

poem seems to me the most quintessentially Eliotic of all the poet's performances, at once excessive and curtailed, irresistibly charismatic yet forever elusive, its power immediately apparent yet very difficult to describe. It is the achievement toward which all the letters in Volume 2 point, and yet the poem is scarcely mentioned: careening between turpitude and revelation, the letters lay out the tensions and obsessions of the poem in broader brush strokes, not so much elucidating as embodying its energies.

Future volumes of the letters will perform the same service for *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets*, and, perhaps even more crucially, so will the long-awaited edition of Eliot's complete prose. "A Sceptical Patrician" and "Eeldrop and Appleplex" are only two of the hundreds of fascinating prose pieces that remain uncollected in any form, and another is Eliot's introduction to a long historical poem called *Savonarola*, published around the same time as *The Hollow Men*. Eliot offers here his most incisive remarks about the relativity of historical

interpretation, reaching back to the work he'd abandoned in the Harvard philosophy department; but he nowhere acknowledges that the author of *Savonarola* is his mother, Charlotte Eliot, who at 83 was publishing her first book of poems:

The role played by interpretation has often been neglected in the theory of knowledge. Even Kant, devoting a lifetime to the pursuit of categories, fixed only those which he believed, rightly or wrongly, to be permanent.... Some years ago, in a paper on *The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual*, I made an humble attempt to show that in many cases *no* interpretation of a rite could explain its origin.

While seeming austere learned, these sentences constitute one of Eliot's most deeply felt exchanges with his mother. They are a gift to the woman who, when he threw over an academic career in favor of poetry, admitted that "I have absolute faith in his Philosophy but not in the *vers libres*." ■

ing a portion of the mass murder committed on orders signed by the dictator's own hand. Yet as Khrushchev privately confessed near the end of his life, he was himself "up to the elbows in blood" shed by the victims of communist purges and forced collectivization.

The Khrushchev era ended in 1964 (the year that would have marked Hitler's seventy-fifth birthday), and it was the first great attempt to stabilize the Soviet project and make it a going concern fully competitive with the capitalist West. For Vladislav Zubok, the author of *Zhivago's Children*, Khrushchev's "Thaw" inaugurated a period of tremendous optimism, a Soviet-style New Deal following the deep freeze of postwar Stalinism. Surveying a vast array of published and unpublished sources with an exquisite eye for telling detail, Zubok shows how the optimism of the era drew deeply on the classical inheritance of Marxism-Leninism. Contrary to assessments by foreign observers eager for signs of anticommunist ferment, the '60s intellectuals of the USSR were inspired by the dream of fulfilling, not transcending, the ideals of 1917.

As the title of her book suggests, Miriam Dobson keeps her distance from the thaw metaphor, and for good reason: optimism didn't brighten her protagonists' experience of the Khrushchev years. Unlike Zubok, who is primarily interested in the intelligentsia, Dobson has mined from Soviet archives the fragmented voices of a wide range of Soviet citizens, for many of whom Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin provoked feelings of profound uncertainty and anxiety. It was not just a matter of waking up to the news that the man previously heralded as "The Lenin of Today" and "Generalissimo" had defiled Lenin's sacred legacy and nearly botched the war against Hitler. Even more upsetting was the Soviet leadership's decision to reduce Stalin's Gulag population by roughly 80 percent, thereby releasing into Soviet society some 4 million concentration camp prisoners, including people who only yesterday had been branded "enemies of the people." That mass amnesties of Gulag inmates were followed by a dramatic spike in crime only served to stoke the fears of ordinary citizens: for them, what was melting under Khrushchev's Thaw was not only the received moral order of things, but public order itself.

How are we to make sense of these starkly opposed views of the post-Stalin era? Khrushchev was famous for his zigzagging domestic and foreign policies, but it would be a mistake to reduce the tensions of the Thaw to the temperament of one man, or even to the volatility of competing inter-

Uncertainty and Anxiety

by BENJAMIN NATHANS

In his bestselling novel *Fatherland*, published in 1992, the British writer Robert Harris imagined a postwar Europe in which a victorious Germany prepares to celebrate Hitler's seventy-fifth birthday. It's the early 1960s, and the Third Reich, having annexed vast territories from the defeated Soviet Union, is engaged in a protracted cold war with the United States, even as rock 'n' roll and other corrupting Western influences are seeping into German society and a younger generation of Germans are starting to question the brutal silence surrounding the darker aspects of the country's Nazi past. Harris's stunning counterfactual history asked its many readers to ponder what Europe might have become had the fortunes of war turned in another direction—as they very nearly did, especially on Germany's eastern front.

