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## Book Review

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# When 'art' rhymes with Okhrana

by Katherine Kanter

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### Chaliapin

by Victor Borovsky

Hamish Hamilton, London 1988

£25, hardbound, 630 pp. with index

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Truth has an alarming way of emerging, sooner or later. The only question is, when, and will it be too late? One puts down the title above, wondering, why has that powerful faction in international politics that has run the last 70 years as the "Anglo-Soviet Agreement," decided to rip off the mask and "blow the network," or at least big chunks of it, just now? On Jan. 15, for example, the *Sunday Times* of London carried an interview with the "dissident" régisseur Yuri Lyubimov, in which he disingenuously reveals, that he owes his career to the patronage of KGB chief Yuri Andropov.

Why so shameless? The reason may be that the British "Gods of Olympus" and their Russian allies, feel sure that no one is left alive in the West, either in art or in politics, who will buck the deal over Europe with Gorbachov. By now, Western artistic traditions are so destroyed, that the Russians are welcomed with scraping and bowing in every theatre in Europe, so much so, that we can expect the same people to act the same way toward Russian tanks and heavy artillery in a couple of years. After reading what they have to offer, it is safe to assume that people like the "dissident" Mr. Borovsky (who still beats his path into Soviet art magazines, curiously) will have no trouble earning a fine living under any new regime.

In Mr. Borovsky's cleverly-written pages, he uses the prop of the singer Fyodor Chaliapin's life, to "attack" the present regime, and offers us, in a way we have seen before in "dissidents" of his ilk, a fake alternative: We are made to feel that we in the West are softies, that we must look up to the Russian people's craving to return to the harsh, but colorful, pagan times, where some supposed "uniqueness" of Russian racial characteristics will be again given full play. This he tells us in his first, self-congratulatory lines: "For Russians, the word *dusha* has far wider and deeper implica-

tions than the English word 'soul'. . . . it assumes dozens of subtle shades and can convey a state of mind or explain actions and their motives. It is at least as important as mental powers, if not more so. This concept is indispensable when talking of Chaliapin the quintessential Russian, and Chaliapin the true artistic prodigy." (p. 13)

How can Mr. Borovsky know whether *dusha*, has "far wider and deeper implications" than the word "soul"? What is "soul," what is *dusha*? He does not care to define either word, or even to give some fair paraphrase of the idea; no, it is "shades, states of mind." In plain English, we call that being moody, good mood, bad mood, murderous mood, sentimental mood. . . . When Mr. Borovsky tells us that "*dusha* is at least as important as mental powers," I would like to know, how the *dusha* is divided from mental powers? How does the *dusha* know itself, unless it is by those "mental powers"? Is *dusha* a vapor, a gas, a dust formation, something which exists as a discrete object in the universe outside man's power to think? Is *dusha* a secretion, perhaps from the heart, or even, the sex hormones? Could it possibly be a virus, traveling through the body, even reaching the brain and its besieged "mental powers"?

Borovsky himself must be suffering from a severe case of *dusha*, because after reading through 600 pages, we are no closer to knowing what poor Chaliapin thought about the truly important composers like Mozart, Verdi, or Beethoven, which for a musician, does tend to be rather basic, while the singer is quoted as saying, that for him, Modest Mussorgsky was the greatest composer of all time—an astounding belief, for which no reason can be found in art. The reason is to be found in political intelligence, and Mr. Borovsky's book is a gold mine in that respect, at least, for people who are willing to take off their "I love Gorby" buttons for an hour, and think.

Chaliapin was born in 1873, to a poor and desperate peasant family. His singing training seems to have been limited to six years in the choir of the Orthodox Church in Kazan, and his year's work with the famous tenor Dmitri Andreyevich Usatov at Tiflis, who put him on the road to fame. It was the Tiflis Music Society which gave Chaliapin his first subsidies, and the Tiflis Opera House, his first steady en-

gagement as a soloist. Tiflis, birthplace of Stalin, home of the Balanchine (Balanchivadze) family, seems to be a pagan cult-center of the utmost importance: on Mount Kazbek, Zeus tortured Prometheus for stealing fire, and the town of Kutaisi, where the Balanchivadze family stems from, has the Golden Fleece as its coat of arms.

