Of pity and terror

by PHILIP TOYNBEE

HOPE AGAINST HOPE
A Memoir by Nadezhda Mandelstam translated by Max Hayward (Collins/Harvill £3.15)

OSIP MANDELSTAM was a Russian-Jewish poet who belonged to the 'Acmeist' school (his slogan was 'Nostalgia for World Culture'), and who died, or was killed, in a camp some time between 1938 and 1940. In outline his career is so typical that he had seemed, when we knew *only* the outline, almost to disappear into his own background. A romantic revolutionary before 1917, he had begun, even in the 'heroic' days while Lenin was still alive, to find his less romantic comrades unspeakably crude and cruel. By the late twenties he was a confirmed anti-Stalinist; in 1934 he was arrested for writing a poem against Stalin which came to the ears, if not to the eyes, of the secret police. With help from above—perhaps from Bukharin—he was released later in the same year, and lived in the half-world of exile from Moscow (provincial poverty and harassment) until the cat stretched out its paw again on May Day 1938. His wife was officially notified of his death about two years afterwards.

This is the story that was known to Russian friends of the Mandelstams—and also to our own students of modern Russia: a miserable story, a tragic and horrible story, but also an ordinary one. What Mandelstam's widow has done in her wonderful book is to raise the bare story of her husband's life and death from the ordinary to the exemplary; from the typical to the archetypal.

To those of us who watched Soviet Russia from the outside during the Stalinist period, the whole apparatus of State and people looked monolithic and homogeneous. This was true, I think, whether we thought we loved what we thought we saw—as I did during the whole period of the great trials—or whether we hated it—as I did from 1939 until Stalin's death in 1953. Russia looked like one great *Thing*—whether of Heroic Socialist Achievement or of Barbarous Totalitarianism. It is only in the last 10 years, when various memoirs have gradually been creeping out into the light, that outsiders have been able to get a truer picture of what it was like to live and die under that hideous regime. Of all such documents Mrs Mandelstam's must surely be the best and the most revealing. For what we have now is a genuine work of art, and with it the reminder that it is only a genuine work of art which is capable of communicating a reality so appalling as the Stalinist Terror.

Being a work of art this book is not in the least arty. It is organised with great subtlety—the consecutive narrative of the Mandelstams' life together emerging very clearly out of Nadezhda's reflections on the nature of that life and of all human life lived at the end of its tether. She concentrates on the years between the first and the second arrest—between 1934 and 1938—but moves easily and tellingly into the earlier years, or into the long later years of her widowhood, without giving the reader any sense either of digression or of contrivance. The book reads so easily and naturally that it is worth insisting that it has been written not only under (and by means of) enormous emotional pressure but also with a literary control which Mrs Mandelstam's husband would certainly have applauded.

During the last four years of Mandelstam's life—the central years of his widow's book—they were, to put it absurdly, in a good position for observing a very large cross-section of Russian society. Their friends, betrayers and enemies were mostly members of the Intelligentsia—that uniquely Russian sub-group of politically impassioned writers, philosophical artists, endless proliferators of new schools and groups. But because the Mandelstams spent much of their time in the provinces they also saw a great deal of ordinary life, both working-class and professional. At the other end of the social scale they even knew one or two of the political bosses. So that if HOPE AGAINST HOPE is treated purely as a social document it is a unique and invaluable one. I doubt whether there is any primary source which tells us so much about the whole of Russian society under Stalin.

But the book would not be a great one unless Mrs Mandelstam were herself capable of great emotions. She writes with a controlled bitterness, which is constantly being relieved, or transcended, by an astonishing determination to be just and an equally astonishing capacity for admiration, love and renewed faith in man. (The title is a pun on her name, which is the Russian word for hope.) There is none of that too-facile 'forgiveness' which is sometimes assumed, for the sake of appearances, in such cases as this. Mrs Mandelstam still lives in Moscow (I wish the editor and translator, who has done his work so well, had been able to tell us more about the provenance of the book) and still meets many of the 'friends' who failed her; and even a few of the ruthless enemies who persecuted her.

