote in his Report, after ten years' residence in the West, that after Western Europe had been occupied by the Soviet Army the first thing to do would be to liquidate all those who voluntarily give us their help: the Communists, the leftists, the pacifists, the neutralists, the intellectuals, the liberal writers, the professors, the youths with beards, and all that kind of filth. Why? Because they will then come to their senses and start to rebel against us. And in general, may the Lord deliver us from our friends: we can get rid of our enemies ourselves! Besides, advised my friend, there is some point in preserving your enemies, inasmuch as you can get some use out of them. But let us rather return to the theory of the Report.

## **THE REPORT**

Soviet people are trained to write Reports about everything. It is an indispensable element of the Communist organization of work. Monthly Reports, Quarterly Reports, Yearly Reports, Five-yearly Reports. One old Bolshevik on the books of our institute wrote a Report about his entire life since the revolution. Three thousand pages in very small type. He trundled his epoch-making Report round to the Party office in two battered old shopping bags, and asked the officials to study it and draw lessons from it. The Secretary of the

Party bureau entrusted me with this noble mission. In half an hour I wrote my Report on the Report of the old Bolshevik without even looking at it. In the years of Soviet power (so I wrote in my Report) he had consumed so many tons of bread and porridge, drunk so many kegs of vodka, written so many secret denunciations and made so many oral ones, sat for so many years of time at meetings and stood for so many years in queues. 'You are laughing at him,' said Secretary. 'No, I'm crying,' I said. 'What shall we do?' asked Secretary. 'We'll write to the author on official paper telling him that his manuscript has been transmitted to the Secret Division of the Central Party Archives,' I said. 'Why on official paper?' asked Secretary. 'So that the author can frame it and hang it on the wall next to the fifty or so official testimonials that he has received in the course of his inordinately long and stupid life,' I said. 'But why to the Secret Division?' asked Secretary. 'So that he won't torment us any more with his reminiscences,' I answered. 'But where does this go?' asked Secretary, motioning towards the battered shopping bags that contained the priceless experience of the life of a whole generation. 'To the rubbish dump,' I said. 'Go ahead,' said Secretary, 'and then write me a short Report about....'