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USSR: Dissidents

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ANDREI AMALRIK: AN INDIVIDUALIST ON TRIAL

Summary: Andrei Amalrik, a young Soviet dissident, is to stand trial in the Ural town of Sverdlovsk for his allegedly "anti-Soviet" writings. A controversial figure as a result of his works, unpublished in the Soviet Union, he is not on trial without the support of several leading dissidents and, possibly, could have the support of prominent figures in the scientific or literary community.

Today, in the town of Sverdlovsk at the foot of the Ural Mountains, a scene that is becoming all too familiar in the Soviet Union is about to be repeated. A young Russian writer and publicist, Andrei Aleksandrovich Amalrik, reportedly will stand trial charged with Article 190-1 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, i.e., with willful anti-Soviet slander.⁽¹⁾ While the mechanics of this procedure appear to be a carbon copy of the official methods of sanction against those who express opinions considered awkward by the regime, the individual involved is one of the more exceptional figures in what is generally termed the "democratic movement" in the Soviet Union.

His most salient characteristics are his individuality, his consistent refusal to compromise his beliefs, and his determination to act in strict accord with his own principles. Since his personal outlook is often at variance with officially sanctioned norms of behavior, frequently he has been, as he is now, the object of persecution.

(1) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 November 1970, and KYJ, 1 November 1970. UPI and Reuter, 11 November 1970.

As a young man, his intellectual interests and curiosity led him to establish contacts with "underground" writers, poets and artists who refused to surrender their talents within the strictures of "socialist realism." Among these contacts are: Alexander Ginsburg, the editor of the manifold journal Syrtak; the painter Kharov, regarded by Soviet authorities as too "modernist" for domestic consumption hence forcing him to show his work privately; and the painter D. P. Flaxinsky, as well as members of the foreign diplomatic and press community.

In their attempt to maintain surveillance over such persons, the secret police approached the 22 year-old Anaisrik in 1961 and, in his own words, "politely suggested that I write general reports on the mood of the intelligentsia, and I, equally as politely, refused, and there the matter ended."⁽¹⁾ Two years later, however, the pressure to become an informer became less good-natured. "In 1963, I was driven to Lublanka at night and was told to write a denunciation against an American diplomat, to the effect that he was subjecting myself and other Soviet citizens to harmful ideological influences. I again refused although this time they threatened me with criminal proceedings."⁽²⁾ Although in fact there was nothing, strictly speaking, illegal about his refusal to betray his friends, his attitude was a source of aggravation to local officials. While a student in the history department of Moscow University he wrote an essay entitled "The Normans and the Kiev Principality," suggesting, according to a personal friend, "that an early Russian state centered in Kiev in the ninth century owed much of its civilization to the Normans."⁽³⁾ While this view was shared by many eminent pre-revolutionary historians the official view promoted by the Communist Party dictated that the proper conclusion should stress the Slavs as the true founders of the first Russian State. The issue was resolved in a manner characteristic of Anaisrik. "Andreï's professor, impressed by his research, suggested that he submit merely the dry facts and omit his 'controversial' conclusions. Andreï refused. The professor declined to approve the dissertation. Andreï protested -- and was expelled from the university."⁽⁴⁾

(1) Survey, No. 74/75, Winter-Spring, 1979, p. 98.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Henry Kiss, author of the preface to an edition of Anaisrik's essay, Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1992?, New York, 1970, p. viii. Hereafter cited as 1994.

(4) Anatole Shub, (a personal friend of Anaisrik), The New Russian Tragedy, New York, 1967, p. 73.

Apparently seeking a more objective appraisal of his work, he had earlier tried to send it to the well-known Danish scholar of Slavistics, Professor Steender Petersen. Suspecting that the Soviet postal authorities would not forward the manuscript, he attempted to use the channels of the Danish Embassy in Moscow -- and was promptly arrested, although released after the authorities could do nothing specifically "anti-Soviet" in the contents of "an essay." (4)

While none of the aforementioned activities in which Amalrik engaged were in fact illegal, they did comprise what he himself has termed "a broad 'gray belt' -- activities that the law does not formally forbid but which are, in fact, forbidden in practice." (7) In the aftermath of the relatively liberal rule of Khrushchov, a more conservative attitude was adopted by the new regime whereby the "gray belt" once again fell into the category of "anti-Soviet" activity with a corresponding straitening of official tolerance.

