

# Settling Old Accounts

By **Dmitri N. Shalin**

**S**OVIET readers have a great appetite for historical narrative these days. That's understandable in a nation that long suppressed the truth about its past. Yet this passion for history has its darker side.

The explosiveness of history is seen in a furor raised by a release of minutes from a 1958 writers' meeting condemning Boris Pasternak for publishing "Doctor Zhivago" overseas. Many were shocked to find admired names among the condemners.

Vladimir Soloukhin, a popular poet and writer, had the misfortune to speak at that fateful gathering.

He has tried to lay the issue to rest in an article, "Time to Settle Accounts," but succeeded only in touching off a bitter dispute that has been raging for months, and still goes on.

Soloukhin's position can be summed up thus:

Everybody acted under duress at the time. Of the 500 writers present, none had the courage to defend Pasternak. It is the times that should be placed on trial, not individual participants forced to act unjustly. If we are to repent, then repent collectively.

Younger liberal writers felt the most incensed by Soloukhin's argument. They found it insensitive and self-serving and called on all those with a hand in the Pasternak affair and subsequent campaigns against dissidents to resign their offices in the Writers Union.

But the old guard refused to budge. "Who are you to teach us morality?" retorted Felix Kuznetsov, long-time head of the Moscow Writers' organization. "Why hadn't you spoken out then? He who kept silence before *perestroika*, has no right to be sanc-

tionious today."

Emboldened by the argument, conservatives counterattacked:

They reminded Bitalii Korotich, editor of the daring weekly "Ogonek," about a glowing review he wrote of Brezhnev's memoirs. Korotich defended himself, pointing out it was doctored by his superiors. But the fact he waited until it was safe to say so did not escape notice.

Evgenii Averin, another reformist author, was accused of being a onetime aide to Grishin, a despised Moscow party organization boss who made life miserable for Moscow intellectuals.

Tatiana Zaslavskaja, a sociologist and a force behind Gorbachev's campaign against bureaucracy, was taken to task for earlier writings which appear to have laid the rationale for a cruel campaign to transfer people from so-called "non-viable villages" to bigger agricultural centers.

The names of Evtushenko, Voznesenski, Burlatski, and other liberals have been mentioned among those whose conduct in the past did not always square with the standards espoused by the Russian *intelligentsia*.

Wading through the litany of charges and counter-charges, I remembered what my old teacher said in the '70s, before I left my native Russia: "By today's standards, you are a decent man if you feel disgusted with oneself every time you do something indecent."

The sad truth is that rulers with unlimited power make us tacit accomplices in their crimes, with shame often the last thing left to shield one's moral core. Does this mean that attempts to weigh personal responsibility are somehow superfluous? I don't think so.

Not everyone summoned to the Pasternak trial showed up. Veniamin Kaverin called in sick and stayed home despite stern warnings from a party secretary —

a courageous act at the time.

Nor did everyone take the podium. Of those who did, some stuck to low-key rhetoric and avoided calls for Pasternak's expulsion. Boris Slutski was one.

Scores of those who took part in this ignominious affair deeply regretted it later and said so publicly. Soloukhin never did.

Nor can we forget that in the worst times, some had courage to fight the system: Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Voinovitch. Without them, the moral revival now under way wouldn't be possible.

Figuring out who said or did what — and when and how — is the brutal task facing Soviet intellectuals. It could be a healing process, provided one doesn't look for ways to pass blame around. Benedict Sarnov, a literary critic, put it well when he said nobody has a moral right to shame others until one has felt ashamed of oneself — not even if you were too young.

The question Soviet intellectuals ponder today is akin to the *Schuldfrage* that Germans grappled with after Hitler. The key issue in both cases is how much responsibility a person bears for the historical ruptures that transcend personal lives. It is telling that in both cases the discussion has led to Judeo-Christian ethics.

Words like "sin," "guilt" and "shame" now crop up frequently in Soviet discourse. The movie that has captured the nation's spirit is called "Repentance." It is significant that Gorbachev conceded the primacy of universal human values over class morality when meeting with the Pope.

Ethics cannot solve the major problems confronting Soviet society today, but settling moral accounts and rebuilding one's moral universe is a right step.

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