She writes wryly of these meetings, without forgiveness but with something better—an ironic but intense understanding. When she meditates on the general demoralisation of the Terror she writes of 'us' as often as she writes of 'them.' It is part of her case that everyone was affected: 'Everybody is a victim—not only those who die, but also all the killers, ideologists, accomplices and sycophants who close their eyes or wash their hands—even if they are secretly consumed with remorse at night.' Everybody was a victim—but, as in all the accounts I have ever read about life in its most extreme condition, there are just enough just men to save the city. Akhmatova is by no means the only friend who never failed the Mandelstams. Nadezhda writes rather waspishly of Pasternak, but he was another who remained almost immune to the current disease. There were several obscure heroes and heroines of human decency among the peasants and provincials. Ehrenburg, that deeply ambiguous figure, emerges very well from the present book; and even some of the most corrupted official writers sometimes took a small risk or two on behalf of the pariah-couple.

We do not emerge from this literally nerve-racking book thinking either worse or better of humanity. But we do emerge from it with a deepened apprehension, with a fuller sense of the depths and complexities, and sudden superb simplicities of human nature. One small story must stand for a multitude of equally strange and revealing ones. In the early years of the Thaw a notorious Tashkent police official committed suicide. His daughter Larisa was filled with filial indignation against the Khrushchev regime, feeling quite as bitter against the new as so many others had felt against the old. 'One can't make such sudden changes—it's so traumatic for people who were in official positions.' And she even talked of making protests 'to the world' about the cruel demotions and dismissals which some (not many, alas!) of the Stalinist monsters had had to endure! It is grotesque—not least in its use of Freudian jargon in such a context. But it is not without its own peculiar dignity.

From the few poems of Mandelstam's that I have been able to find I cannot possibly judge whether he was as great a poet as the blurb suggests. But if he had done nothing more than provide the inspiration of this book his life and death would not have been totally pointless. No work of art has ever atoned for, let alone justified, such absolute human anguish as this. But Nadezhda Mandelstam has travelled beyond despair to reach that kind of genuinely *earned* hope which is about the rarest and most valuable of all the virtues:—

> We have seen the triumph of evil after the values of humanism have been vilified and trampled on. The reason these values succumbed was probably that they were based on nothing except boundless confidence in the human intellect. I think we may now find a better foundation for them, if only because of the lessons we have drawn from our experience. . . . The sacrifice in human life was enormous. How can I believe it was all in vain.





Nadezhda and Osip Mandelstam: 'a tragic and horrible story but also an ordinary one.'

Kings and queens and hangers-on

by A. J. P. TAYLOR

ENGLISH HISTORY: by Sir George Clark (Oxford £2)

SIR GEORGE CLARK has high qualifications for surveying English history. He launched the Oxford History of England more than 40 years ago and is probably the only man to have read all 15 volumes with

people. As another indication he describes Chaucer as 'the earliest poet whose works are still part of the daily reading of the English-speaking world.' I must confess that it is many a long day since my neighbour on the bus asked me:



Partners to the Left

by MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

THE ENTHUSIASTS by Laurence Thompson (Gollancz £3)

I DON'T suppose many people under 50 will have heard of John and Katherine Bruce Glasier, the subject of Mr Thompson's excellent biography. Yet among the founding fathers of the Labour Party, especially the ILP wing, they were important and significant figures. Not only that: they exemplify certain essential strains in the texture of British Socialism which have given it its particular character and in some degree survive to this day.

One has to think of them, first and foremost, as a partnership. This was very much the style—the Webbs, the Hammonds, the Coles. Also, as with the Webbs and the Ramsay MacDonalds, the wife came from a higher social echelon, meeting her spouse-to-be in the course of political activities on behalf of the Fabian Society or Labour Party. A sort of political slumming. There was, as I recall myself, something vaguely exciting about these bourgeois ladies in their well-cut suits, and with their melodious but authoritative voices, who came among us in our dingy committee rooms, or joined us in our canvassing, enlivening with their self-confident presences the unwelcome traipse from door to door, the knocker's hollow echo as one awaited the dread approaching footsteps.

The most amazing equation of this kind, hinted at—but only, I admit, as a possibility—was between Mrs Pankhurst and Keir Hardie. A relationship, if it actually existed, that would have put even Curzon and Elinor Glyn in the shade. 'Verily,' Bruce Glasier noted down in his diary for 19 June, 1910, 'Mrs Pankhurst has been the Delila that has cut our Samson's locks,' and went on to mention that Hardie had been reading George Sand's letters, and was 'curiously interested in her abnormal sensuality.'