As one of the first victims of the new stringency, Amalrik was arrested in May, 1955 and at first charged with the production, harboring and dissemination of pornographic works. (8) The evidence was based on several plays he had written but had never had published or staged. (9) Despite the insistence of legal officials that the plays were pornographic and, in their opinion, anti-Soviet, Amalrik denied the accusations and told the judge that "they were Soviet in the sense that they were written by a Soviet citizen and hence, for better or for worse, were part of Soviet literature, not political tracts for or against the existing order in our country." (10) For lack of evidence with which to continue a case that would hold up even in a Soviet court, the charge was dropped and a new one leveled. The defendant was charged with "avoiding socially useful work" and leading "an antisocial, parasitical way of life," despite the fact that he held various part-time employment and spent the rest of his time caring for two dependents -- his father, an invalid as a result of an injury suffered during the war, and an invalid aunt. (11)

(4) Andrei Amalrik, Revolutionary Journey to Siberia, New York, 1970, pp. 48-50.

(7) Ibid., p. 25.

(8) Amalrik, Revolutionary Journey, p. 77.

(9) Six of Amalrik's plays were supposed to have been published last month in Holland, although a copy has not yet been received in Munich. According to the Chronicle, three of the plays which were considered "pornographic" are entitled "East-West" (dealing with Sino-Soviet relations), "Is Uncle Jack a Conformist?" and "My Aunt Lives in Volokolzinsk." (The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 19, 30 June 1970).

(10) Amalrik, Revolutionary Journey, p. 100.

(11) Ibid., pp. 89, 100-100.

The one-day trial was an absolute sham and more an act of vengeance than the process of law. It was offensive even to a local police superintendent who was present in the court and who told Amalrik, "It was all a farce, since the verdict had been decided beforehand." (12) The sentence, not subject to appeal, stipulated exile in Siberia for 3-1/2 years with obligatory physical labor. (13)

It only confirmed the fact that the trial was an act of official reprisal. A medical examination prior to the trial revealed that Amalrik's heart was extremely defective. Having received the results of a cardiogram test, a local official told him: "Your heart is no good at all, Siberia is quite out of the question," that he was only capable of a "limited capacity for work, no lifting of heavy objects," (14) and by the local interrogator that he might even be registered as an invalid. (15) Despite his infirmity, he was sent to the Tomsk region in Siberia and forced to work on a kolhoz, although, magnanimously, he was released after having served half the sentence and returned to Moscow.

In addition to compiling a samizdat account of the events concerning his exile which has now been published in the West, (16) he also engaged in writing an analytical essay entitled "Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1990?" concerned with aspects of the domestic and foreign affairs of his country. At first this essay was also circulated in samizdat form but last year it was published in the West, (17) where it has been the subject of heated controversy both there and in the Soviet Union and has led to accusations that he was a Kussophobe, an agent in the service of the KGB, and that his work has damaged the democratic opposition in the Soviet Union.

In keeping with its general policy of an impartial presentation of literature circulating in samizdat, the Excerpta carried an accurate and fair synopsis of this controversial work:

The author considers the liberalization of the post-Stalin period to be a sign of the decay of the regime, and sees no forces in our society which are even potentially capable of bringing about a renewal, a democratization of the country. The

(12) Ibid., p. 118.
(13) Ibid., p. 112.
(14) TESS, pp. 36-37.
(15) Ibid., p. 39.
(16) Andrei Amalrik, Involuntary Journey to Siberia, N.Y., 1970.
(17) Andrei Amalrik, "Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1990?" Survey, No. 78 (Autumn 1980) pp. 47-78.

author predicts disintegration for the state in view of inner contradictions, which in his opinion are growing even greater. The author suggests that the basic cause of the coming crash are the following: contradiction between the demands of economic development and the ossification of the economic system; the conservation of the bureaucratic elite, which is increasingly declining in quality, the passing and venality of the "middle class," i.e., the "specialist class" [which Amalrik considers to be the basic component of support for the emerging democratic movement]; the absence of positive goals in the lower strata; the striving toward separateness of the non-Russian nations.