Allow me to make a short but vital digression here: In a paper written some years back, "The Secrets Known Only to the Inner Elites," Lyndon LaRouche dealt with the battle between the "two elites," the republican and the oligarchical, since Homeric times. Prometheus and the Golden Fleece stand for the two warring factions: Prometheus, a mortal, refuses to be "initiated" into the circle of the Gods of Olympus and dares to steal the divine spark, not for himself, but for all of mankind, to whom he passes on the gift of "fire"—the power to think, the power to act on the universe—before he suffers martyrdom at the hands of Zeus; whereas, the Golden Fleece, taken from Zeus' sacred herd, stands for hermetic knowledge, secrets dispensed by Magi only to the "chosen ones," those who willingly walk down the 33 steps or degrees into Hell, step by step betraying their fellow men to win material advantage and power—an exact inversion of the process of self-development which Dante deals with in his *Commedia*. Benjamin Franklin, the brain behind the American Revolution, was in his time, like Mr. LaRouche today, called "the American Prometheus" while Scottish Rite Freemasonry epitomizes the modern circle of the Golden Fleece.

Now the relevance of all this to the Chaliapin story, is that his teacher Usatov at Tiflis, who moulded Chaliapin as a teenager, was part of that circle of "initiates" who were striving to "change all values into their opposite" by breaking the tide of popular feeling which was in favor of Westernizing Russia. This was the aristocratic group who were to overthrow the Romanov dynasty. In art, the values that had to be inverted, were the love of educated Russians for Western classical music, their striving, led by Pushkin, to do away with that invasive *dusha*, those awful infantile moods, which hold the Russian character back from becoming a self-conscious individual. In Borovsky's words:

Usatov introduced Chaliapin to the music of Mussorgsky. At the time, far from being particularly popular, Mussorgsky was not even well-known. The premiere of *Boris Godunov* in 1874 at the Mariinsky Theatre and . . . [then] in Moscow 14 years later was largely ignored by the Russian public and the critics. The works of one of the world's greatest composers were considered heavy, boring and even harmful to the voice. . . . To Chaliapin belongs the honor and the glory of a complete reversal of opinion in favor of Mussorgsky, first in his homeland, and then abroad.

The public, together with singers and critics, openly showed that they preferred works coming from

Western Europe, particularly Italy. Usatov's repeated attempts to instill some enthusiasm for the works of national composers into his pupils were all in vain. Classmates said to Chaliapin, "Don't listen. Mussorgsky with his Varlaams and his Mitiukhas is nothing else than deadly poison for the voice and for singing."

What actually happened was a phenomenon repeated in the West in 1909 with Serge de Diaghilev and the Ballet Russe: "For the sake of hearing Chaliapin's voice, opera-goers grudgingly forgave his obstinate determination to sing Mussorgsky," just as balletomanes in Paris, were to sit through Stravinsky or Rimski-Korsakov in order to see Pavlova and Vaclav Nijinsky.

Appropriately enough, Borovsky compares what Chaliapin's undoubted gifts did for the Slavophile Mussorgsky, with what Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre did for that existentialist bore, Chekhov. I almost fell off my chair laughing, reading a letter by Chekhov to his fellow Freemason, Nemirovich-Danchenko, reporting how the audience had spontaneously reacted to the first performance of his play, *The Seagull*: "The theatre exuded ill-will, the air was heavy with hatred, and I, obeying the laws of physics, flew out of Petersburg like a bomb." And Nemirovich: "The public was indignant. They were shouting 'Curtain!' " How one wishes the public had the guts to do that today!

While singing, oddly enough, the role of the High Priest in *Aida*, for the Tiflis Opera House, Chaliapin was observed and praised, by Fedor Komissarzhevsky (his son was later to marry the British actress, Dame Peggy Ashcroft) and the composer Dargomyzhsky, both Slavophiles and close to Mussorgsky. Chaliapin then went up to Petersburg, where, through his Tiflis networks including the conductor Truffi, he was engaged by the "Tovarichestvo" Company. There, too, the talented youth was presented to one messianic Slavophile after another, like the Russian folksong expert Vasili Andreyev who watched over him and taught him "how to behave in high society," but above all, the court official Terti Filipov and the crypto-Old Believer, Vladimir Stasov. This is what Chaliapin himself has to say about Filipov:

There was a big soirée at Filipov's on January 4th, 1895. All the big names sang there. Glinka's sister paid me the most flattering attention after my performance. This soirée played an important role in my destiny. Filipov's name carried great weight in the capital, and rumors of my successes reached the Imperial Theatre. The management called me for an audition.

In 1895 and 1896 seasons, Chaliapin sang at the Imperial Theatre. He must have been "coming along nicely" with the Slavophile circle, because, suddenly, Savva Mamontov, one of the money-bags of the Old Believer movement, offered

him employment with his Moscow Private Opera where the conductor Truffi, again, was also employed. Mamontov, who was financing his close relative Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, which had opened in 1894, followed Chaliapin everywhere, and did not rest until he got the singer to move to Moscow.

