Medvedev vs. Solzhenitsyn

Historian's Criticism Points Up Differences Among Dissidents

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By Peter Osnos
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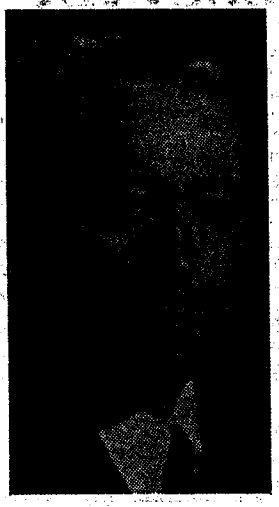
MOSCOW, March 12—Dissident Soviet historian Roy Medvedev has sharply criticized the views of author Alexander Solzhenitsyn and several other prominent political exiles from Russia, accusing them of reinforcing "the most reactionary circles, sentiments and institutions," in the Kremlin.

Medvedev's criticism, contained in a lengthy analytical paper now circulating in Moscow, extends in milder form to Andrei Sakharov, the Nobel Prize winning dissident physicist. Medvedev says Sakharov's "naivete," can be astonishing and his judgments on domestic and foreign subjects are sometimes "erroneous."

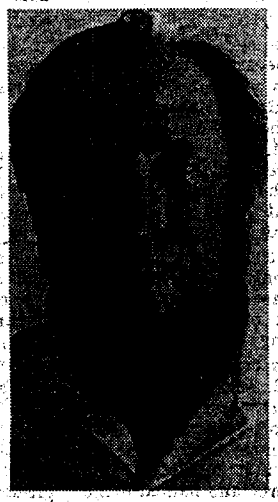
Medvedev's polemic, the first of its kind in some time, illustrates once again the diversity of opinion among the dissenting Soviet intelligentsia of the 1970s. Their voices reflect currents in Soviet society of a strength no outsider can really measure.

Since Solzhenitsyn was forcibly sent abroad two years ago, his apocalyptic images of Western society in precipitous decline because of a reluctance to challenge a repressive and aggressive Soviet regime has aroused widespread interest among westerners skeptical of latter-day detente politics. "The West is on the verge of a collapse created by its own hands," said Solzhenitsyn in a British television interview last week.

While Sakharov, the dissident physicist, has achieved acclaim primarily for his democratic humanism, he too considers Western firmness as essential in dealing with the Soviets. This bothers Medvedev, who says Sakharov's "biggest mistake" was his position on the Indochina war in which he lamented the lack of "combined diplomatic and resolute military force" by the United States to "stabilize the situation there."



ROY MEDVEDEV
. . . 'diseases . . . not mortal'



A. SOLZHENITSYN
. . . apocalyptic images

In challenging such celebrated figures as Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov, Medvedev's purpose is not to discredit tehir views entirely—that would be the official Soviet line—but rather to show where he believes they are exaggerated, misleading and, particularly in the case of Solzhenitsyn, dangerous.

Medvedev compares Solzhenitsyn's dire warnings to "putting a leper's hood with bells" over the Soviet Union so that nobody will approach it and it will die "not only from disease, but also from starvation and stale air under a dirty hood."

But this advice, he asserts, "is also disastrous for Western society. Soviet society really is sick in many ways, but these diseases are not mortal. And even total isolation of Western countries from the U.S.S.R. won't lead to the death of the Soviet regime Solzhenitsyn hates so much. It will only reinforce the most reactionary circles, sentiments and institutions in the society."

Medvedev first criticized Solzhenitsyn shortly after the famed author's exile for his open letter to the Soviet leadership which proposed dropping Communist ideology, restoring Russia's religious autocracy and turning away from industrial growth. As a socialist who considers Soviet failures to be the result of Kremlin style rather than Marxist principles, Medvedev wrote that Solzhenitsyn's opinions were "retrograde," dangerously nationalistic and narrow-minded.

Now Medvedev is concentrating his attention of what he considers Solzhenitsyn's proselytizing against toleration of any form of leftist or socialist tendencies lest they weaken the West further to Soviet advantage. He also mentions several other active Soviet emigres—men like writer Vladimir Maximov and scientist Mikhail Agursky—who share Solzhenitsyn's views to some degree.

The bitter Russian experience with socialism need not be repeated elsewhere, Medvedev writes. Reflecting the stance now taken by the Italian and French Communist Parties, he says that by "preserving the West's democratic institutions and political pluralism," it would be possible for many European countries "to find their own way to creation of a just socialist social order."

"That prospect," he adds, "frightens not only the right-wing forces of the West . . . but also the most reactionary politicians of the Soviet Union," who see capitalism as less of a threat to them than liberal socialism of the kind endorsed by the ill-fated Alexander Dubcek government in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

In short, Medvedev is denouncing what he regards as Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of "Communism as the enemy" without any hope of reform and the view that "any means are valid in the struggle" against it.

While endorsing Sakharov's assessment of Soviet shortcomings—from abuse of human rights to neglect of the consumer—Medvedev disputes what he sees as the tendency of Sakharov to "idealize the good will and openness of the West . . . a dangerous illision."