Katherine Conway, when Bruce Glasier met her, was an ardent young woman of 24, Newnham trained, romantic and impetuous, who had already experienced emotional entanglements with fellow-toilers in the Socialist vineyard. Glasier himself was equally romantic; his gurus being William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Walt Whitman. The two latter were wind-on-the-heath-style homosexuals, and Glasier may well have had a certain tendency in that direction. One notes a touch of narcissism in his reflections on his fiftieth birthday: 'I still feel almost a boy ready to run and leap—as at 25 years. My beard shows signs of grey, but my hair is still brownish fair as formerly.'

His marriage to Katherine was on the whole a happy one, though initially they saw little of each other, both of them spending much of their time on the road as itinerant evangelists of Socialism. When children came Katherine was less mobile, and devoted her spare time to writing novels for serialisation in progressive publications. Mr Thompson quotes a sentence from one of them—'New England Nell,' published in *The Family Herald Supplement*—which may be taken, I should suppose, as fairly characteristic: 'If a tenth part of the felicities that are enjoyed in the region of the imagination could be imported into regions terrestrial, what a delightful thing it would be to awake each morning to such a world once more!'

Glasier's aspirations, likewise, were directed more towards being a poet than a politician. So he managed to make his politics poetic and his poetry political, to the disadvantage of both, I fear. Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie, two other pillars of the ILP, were in some degree similarly bent. It is interesting, and maybe significant, that all three were Scottish and illegitimate: a circumstance that both MacDonald and Hardie used to romanticise their origins. I have often reflected that these figures of the early Labour Party, unlike their Continental equivalents, were mostly clerics *manqués*. To some extent the parallel still holds; the Very Rev. Harold Wilson, Father Roy Jenkins, SJ, and on the wilder shores of evangelism, the Rev. Michael Foot. Somehow it sounds right.

As Mr Thompson indicates, there were endless quarrels. The Left is always more subject to internecine strife than the right; in the same sort of way that those who attack a fortress easily fall out over strategy, whereas the defenders have every inducement to hold together. Keir Hardie seems to have been a very touchy individual, and if Glasier is to be believed, oddly unreliable in money matters. That weird bearded Etonian, H. M. Hyndman, valiant for Marx, was a constant centre of intrigue; Robert Blatchford in his publication *Merrie England* often seemed nearer to Rudyard Kipling than William Morris, and even dear old Uncle Arthur Henderson, a veritable chaste Susanna of the Labour Party, one would have thought, is roundly condemned by Glasier as 'a canting humbug.' MacDonald, too, was already succumbing to the verbal deviousness which led him finally into a condition of total incoherence; while the occasional stray proletarian—'rare as a unicorn in early Socialist societies,' Mr Thompson writes—who came among them was liable, understandably enough, to take to the bottle.

In such circumstances it must be considered remarkable that none the less the Labour Movement throve, to the point that it began to be an important factor in the Westminster scene. Sadly from Glasier's point of view, neither he personally nor the ILP throve with it; as the party machine waxed, the sea-green incorruptibles waned. Glasier did not manage to win a parliamentary seat, and the efforts in which he was concerned to create an effective Labour Party Press proved a failure. While old colleagues like MacDonald and Snowden were going up in the world, he and Katherine found themselves where they began—back on the road. His health deteriorated; the interminable platform appearances grew ever more wearisome. In May 1920, having finished a work on Morris and prepared a collection of his verses, he died. Katherine lived on for another 30 years, becoming a revered figure in Labour Party circles, and fortifying herself, Mr Thompson tells us, with an ideological milk-shake composed of Mr Priestley's broadcasts and the Dean of Canterbury's eulogies of Stalin and the Soviet Union.

It is a fascinating story, and Mr Thompson tells it admirably, with just the right note of gentle irony throughout, and, at the same time, a due appreciation of the undoubted moral qualities of Glasier and his mate. A proper full-length history of the Labour Party is now due; when it is undertaken, THE ENTHUSIASTS will prove a valuable source book.

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