In the second part of the pamphlet the causes and nature of the possible war with China are discussed, together with what the author considers to be the most likely attitude of the West to such a war. (18)

As an indication of some of the internal reaction to this essay, the same issue of the Chronicle cited two open letters circulating in samizdat form which rejected his conclusions. One, written anonymously, was particularly indignant, considering Amalrik's analysis "irrational, mystical and false" and was allocated by "Amalrik's attitude to Russia -- scorn for her people, history and culture." (19)

For some, particularly outside the Soviet Union, suspicion of Amalrik was also fostered by a letter he wrote last autumn to the Russian writer Anatoly Kuznetsov who had recently defected to the West, in which he criticized the writer for choosing to compromise his conscience by allowing the censor to alter his works in order to be able to publish them officially and for deciding to collaborate with the secret

(18) The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 11, 28 February 1974.

(19) Ibid.

police in order to gain permission to travel abroad.
In Amirk's opinion:

In general it is better to keep silent than to tell lies, better to refuse to have one of your own books published than to let it appear saying the opposite of what you originally wrote, better to refuse trips abroad than to turn informers for the sake of going on them or to 'report' in the form of a facetious poem, better to refuse to attend a press conference than to state publicly that creative freedom exists in our country. (20)

In response to criticism, Amirk issued a statement in which he clarified and defended his position. (21) With regard to doubts of his patriotism he replied:

... without distortion it is possible to find in my book harsh judgments about my country and about my people. It may be that the ordinary Russian, if he were given the opportunity to read or hear my book...would find some passages in my book unpatriotic. But I consider that the best patriot is not the man who papers over his country's failings but the man who exposes the wounds so that they can be cured. It may be that it is unpatriotic to criticize one's country and to warn it of threatening danger by publishing a book abroad for this purpose. But I have no other possibility. And besides, I consider that it is time for my country to overcome its national and social inferiority complex which leads to every citizen from within or from without being considered as something terrible.

I love my country, in which I was born and grew up, and I cannot think without tears of its extraordinary fate. To be separated from it would cause me great grief, but with bitterness I confess that I am not unattached to my country. If I had been able to make a choice before my birth I should have preferred to be born in a small country fighting for its freedom with weapons in its hands, like Biafra or Israel.

And, clarifying his stand on the creative intelligentsia, in particular Kusnetsov, he said:

I criticize Kusnetsov for the fact that having got abroad he tries to fully justify his activity as an

(20) For a synopsis of this letter see The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 11, 31 December 1969 and for the full text in English, see Survey, No. 74 (1970), pp. 95-102.

(21) Entitled "I Want to Be Understood Correctly," it was probably written in Moscow some time between 27 November 1969 and 22 February 1970. For the English text see Survey, No. 74/75, Winter-Spring 1970, pp. 102-110.

informer and his conformism in the USSR, attributing everything to the cruelty of the regime and thus justifies the cowardly and passive behavior of the majority of the Soviet intelligentsia which wants to be "pitied" because it is not free but is not willing to make the slightest effort to seek that freedom. Thus I wrote that if we want to change the regime in our country, we must all take a share of personal responsibility for this.

