

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Bitter disillusionment

by [Paul Hollander](#)

On *The Kravchenko Case: One Man's War on Stalin*, by Gary Kern.

*Gary Kern*

The Kravchenko Case: One Man's War on Stalin.  
Enigma Books, 750 pages, \$28

Even among well-read and educated Americans there are few who know who Victor Kravchenko was. His life illuminates the trajectory of fervent support followed by bitter disillusionment with what was, arguably, the most potent secular religion of our times. This new—and only—biography should go a long way to remedy this situation, and there is every reason to consider it definitive. Mr. Kern (both the author of a study of Walter Krivitsky, another high-level Soviet defector, and the translator of the memoirs of Bukharin's widow) left no stone unturned in his pursuit of information about the life and impact of Kravchenko. Not only did he track down every bit of archival and other written information in several countries, both published and unpublished, he also interviewed everybody alive and accessible who had anything to do with Kravchenko: relatives, friends, officials, journalists, lawyers, translators, publishers, scholars. He also helps the reader to assess Kravchenko's impact by examining a large sampling of the reviews of Kravchenko's famous *I Chose Freedom* (1946).

Victor Kravchenko has several claims to fame. He was an authentic product and beneficiary of the Soviet system: of working-class background, he became a university-trained engineer, a party activist, and a highly placed industrial manager/administrator. His loyalty to the system allowed him to be selected to work in the United States for the Soviet state agency handling Lend-Lease shipments during World War II. He was a man of unusual moral character and sensibility whose privileges did not prevent him from recognizing the evils of the system. Given the wartime alliance and the prevailing romanticized portraits of the Soviet Union disseminated by Hollywood, the government, and the many fellow travelers, at the time of Kravchenko's defection in 1944 American public opinion was unprepared for and initially unreceptive to revelations about the depravities of the Soviet system.

Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* became an international bestseller and the target of an especially vicious and highly organized campaign launched against him by the Soviet authorities and their Western supporters. It culminated in a lawsuit Kravchenko brought against a French Communist literary weekly that claimed not only that his revelations about the Soviet Union were malicious fabrications, but also that he did not even write them, being concoctions of the U.S. intelligence services. The raucous 1949 trial in Paris lasted for almost two months. It attracted enormous publicity and was attended by major public and intellectual figures of the period (e.g., Camus,

Koestler, Sartre, de Beauvoir, etc.). The witnesses included former Gulag inmates (displaced persons, refugees in Europe) on his side, and a large contingent of his adversaries, among them Soviet officials and Hewlett Johnson, the Dean of Canterbury.

The latter group testified to the wonders of the Soviet system and the baseness of Kravchenko's character. He won a symbolic victory, nominal fines were imposed on the journal and its editors, and the slanderous nature of their allegations was confirmed by the court. His second book (*I Chose Justice*, 1950) dealt with the trial but got far less attention.

Throughout his life Kravchenko sought to influence and enlighten American policy makers and public opinion about the Soviet system although he became less critical after Stalin's death. In 1966, he was found dead of a gunshot wound in his head in his New York apartment; it was the consensus of the U.S. authorities, his friends, and his son Andrew that it was suicide, not assassination, although the latter could not be ruled out.

It is hard to decide what was more important about the Kravchenko case: the information he provided about Soviet society (including eyewitness accounts of the collectivization of agriculture, forced labor, the purges, the privileges of the Party elite, etc.) or the responses to the first book and especially those of the Soviet authorities and their Western supporters. The information he provided, needless to say, was amply confirmed by other defectors and exiles, the revelations of Khrushchev, Soviet archives, and a wide range of post-Communist Russian sources.

The campaign against him organized by the Soviet authorities and eagerly supported by Western Communist parties and sympathizers points to the centrality of mendaciousness in the structure of Communist systems and in the mentality of their leaders and supporters. Such mendacity was quite exceptional by any standards and by no means an attribute of every repressive system. The blatant, determined, and matter-of-fact lying Communist systems and movements institutionalized probably had something to do with their unrealized original aspirations and ideals: the creation of historically unprecedented levels of social justice, solidarity, and abundance; the reduction and eventual elimination of the conflict between private and public interest (or between the personal and the political), and the creation of a new, superior human being. The failure to attain these objectives led to the compulsion to deny this failure and stimulated the pervasive and fraudulent propaganda these systems and movements developed. The Leninist belief that "ideas are weapons" added to this pattern. Defectors personified, and were reminders of, the multiple moral, economic, and political failures of the Soviet system; hence they provoked an especially venomous hatred in the officials and ideologues.

This thoughtful and meticulously researched book is far more than a biography. It is also a wide-ranging study of Soviet-American relations, World War II, the Cold War, Western fellow-traveling, and the Western reception of defectors.

Kern embeds Kravchenko's life in a thoroughly explored political and historical context. Occasionally, his narrative goes off at various tangents; much of the book is about Kravchenko's times rather than about Kravchenko. But this is a minor shortcoming in a study that captures the major political and ideological conflicts of the twentieth century and acquaints the reader with some of their most important protagonists.

**Paul Hollander's** most recent book is *The End of Commitment* (Ivan R.

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