The Old Believers, also called "Raskolniki," are a fanatical sect which still, unfortunately, exists and has power today, not only in Russia, but in the Western part of the United States and Canada. They uphold the hard core of the doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church, being opposed to any compromise with Rome ("the anti-Christ") on the issue of the *Filioque*, and this is the faction of Orthodoxy which emerged victorious from the 1917 Revolution. They believe that the Prince of Darkness rules this world (hence, Chaliapin's life-long obsession with the role of Mephistopheles), and that one should either flee it, or plunge into it and purify oneself by being as depraved as possible. Any means are justified to destroy the "anti-Christ."

These beliefs are ringed round with a whole series of rituals for daily life which remind one of nothing so much as the Hassidic sect and its Cabbala, or the Ecologist movement, due to their murderous rage against anything, like science and technology, which shows man's ability to act upon Nature. To promote such a sect was of evident use to the landed aristocracy and rentier finance, which fought like wild animals since Peter the Great, to keep the serf-system, and stop Russia being industrialized. To the Old Believers, Moscow is the Third Rome, the capital of the anti-Romanovs, and the 1890s was just the period, when a great deal of money was being pumped in to bring Old Believer families to Moscow from all over Russia, in order to build up a power base and "stack the cards" against the Westernizers there, something they could not easily achieve in Saint Petersburg.

Mamontov was a big wheel among those families; he was very similar to Diaghilev, both as a personality and as a network man, save that he was independently immensely wealthy, mainly due to the textile industry, which was almost entirely under the control of the Old Believers. Stanislavsky was always to refer to him as "my master of aesthetics . . . the universally accepted authority in matters of art."

In 1870, Mamontov bought the village of Abramtsevo, and turned it into what Borovsky describes as a "haven" for Russian painters, like Vrubel, Korovin, Serov and Levitan, a "center for the revival of traditional folk crafts . . . the cradle of a new Russian school of painting which would later play a key role in revolutionizing scenic design."

A milestone in Mamontov's work as an impresario, was his 1885 production of the Ostrovsky opera, *The Snow Maiden*. Borovsky reports: "Mamontov planned the event with utmost care, and even sent the painter Vasnetsov on a special expedition to Tula to search out examples of national dress and everyday artifacts. The results exceeded all expecta-

tions. It was as if a legendary ancient way of life had been resurrected." And the singer Shkaffer wrote: "What I saw and heard transported me with supernatural ecstasy . . . a deeply poetic view of an immemorial way of life, pagan and rustic, full of beliefs and superstitions."

Anyone who would study the Russian peasants, who were in fact nothing but serfs, in their "ancient pagan way of life," which included human sacrifice up to quite modern times, will find nothing poetic there at all. Mamontov was cooking up a public relations hoax, very like what the oligarchy has done with the Ecologist Movement in Europe today: presenting Dark Ages suffering and slavery, as intensely romantic because people look so picturesque when they wear simple, becoming clothing, eat as little as possible, and die young!

*The Snow Maiden* and the row of Slavophile operas Mamontov produced, were such a box-office failure, that Mamontov almost went bankrupt, and had to alternate Russian operas with Italian ones, and engage Italian singers. Mamontov knew, of course, that Mussorgsky, Rimski-Korsakov, and so forth, were very bad composers, and that neither the music nor the theological message would ever be choked down by a public raised on Mozart and Verdi, unless some trick could be found. First, he spent millions on costumes, on settings, on visual effects, then, he found Chaliapin.

This is what Mamontov's friend Stasov wrote in 1898, under the title: "Boundless Joy," on Chaliapin's performance in Rimski-Korsakov's Viking opera, *Sadko*: "I was sitting in Mamontov's theatre reflecting on the sad state of Russian opera, and of our music in general, when suddenly in front of me appeared an ancient Scandinavian bogatyr, singing his 'Viking Song' . . . immense, leaning against his enormous axe, a steel helmet on his head, his arms bare to the shoulders. . . . His gigantic voice, the prodigious eloquence of his singing, the herculean movements of his body and arms, the look under his thick frowning brow, so powerful, so deeply real. . . ." A bogatyr is a Russian superhuman hero.