Fatherland could also serve as a mirror to a history that wasn't virtual: the post-Stalin era of the Soviet Union, the sole totalitarian

Khrushchev's Cold Summer

Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform After Stalin.

By Miriam Dobson.

Cornell. 264 pp. \$45.

Zhivago's Children

The Last Russian Intelligentsia.

By Vladislav Zubok.

Harvard. 453 pp. \$35.

power to emerge intact from World War II. As British historian Miriam Dobson writes of Stalin's successors in *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, "unlike many other countries embarking on the process of transitional justice theirs was not a new regime, but a continuation of the party-state system which had been responsible for the atrocities they now sought to rectify." Imagining a post-Hitler Germany run by Rudolf Hess or Albert Speer helps to cast in sharp relief the quandaries faced by Nikita Khrushchev and other Communist Party leaders as they confronted a lethal legacy of state-sponsored terror in which they too were deeply complicit. Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" at the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956 may have instigated Stalin's oedipal dethronement (in effect, his second death) by reveal-

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est groups within the closed world of the Communist Party leadership. Rather, the tensions are best understood as hints of something that was supposed to have long since vanished from the Soviet landscape: the hierarchy of class.

Just over half a century ago, on the eve of the Khrushchev era, a group of Harvard scholars undertook a large-scale study of Soviet society, which at the time was nearly as opaque to the outside world beyond its borders as North Korea is today, but of exponentially greater consequence. Based on hundreds of interviews with Soviet citizens who found themselves in the West after the war—former POWs, slave laborers from Nazi Germany, émigrés—the Harvard Refugee Interview Project marked the first social-scientific attempt to analyze public opinion and the structures of daily life inside the socialist superpower. A key item on the research agenda was to determine whether one of Moscow's proudest claims was true: had the abolition of private property succeeded in eliminating the division of society into antagonistic classes, as Marx had predicted? Was the USSR a fundamentally new kind of society, in which social origins no longer governed life chances, lifestyle and attitudes? Was the Soviet world truly “flat,” perhaps marking the end of social history?

The answer from Cambridge: not really. While it's true that conventional Western hierarchies of income and occupational status carried far less weight in the USSR, and that the dream of a propertyless egalitarianism still held sway over much of the population, differences in cultural capital, and specifically in levels of education, still acted as an enduring social classifier within the Soviet populace. Such differences helped preserve the intelligentsia not just as an “imagined community” but as an actual stratum of society, and they help explain why different segments of the Soviet population experienced Khrushchev's Thaw in radically contrasting ways.

Vladislav Zubok began his academic career in Moscow as a specialist in American political history, only to move to the United States in the mid-1980s, where he became an internationally renowned scholar of Soviet cold war foreign policy. With *Zhivago's Children* Zubok has reinvented himself yet again, this time as an accomplished cultural historian of his native land. His book is an elegiac account of the final chapter in the history of the Russian intelligentsia, a group that survived revolution, civil war, Nazi onslaught and Stalinist repression, only to succumb to the supreme solvent

of its life-ways: the free market. Driven by a vision of itself as “a civic community that could become a moral and cultural vanguard for society,” the post-Stalin intelligentsia combined a “profound hunger for personal freedom” with unquestioned faith in “the Holy Grail of collectivism.” There was good reason to believe in its collective strength: by the time the Sputnik satellite was thrust into orbit from a launching pad in the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan in October 1957, the USSR could boast over a million university graduates, marking a roughly tenfold increase during the preceding three decades. Having emerged from the Armageddon of the Great Fatherland War, the postwar generation was aglow with youthful revolutionary romanticism, and poised to play a key role in Khrushchev's plan to move the country from socialism into the bright future of communism—if not in his lifetime, then surely in theirs.

The alliance of optimists, however, never materialized. Conservatives in the party elite, Iagos eager to exploit the anxieties of their Othello, preyed on Khrushchev's inferiority complex about intellectuals, which because Khrushchev had never attended university was acute. In one memorable encounter in the fall of 1962, Khrushchev berated a group of abstract artists during a special tour of their paintings and sculptures, calling them “faggots” and their work “dog shit” and “ass-hole art.” A year later, at a gathering of the “creative intelligentsia” inside the Kremlin, Khrushchev denounced members of the audience: “They think that Stalin is dead and anything is allowed.” Barely hidden beneath such outbursts was the simmering resentment of what Zubok calls “simple, popular, working-class Russia” against the “young, cosmopolitan, elitist, and Westernized cultural vanguard.”