Despite the controversial nature of his views (22) the reaction of the central intelligentsia in the Soviet Union to his statements has by no means been entirely negative. This spring, an open letter circulating in amman, entitled "Andrei Amalrik as a Publicist" and not yet published in the West, praises Amalrik. The author, Ia. Lazovyy, feels that:

In the publicistic works of Andrei Amalrik, one can see the level of moral purity attained by the independent word in Russia....In the small amount of work that he has had time to write, Andrei Amalrik serves as an example of the action of a free literateur and of a person in a situation of blackmail, illegal arrests and de facto secret trials. The question of the manner in which a literateur is called upon to behave under the conditions of opposing Soviet totalitarianism is not only forthrightly dissected in the "Open Letter to Anatoly Kunznetsov," and in the article "Foreign Correspondents in Moscow,"⁽²³⁾ but, as it were, is illustrated by everything that has been published by Andrei Amalrik....It is possible that some of Amalrik's assertions concerning Russia's future, as well as its past, may appear to certain categories of readers to be unpatriotic. I will not judge the essence of these assertions here. But can it be that a writer is obliged to prepare his experimental theses to please some kind of sentiment, even one that is extremely noble?

- (22) It should be noted that Amalrik was fully aware of this and wrote in the preface to the essay: "Since I regard the conclusions reached here as in many respects debatable, I shall be grateful for constructive criticism."
- (23) The 18th issue of the Chronicle carries a synopsis which indicates that the author criticizes the choice of a majority of foreign correspondents in Moscow to adapt to existing conditions in the country rather than to demand their professional rights. Amalrik feels that this majority is thereby isolated from the life of Soviet society and, inevitably, presents a distorted picture in their dispatches.

In March, Pyotr Yakir, the non-titular head of the "democratic movement" also addressed Amalrik. Although he takes exception to some of his views as stated in the 1984 essay, in particular what Yakir considers to be his overestimation of the strength of the democratic movement and his "too one-sided description of the Russian character," he welcomes "the precision, honesty and detached nature" of his position, the "boldness" of his act, and considers that he has "successfully" analyzed "the psychology and ideology of our society." (24)

While appraisal of Amalrik's views have had a mixed reception by the critical intelligentsia, the official view is that they comprise "anti-Soviet slander" for which he is to stand trial today. Although the trial has hardly begun, there are signs that the verdict has already been decided as was the case with his first trial five years ago. Last summer, the Soviet press commented that both Amalrik and his wife, Gynzel, were persons "whose activities have interested our investigational and judicial agencies" (25) and that the former "judging by his articles, is a passionate worshipper of 'the Western way of life,' and a collaborator in the dark deeds of the Shub family." (26)

More recently, a Novosti article is reported to have condemned Amalrik in a pre-trial judgment. Although the defendant was under arrest and awaiting trial, the Soviet Novosti agency issued an article signed by Viktor Kurolyov, accusing Amalrik of being a "complete impostor and liar," and, referring to the forthcoming trial, wrote:

It is still too early to judge what the results of this enquiry will bring, but even a cursory examination of his work ['The Year 1984'] permits a conjecture -- when we read his fragments of imagination, his knowingly mendacious allegations, his outright slander and his gross calumnies: these can be considered as sufficient for a conviction. (27) (emphasis added)

(24) For the text of this letter see The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 19, 28 April 1979.

(25) Inverzia, 13 June 1989, p. 4.

(26) Literaturnais Segoda, 20 August 1989, p. 15. Anatole Shub was Moscow correspondent for the Washington Post but was expelled in the summer of 1989 for his contacts with and reports of Soviet dissidents.

(27) The Novosti dispatch is reported to have been published in the Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf, 18 August 1979. For extensive quotes, see RFI Special/Russeny, 18 August 1979.

Although the selection of Sverdlovsk as the place for the trial can be seen as an attempt by the Soviet authorities to prevent foreign correspondents from reporting the trial (Sverdlovsk is one of the thousands of towns in the Soviet Union closed to foreigners) and to hamper attempts by Amalrik's friends to attend the trial, hence an attempt to prevent any "unofficial" reports concerning possible violations of the law by the legal authorities, Amalrik is not entirely in an isolated position. Four Western news agencies have already issued reports on the forthcoming trial. According to one report, Amalrik's wife Gyssel, has left Moscow for Sverdlovsk on the hope of gaining entry to the courtroom. (28) This summer she wrote two statements to the legal authorities specifying the illegal aspects of the investigation. (29) The day after his arrest on 21 May seven prominent Soviet dissidents, including Pyotr Yakir, sent an appeal both to the Soviet government and the United Nations calling for his release. Indignant at his arrest, they are reported to have compared him to some of the most celebrated defendants in recent civil rights cases -- Andrei Shnyrevsky, Yuli Daniel, Alexander Ginzburg and Yuri Galanskov. (30) In this letter, they imply that this is another violation of the Constitutional right of freedom of speech.

