

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Better read than red

by [David Pryce-Jones](#)

In 1943 Philip Grierson of Cambridge University published a bibliography with the title *Books on Soviet Russia 1917–42*: at a rough estimate, it counted between two and three thousand such books in the English language alone. This seminal work lists a comparable bibliography published in 1937 by Klaus Mehnert—originally from the Volga region and in his day a prominent specialist—with 1,900 titles in German. The scale of this output testifies to the fascination exerted by the Soviet Union in its heyday. Grierson allowed himself to guide his readers with short comments such as “Violently anti-Bolshevik” on books he disapproved of, or at best “very hostile but gives a valuable picture of the appalling conditions caused by the Civil War.” One early visitor eager to judge Communism for himself was Bertrand Russell, who records that his blood ran cold when he met Lenin. “A friendly but sceptical account of Bolshevism” is Grierson’s summary of Russell’s 1920 book, “with a sketch of Bolshevik theory which a Marxist would repudiate.” Such a tone of sober apologetics was commonplace, even for a scholar like Grierson.

Most of these books presented the Soviet Union as a society embarking on a new and hopeful start, nothing less than a model for mankind, and they shaped public opinion accordingly. Ongoing violence and terror was treated as circumstantial, quite comprehensible, and excusable, or as Walter Duranty of *The New York Times* put it with a cynicism that does not fade, “You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs.” (Incidentally, his carefully mendacious dispatches were, in Grierson’s opinion, “Contemporary history as seen by a friendly and well-informed observer.”)

So it came about that famous intellectuals, churchmen, aristocrats, ambassadors, scientists, the educated, and the uneducated, all on the same footing in their gullibility, looked to Lenin and Stalin with veneration; believed that the Soviet show trials had a basis in fact and that the Gulag either did not exist or was only for the rehabilitation of criminals; wrote or read pamphlets with some title of fantasy such as *Spies, Wreckers and Grafters*; and spouted about class war and dialectical materialism as though such figments were real. Since the French Revolution there had been no comparable outbreak of collective irrationality, and the history of the twentieth century will always be marked by it.

White Russians were easily dismissed by a general public eager to be deceived as embittered losers and exiles, furthermore hirelings of Fascism or Imperialism. Better placed to describe the Soviet Union from the inside were former Communists who had become disillusioned: for instance, Boris Bazhanov, the secretary of Stalin and the Politburo before he defected at the end of the 1920s; Victor Serge; Franz Borkenau, a one-time stalwart of the Comintern; the Yugoslav Anton Ciliga who, based on years of grim personal experience, could write in a book in 1938 that “the myth of Soviet Russia is one of the most tragic misunderstandings of our time”; the Swiss Elinor Lipper, one of the earliest

to emerge alive from the Gulag and write about it; and not forgetting Leon Trotsky, the former Kremlin arch-insider. The number of such people was always rising as more and more were able, one way or another, to free themselves; their testimony was potentially dangerous, and it became one of the Communist Party's primary tasks to portray every defector and dissident as a worthless and malicious liar. Time and again in Stalin's heyday, as each of these disillusioned Communists broke cover and went public, what came into question was the very nature of Soviet reality.

*The Anti-Communist Manifestos* is not the general account of the process of illuminating reality that its title seems to suggest, but rather a selective study of four books, unrelated except that their authors—Arthur Koestler, Jon Valtin, Victor Kravchenko, and Whittaker Chambers—were one-time Communists whose testimony blew up into a cause célèbre, each of them doing his bit to expose what he had experienced through the Soviet Union and its agents. The fundamental subject here is less anti-Communism than the random manner in which public opinion shifts to and fro in a daily battleground at the mercy of all manner of unquantifiable influences, above all the sheer hazard of personalities and events.

Koestler left the Communist Party in 1938. The contemporary Moscow trials had evidently been a sinister charade, and his novel *Darkness at Noon* attempted to explain the central mystery posed by the confession of those accused of crimes they could not conceivably have committed. Physical and psychological torture broke these men, but Koestler came up with the theory that they had been persuaded to confess, and therefore consent to be killed, because the Party demanded this final duty of them. Here was an imaginative rendering of the cruel and fateful hold that Party ideology could exercise. Published in 1940, the first edition of *Darkness at Noon* was almost entirely destroyed in one of London's severest air-raids, and only made its mark when translated into French after the war and acclaimed in a review by François Mauriac.

John Fleming comes straight out with the compliment that Koestler is a modern genius, and he is an emeritus professor of literature who applies high standards, with references ranging from Ovid and Dante to Pope, Dr. Johnson, and Woody Allen, all amid graceful and sometimes witty prose. Koestler would surely have found his audience without benefit of his French friends, especially Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty with whom he soon broke anyhow. The Communist media quickly began to link Koestler and Orwell as their main ideological enemies, and to call for their murder. For some reason, Fleming leaves Orwell altogether out of this inquiry into anti-Communist manifestos, which is a bit like Hamlet without the Prince.

