
Book Review

Russian nationalist imperialism profiled

by Rachel Douglas

The Russian Challenge and the Year 2000

by Alexander Yanov

Basil Blackwell, New York, 1987

302 pages, hardcover, \$24.95

It would be nice to be able to recommend Alexander Yanov's book as a useful pre-history of the Pamyat phenomenon, the Russian racist mobs whose shadow looms over the entire process of *perestroika* in the Soviet Union today. It is too rare, after all, that a writer on Soviet affairs puts a Russian icon crowned by the red star of Communism on the cover of his book, or polemicizes against the notion that 1917 was the great divide in Russian history. To buy the book would be a waste of money, however, since the same material was assembled by Yanov in his *The Russian New Right*, a paperback that cost less than \$10, nearly a decade earlier.

In *The Russian New Right*, Yanov acquainted readers with little-known movements such as the All-Russian Social-Christian Union for the Liberation of the People (VSKhSON), the group around *Molodaya Gvardiya* (*Young Guard*) magazine in the 1960s, and the neo-Slavophile underground journal *Veche*. He put forward evidence about their patronization by individuals and factions within the Communist Party and police apparats.

Much of that material is repeated in the middle section of *The Russian Challenge*. In updating his presentation of the "right," Yanov doesn't bother to talk about the Pamyat (Memory) group of Dmitri Vasilyev et al., whose growth and activity had already burst into public view by the time *The Russian Challenge* came out. Perhaps this has to do with the author's evident desire to paint Mikhail Gorbachov in the most favorable light, as a person having no inclination in the direction of Pamyat or other Russian chauvinists. In a chapter called "Fascism Takes to the Streets," he does provide lengthy

quotations from a 1977 manifesto on "the formation of a broad worldwide anti-Zionist and anti-Freemason front," written by the sinister Nikolai Yemelyanov, who is much admired by Pamyat.

Yanov on Yanov

Unfortunately, what Yanov *has* added is an account of debates within academia during the past decade, about the nature of the Soviet Union, the resurgence of "the Russian Idea," and Russia's "attempts to join civilization," all cast by the author as a war over the merits and demerits of the personality and views of Alexander Yanov. These questions are not devoid of interest, but Yanov's preoccupation with his own place in the battles makes for tedium in his account of them.

Although he recommends that a "historical approach" is needed for American "intellectuals and politicians" to understand Russian imperial nationalism, Yanov repeatedly abandons his own rich knowledge of history, for the pitfalls of formalist modeling (or muddling) that afflict political science. The result is sometimes comical, as with Yanov's remarkable Figure 1, "Five Centuries of Russian History in One Chart," which looks like somebody's wash hung out to dry on an elaborate clothesline. It is more often atrociously misleading, as when Yanov states that 19th-century writer Fyodor "Dostoevsky, unlike [VSKhSON leader] Vagin, was not involved in devising plans for Russia's future." Come again? Did Yanov, who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1974, somehow miss reading Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*, in which the ideologue of Russia's privileged mission outlined grand schemes for the country's future order and place in the world?

Grand strategy?

In a concluding chapter, "Is the West Ready for the 'Year 2000'?" Yanov plays at grand strategy by categorizing various Western academics' views of the Soviet Union, without any reference to the economic and cultural collapse devouring the West itself. He believes that Gorbachov wears the white hat of a Western-oriented reformer, and that Western nations should attempt to help *perestroika*.

In the February and March 1989 issues of *International Affairs*, the Soviet Foreign Ministry monthly, Yanov, as the first guest author from the ranks of recent emigrés, contributed a two-part article: "New Thinking and American 'Brezhnevism.'" He proposes that the way to make a breakthrough in United States policy toward the Soviet Union, is to build on "the Princeton school of demilitarizing the rivalry" (as opposed to "the Harvard school of non-intervention"), until America were "opened up to the refreshing winds of reform," and the "cauldron of Gorbachovist Moscow seething with new ideas [could] blow up the comfortable provincial torpor of 'Brezhnevist' Washington." To put it charitably, Yanov's constructs do tend to get the best of him.