It is impossible to imagine, that it [Amalrik's arrest] is due to any other reason than his composition of the brochure 'Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?' and assert that 'on the basis of a just and careful examination of the case, Amalrik must be exonerated by any court. (31)

It is also possible that he has the support of more influential members of Soviet society. There are signs that the Soviet scientific community's concern for civil rights cases is extending its scope. Whereas usually scientists such as A. Sakharov, I. Tamm, and others have intervened on behalf of their arrested colleagues,

(28) NFI, 11 November 1979.

(29) The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 14, 30 June 1979.

(30) International Herald Tribune, 30 May 1979. The full text of the letter is not yet available.

(31) These extracts are quoted in The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 14, 30 June 1979.

for example the recent cases of Ekaterina Medvedeva and E. Pimenov, two cases have already been reported of their support for persons outside the scope of the prominent intelligentsia. A Western correspondent has recently described a petition signed by four persons, including Academician Sakharov, calling for the release of students Olga Ioffe and Valeria Novodvorskaya, both of whom are presently in special psychiatric hospitals as punishment for their civil rights activities. (12) Furthermore, the last issue of the Chronicle reported that the physicist V. Chalidze was the only one of several friends and acquaintances who was successful in attending the trial of young Natalia Gorbanevskaya. (13) It should also be noted that such prominent scientists as A. Sakharov, I. Tamm and N. Leontovich signed a protest against the introduction of Article 191-1 into the USSR Criminal Code -- the precise article under which Amalrik is reportedly to be tried. (14) It is also possible that Amalrik's family background may play a role in their possible decision to extend support. Amalrik's deceased father, Aleksei Sergeyevich Amalrik, was, according to the Chronicle, "a well-known historian and archeologist." (15) In 1967, his USSR was of such a caliber that one of the two books he co-authored was published by the USSR Academy of Sciences. (16)

Another factor that might lead to the involvement of the professional intelligentsia in the case is Amalrik's co-defendant at the trial - Lev Grigor'evich Ubozhko. A physician by profession and a recent graduate of the department of law at Sverdlovsk University, Ubozhko, though not acquainted with Amalrik personally, was arrested last January. (17) Among the pamphlet material confiscated from his apartment was a copy of Amalrik's "Open Letter to Anatoly Kuznetsov." (18)

(12) Dean Mills in the Baltimore Sun, 3 October 1970.

(13) The Chronicle of Current Events, No. 13, 31 August 1970.

(14) Pavel Litvinov, The Demonstration in Pushkin Square, Boston, 1969, pp. 24-25.

(15) The Chronicle, ibid.

(16) See Bibliografiya Indanii Akademii Nauk SSSR, Moscow-Leningrad, 1961, Vol. IV, p. 16.

(17) The Chronicle, No. 11, 24 April 1970.

(18) The Chronicle, No. 13, 31 August 1970.

Should Amalrik be found guilty on the basis of Article 199-1 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, he faces a sentence of three years detention, or one year corrective labor, or, the most lenient punishment, a fine of up to one hundred rubles. Considering past trials of Soviet dissidents charged with this article, it is also possible that he will be sentenced to exile. Levian Rogozov-Gandel, Pavel Litvinov, and Konstantin Sabitov, and more recently the scientist B. Pimenov, were all charged with Article 199-1, but all four were sentenced to exile in Siberia.

Whatever the outcome of the trial, it is highly unlikely that Amalrik will compromise his stand in court. As he recently stated in an interview with a foreign correspondent in Moscow: "I consider that no system of rule by force can exist without people who are ready to submit to that rule. And if we don't want the rule of force to prevail, we must all fight against it." (19)

G.V.D.

(19) Quoted from an interview with CBS News correspondent William Cole, telecast in the United States on 28 July 1978.