Stasov's lines above could have been written by Wagner, by Nietzsche, or one of their epigones under the Hitler Reich. What an open hymn to "vitalism," to "animal spirits," to the Great White Race! After all, the "true" Russians claim to descend from the Swedish master Warrior Race. Need I add, that Chaliapin was tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed, and so forth? To be fair, though Chaliapin allowed himself to be used by these people, to whom he owed his success, he disliked Wagner, and does not appear, in his private life, to have adhered to any of his masters' anti-Western, racist beliefs. In fact, he later wrote: "When I look at Europeans I envy them—what freedom and ease in their movements, and in their speech," and, "abroad people lived a better life than we did, more cheerful, more enjoyable . . . they treat each other with more trust and more respect."

It was at this point in Chaliapin's life, that he developed, under Mamontov's direct guidance, his so-called "method," which Stanislavsky was to ape. In order to "sell" his turgid Slavophile authors, Mamontov would spend hours building up the "dramatic" sides of each role, rehearsing every single singer on every raised eyebrow, every grimace, every spot of makeup, so that each character became a Golem, which walked and talked and gesticulated in a special way, and even had "feeling states"; in fact, it had everything but a soul. Only a great author can give a character a human soul, rather than a poor, withered *dusha*. A play by Shakespeare, Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, a ballet by Bournonville—those authors are so good, that they require no window-dressing. For the performer, just to get their ideas clearly across, is already difficult enough. The "role" of Hamlet, as an actor's virtuoso plaything, is nothing, beside the real issue of statecraft in the play *Hamlet*.

It is the very partisans of the "collective soul," the Russian *dusha*, who build up the star system to a paroxysm, because the collective outlook can only be sold to an understandably suspicious public, by a confidence trick: a singer like Chaliapin, or a dancer like Irek Mukhamedov, presented as irreplaceable, unique, staggering. "Forget the gray monotony of life under the iron fist! Wallow in egocentrism, vicariously!" A beautiful work of art is ruined by the star system, but our subject here is not, of course, art.

To me, the most telling pages in Mr. Borovsky's work, are those on how Mussorgsky's opera *Khovanshchina* was staged, and the Chaliapin business with Maxim Gorky. In 1897, Savva Mamontov and his crony, Stasov, "inspired" by two incidents of mass suicide by Old Believers (1896 and 1897), decided to mount *Khovanshchina* at their private theatre, to get round the Imperial censorship. The scene painter, Korovin, was an Old Believer himself. His friend Vasnetsov, took Mamontov's singers to visit the Old Believers' community and temple.

The singer Shkafer was deeply impressed: "These people really exist, religious fanatics. An old man, in a voice trembling with age, started to talk of the old faith, of the way they were being tormented and hounded. It made a powerful impression on us; and we were deeply disturbed by it, mentally and emotionally. We returned to the theatre to tell everybody all we had seen and heard." Or, in Borovsky's frank words: "The Mamontov theatre was unreservedly on the side of the dissenters. It was common knowledge that Old Believers were deprived of civic rights. At the end of the 19th century, performers and public regarded Dosifei, Marfa and their confederates not so much as enemies of Peter the Great's reforms, as people protesting against the repression of spiritual freedom and the violent persecution of their faith."

Unfortunately, facts run quite contrary to what Mr. Borovsky implies there: Repression against the Old Believers was run by the Okhrana, the Secret Police, a force *in league*

with the Old Believers, and commanded by the very aristocratic families who, only 20 years later, were to overthrow the Romanovs. The repression was staged to whip up a homicidal fury against Nicholas II. As for the public's reaction, well, most educated Russians felt about the "Raskolniki," the way I hope you feel about Khomeini today.

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*Khovanshchina's* mitigated success, was due entirely to the spectacle Chaliapin provided as Dosifei, a boyar who lays down his princely crown to become a Monk leading his Raskolniki against Peter the Great. The opera ends in a wonderful scene of all the Raskolniki burning themselves to death.

An intimate friend of Chaliapin, Maxim Gorky, who was writing the singer's biography, had this to say about *Khovanshchina*: "If you see Chaliapin, tell him that I am terribly glad of *Khovanshchina's* success. *He is finally getting down to his proper business* [emphasis added]. I can imagine how he will stage *Die Meistersinger*, and how he will sing Sachs!" Gorky was, of course, one of the key ideologues of the Bolsheviks; in the early years of the century, he spent many months on the isle of Capri, in and around Tiberius's villa, working out ideological affinities with the "vital, vigorous" young men who were to become the leadership of the Nazi Party—so the reference here to Wagner cannot be casual. Wagner's use of Satanist symbology, his explicitly pagan, racialist world outlook, was an essential part of the Superman cult which shaped the individuals behind the two most brutal regimes of this century. Chaliapin, may I add, never accepted Gorky's invitations to Capri, which is probably why the singer, a coarse man, but honest and direct, kept his sanity, and also why he was held outside the circles of the "inner elite."