Jon Valtin was the pseudonym of Richard Krebs, a German laborer who got caught up between the Communists and the Nazis before escaping to the United States. No genius, he was a jailbird and something of a fantasist. His autobiography, *Out of the Night*, has long since disappeared from sight though it was a tremendous bestseller on publication in 1941. The timing was unlucky, however. After Hitler's onslaught that June, the Soviet Union evolved into an ally and Valtin's anti-Communism became politically unwelcome. Still, Fleming finds the book "among the more compelling and exciting adventure stories [encountered] in a lifetime's reading," with "battles, street brawls, deceptions, betrayals, and narrow escapes galore." Valtin seems to have been among the first to say that there was nothing much to choose between the regimes of Hitler and Stalin.

Among the few in the literary world who made a profession of anti-Communism at the time were Max Eastman, Eugene Lyons, and Isaac Don Levine. They or some others of like mind were responsible for Valtin's manuscript and subsequent success. How much did their opinions influence and even sensationalize his writing, to the point perhaps of invalidating it? Evidently, he stuck to the literal truth of autobiography while also resorting for effect to fiction, and the balance between the two approaches is not clear. Fiction, however, may reveal a higher truth, much as Koestler did with *Darkness at Noon*. Intrigued as a scholar of literature by this line of thought, Fleming concludes that having the heart in the right place is all that really matters.

A metallurgist by training, Victor Kravchenko had been on a mission in the United States obtaining war materials for the Soviet Union. Sickened by Stalin's purges, he defected in 1944. The same professional anti-Communists were quick to take him up, and they had a large input into his polemic *I Chose Freedom*, whose impact was far greater and more international than any book previously published by a Soviet citizen. But Kravchenko was no writer, and not yet fluent in English. Once again, authenticity was well founded but the literal truth might be suspect, or at least undermined. *Les Lettres Françaises*, the Party's highbrow journal in Paris, claimed that Kravchenko was a liar who had made everything up.

Here was a tipping point in the Cold War: the public had to choose between incompatible versions of reality. In a carefully masterminded scandal, Kravchenko sued, and won, though the damages awarded were just one franc. A second case followed. David Rousset, a Nazi concentration camp survivor and author of *L'univers concentrationnaire* (still a valuable book), raised the subject of the Gulag. The Party journal claimed that no such system of forced labor camps existed. Gulag survivors, each more tellingly dramatic than the other, were brought to testify in court, and Rousset was awarded damages of 100,000 francs. In addition to irrationality, the Communists' lawyers and witnesses brought extraordinary bad faith for which they were to eat humble pie many years later.

The appearance of Whittaker Chambers in front of the grand jury and the trials of Alger Hiss that followed were quite as sensational and opinion-forming as these French court cases. At this point, the Cold War was truly under way, and anti-Communism ceased to be the private hunting ground of men like Lyons and Levine. Chambers was admittedly unattractive, difficult, and contrary, but a man after Fleming's heart in that he was thoroughly literary and versed in the classics, as was evident in his autobiography *Witness*, which Fleming qualifies as a masterpiece. The story of the secretive, even conspiratorial Chambers is familiar, but it is still instructive to rehearse the details of his break with Communism, and how he informed on Hiss. Patriotism and penitence were his motives, and they were obvious enough to the public to overcome the man's deficiencies and establish the authenticity of his worldview.

The compare-and-contrast pattern of these four case-studies is left to speak for itself. Fleming admires his chosen authors though he floats the notion that they were oddities, damaged, and even disturbed in one way or another—Koestler and Kravchenko committed suicide (though the former was terminally ill, and many think the latter may have been murdered).

As the Cold War unfolded, fellow travelers continued to visit Russia and praise whatever they chose—or were allowed—to see. An up-to-date bibliographer would have been in a position to amass many more thousands of titles than were available to Philip Grierson back in 1943. But apologists were increasingly unable to whitewash Soviet policies and practices with any conviction, and they ceased wholly to be credible once Russians of the stamp of Solzhenitsyn, Varlam Shalamov, Natalia Ginzburg, Vladimir Bukovsky, and many others began speaking and acting in ways that unmistakably enforced the day-to-day reality of their own experiences within the Soviet Union. In the end, an international propaganda outfit, with a huge secret police apparatus in support, proved unable to suppress individuals courageous enough to stand up to it. This book has several encouraging features, and one of them is that an emeritus professor adds the weight of his learning to the tried and tested moral that great is the truth and it will prevail.

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