A series of sham trials against members of the vanguard in the mid-1960s carried out by Khrushchev's successors signaled the Thaw's approaching end. Lingering hopes for the flowering of a Moscow Spring were crushed when Soviet tanks rumbled into Prague in August 1968 and put a halt to a popular program of political liberalization. This was the moment that “set in motion the group defection of many intellectuals and cultural figures from the Soviet communist project,” writes Zubok. But the splintering of the intelligentsia was by no means the result of external pressures alone. Well before the end of the Thaw, Zubok argues, fault lines had begun to appear within the intelligentsia, particularly with regard to the “Jewish Question” and its pertinence to the identity of the intelligentsia itself. As a xenophobic Russian

nationalism percolated just below the surface of Soviet public discourse, the educated class increasingly split into a philo-Semitic “left” and an anti-Semitic “right” (insofar as traditional spatial metaphors of political contestation still made sense in the Soviet context). The resulting schism, according to Zubok, made it difficult for the intelligentsia to find “an acceptable ‘national’ form and acquire a mass following among Russian people.”

While it certainly is true that a remarkable proportion of the leading representatives of the intelligentsia were of Jewish origin, it is doubtful that antagonisms over the Jewish Question were primarily responsible for disagreements within their ranks. For one thing, disenchantment with revolutionary romanticism all but guaranteed the turn to a wide range of alternative worldviews. Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, iconic figures of the emerging “Westernizing” and “Slavophile” opposition (neither of whom was Jewish), did cross pens over the fate of Soviet Jewry, but they quarreled over many other issues too—from democracy and relations with the West to technology and the Russian Orthodox Church. None of this, incidentally, deterred the KGB from planting rumors that Sakharov's and Solzhenitsyn's real names were Tsukerman (a play on “sakhar,” Russian for “sugar”) and Solzhenitsker, or from issuing visas to Israel to non-Jewish dissidents who sought to leave the USSR.

Whatever the sources of the growing rifts among Soviet intellectuals, and despite his unmistakable admiration for their high ideals and civic engagement, Zubok finds their collective endeavor deficient, a conclusion that reflects his stark neoliberal skepticism. “The dream of socialism with a human face,” he writes, represented an attempt “to marry the Soviet project to freedom without a return to private property and capitalism,” and was therefore fatally marked by “political and moral sterility.” If measured by its unintended consequences, of course, that dream was anything but sterile: the belated attempt by Mikhail Gorbachev, Alexander Yakovlev and other perestroika-era reformers to bring it to fruition led the Soviet superpower to a miraculously peaceful demise.

The contrast between Zubok's warm (and repeated) evocation of the “intelligentsia ethos” and his chilly verdict on its utter lack of historical viability comes to a head in his discussion of the ethos's ultimate avatars: Soviet dissidents. They were “living the intelligentsia's ideals,” he tells us, but those same ideals, he argues,

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led them to cloak themselves in the mantle of civic virtue, forming an elitist milieu detached not only from the Soviet state but from Soviet society. Their vocal support for oppressed minorities (Crimean Tatars, Jews, Volga Germans, Western Ukrainians, Catholics and evangelical Christians), along with their reliance on Western media to spread their message (including shortwave radio stations like the Voice of America), certainly stoked suspicion among the majority Russian population. Zubok's claim, however, that by 1975 "the struggle for the right to emigrate

the hero of Boris Pasternak's novel, whose name stems from the Russian word for "living." It is an odd choice, given how frequently Zubok's own evidence points to the stark differences between Zhivago's pre-revolutionary sensibilities—"frozen music," as Pasternak put it—and those of the Thaw-era intelligentsia. Even figures like Andrei Siniavsky, a Pasternak scholar and a pallbearer at his funeral in 1960, drew a clear distinction between old-school "heretics" such as Pasternak (and Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam) and younger dissident writers such as himself, offspring of the

In *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, Miriam Dobson unearths the voices of hundreds of otherwise anonymous Soviet citizens, Zubok's "simple, popular, working-class Russia," and with them a very different sense of the dynamics of the Thaw. Drawing on multiple archival troves of letters to Soviet leaders, she reconstructs the ambivalence of the popular response to Khrushchev's Secret Speech, which hardly remained secret once its contents were transmitted to millions of party members. "What's to be done with portraits of Stalin?" asked one correspondent, sensitive to the sacral qualities of Soviet iconography. Other letter-writers, unable to shed the Manichaean instincts honed by Stalin's purges, were keen to learn whether their onetime Ozymandias should now be considered an "enemy of the people." Among the most poignant documents are petitions from Gulag inmates amnestied after Stalin's death. By 1960 the Gulag population had shrunk to a fifth of its former size, with millions of *zeks* (slang for *zakliuchennyye*, or prisoners) spilling back into Soviet society and facing enormous barriers to reintegration, not to mention former acquaintances whose (sometimes false) testimony had helped send them to the camps in the first place.

Many ex-*zeks* were determined to tell their story, not only to come to terms with the trauma they had experienced but also to assert their innocence and possibly improve their chances of rehabilitation. Dobson analyzes in fascinating detail the emergence of an officially privileged narrative of Gulag survival, in which loyal communists unjustly sent to the camps nonetheless keep faith with the party and, after years of suffering, are rewarded with reinstatement into the party's sacred mission. Some versions of this script were genuinely moving—the first volume of Eugenia Ginzburg's memoir *Journey Into the Whirlwind* offers unforgettable accounts of the intense relationships forged among the *zeks* as well as of belief systems sustained under extraordinary mental pressure.

But of the hundreds of Gulag memoirs written by survivors during the Thaw, when memories were still fresh, only a tiny fraction were approved for publication in the USSR. Ginzburg's, smuggled out of the country and published in English in the United States in 1967, was not among them. The rest languished in desk drawers, gathered dust in the file cabinets of journals like *Novyi mir* (New World) or accompanied petitions to party officials. As Dobson shows, those with a redemptive plotline played a significant role in the delicate balancing act undertaken by Khrushchev as he sought to expose selectively



MEMORIAL, MOSCOW

Poet Joseph Brodsky (left of the driver) in exile in the Russian North, 1964

from the Soviet Union had become the primary goal of human rights activists" falls wide of the mark. It was Western observers who greatly magnified the issue of emigration, especially with regard to the plight of Soviet Jews, even as the Soviet dissident movement continued to champion a wide range of civil and human rights. And while there is considerable truth in Zubok's observation that dissidents became a self-marginalizing community, much the same could be said of various subgroups in late Soviet society, from artists and writers who took jobs as boiler-room operators and night watchmen in order to escape the ritual obligations of Soviet public life, to "in-system reformers" who sequestered themselves in "oases" of progressive thought within the Communist Party apparatus. Beyond its highly uniform official public sphere, late Soviet society was a vast patchwork of face-to-face micro-communities, each bound by unusually close ties of adult friendship.

Zubok refers to his protagonists as "Zhivago's children," the spiritual heirs of

Soviet system and its revolutionary values. More than a few of the people Zubok artfully brings to life referred to themselves and their generation as children not of Zhivago but of the Twentieth Party Congress, that historic moment when Khrushchev attempted to cleanse the USSR of the father's sins—without revealing his own. The postwar episode of Soviet history is haunted by a kind of paternity suit, as if a generation metaphorically (and often literally) orphaned by purges and war were asking itself: Who's our daddy? The lineages they cultivated matter, and more so than ever today, as Russians and their leaders struggle to fashion a usable past from their country's bloodstained twentieth century. They also matter insofar as the human drama of the post-Stalin intelligentsia involved men and women who were fed, clothed and housed by the socialist fatherland, but who yearned not to be treated like children, to be considered just as mature as the "mature socialism" they had helped build. They were adults in search of their own voices.

the monstrous crimes of his predecessor (and his living rivals like Molotov) while reaffirming the innocence of the party and the glory of its historical mission. What better way to damn the father but preserve the family than to recount the patient triumph of dutiful sons and daughters who had been unjustly punished? And so some of the earliest stories of the camps, attached to petitions read by Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders, were knitted into the Secret Speech, thereby establishing a template for other survivors to follow when arranging their Gulag memories.

Many *ex-zeks*, of course, had never joined the party; if they had, they did not leave the camps with renewed faith in the Soviet system. Some of their stories would eventually make their way to Western readers on the wings of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) or Varlam Shalamov's less well-known but far more subtly crafted *Kolyma Tales* (1980). (These and other masterpieces of literary testimony, every bit as powerful as their Holocaust counterparts, are superbly analyzed in Leona Toker's *Return From the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*.) Unlike the handful of officially sanctioned accounts of redemptive suffering by loyal communists, they offer an unflinching portrait of the Gulag's moral chaos: lethal physical deprivation, wanton cruelty and sexual exploitation.

Official censorship as well as unofficial social taboos kept contemporary Soviet readers largely quarantined from such texts—but not from the returning inmates. The most original aspect of Dobson's book is her account of the reactions of ordinary citizens to the influx of *ex-zeks*, the "politicals" as well as those convicted of crimes like murder, rape, robbery and assault. The Soviet system rarely made formal distinctions between the two groups, because antisocial behavior of all kinds was thought to be proof of ideological deviance. For much of the Soviet population, the Gulag amnesties were the first and most visible effect of the Thaw, and they hardly inspired the kind of hopes for revolutionary renewal championed by Zubok's intellectuals. On the contrary; one Moscow trolley-car driver wrote in her letter to party leaders, "We conquered Germany when it was armed to the teeth, can it really be that our state is without the strength to conquer these parasites?" A worker in a car factory in Kalinin, contemptuous of the humanism he assumed to be behind the decision to amnesty so many of Stalin's prisoners, noted, "For the working man, it certainly doesn't make things easier that there are these swinish gangs of bandits who commit hooligan acts and refuse to contribute to our enormous work."

Dobson argues that, far more than the regime's fear of a too rapidly liberalizing intelligentsia, the harsh popular reaction to the amnesties helped curtail the attempt to reform the Soviet legal system in the late 1950s, thereby derailing the effort to create safeguards against the state-sponsored terrorism of the Stalin era. One of the strengths of Dobson's explanation of the Thaw era's zigzags is that it incorporates influences from below, much as the Russian historian Vladimir Kozlov has done in his work on how food riots and other popular disturbances paved the way for the unsustainable terms of the Brezhnev-era welfare state. By the time Gorbachev came to power, reducing the USSR's costly cradle-to-grave entitlements proved even more difficult than containing its bloated military budget.

It took Germany—or rather, West Germany—nearly a quarter-century after its crushing military defeat to begin in earnest the job of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, mastering or coming to terms with the Nazi past. In an extraordinary but deeply flawed act,

Nikita Khrushchev attempted to undertake a limited version of that process long before his country's self-induced implosion, only to panic at the Pandora's box he had opened regarding the Soviet Union's history, and his own. For the next thirty years, the Communist Party kept a close eye on the box, responding to periodic attempts to pry open its lid by tightening the screws yet again, until the threads had all but eaten away the wood housing them. Today, nearly a quarter-century after the Soviet Union began to come apart, the box is mostly open, despite President Dmitri Medvedev's creation in May 2009 of an ominous Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. Russians now watch excellent TV dramas based on Solzhenitsyn's Gulag novels along with documentaries glorifying Stalin's role as an "effective manager" of the Soviet Union's industrial revolution and the Great Fatherland War against Hitler's Germany. The process of coming to terms with its contents has only just begun. ■

Break Their Hearts

by AARON THIER

The problem with most funny stories is that they're funny. How can we take them seriously? If a funny story is to be meaningful in itself rather than an example of an already familiar genre—one-of-a-kind rather than one-of-a-type—it needs another dimension or a larger resonance. The novels of P.G. Wodehouse, exceedingly wonderful as they are, are written according to an endlessly reproducible formula, with the result that we are more likely to say we like P.G. Wodehouse himself than any one of his books. The greatest comic novels—books like Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*—are the kind we might hesitate to call "comic" in the first place, because humor is not what makes them linger in the mind and quicken the heart.

Beckett is an extreme example. The single fixation throughout his vast output is the absurdity of our continuing existence in the context of the pain our existence will cause us. His characters are pushed to absurd levels of degradation and misery—blind, deaf, aphasic, immobilized—and the anguish of their

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Abbott Awaits

By Chris Bachelder.
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conditions is the only subject of the stories. But they can be pushed to such an extremity only because they're comic characters. We don't expect them to think clearly about their circumstances, and they aren't real enough or relatable enough to inspire sympathy of the kind that would make their humiliation too much to bear. Beckett is funny, and only because he's funny are we willing to follow him down his awful rabbit hole. Comedy is a means to an end, like any other literary device. "What must wacky modes do?" asked Donald Barthelme. "Break their hearts."

Like any young writer with an inclination toward wackiness, Chris Bachelder has been trying to figure out how his wackiness might be employed to greatest effect. Bachelder has many talents, but his obvious talent for comic writing has tended to eclipse his other gifts. He first appeared in 2001 with *Bear v. Shark*, a variety show of a novel about the media frenzy associated with a computer-animated pay-per-view fight between a bear and a shark. In 2006 he published his second novel, *U.S.!*, in which a very elderly but resolutely optimistic