BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE SOVIETS

"The child is healthy and all its authors are in a positive state of mind." So said novelist Vasily Aksyonov and his collaborators, the proud parents. The child was the Soviet literary almanac **Metropol** (Norton, 1982), edited by Aksyonov and four fellow writers. It was published in the United States and France in 1982, after officials in the USSR banned the collection.

An eclectic anthology of poetry and prose by 23 Soviet writers, **Metropol** represented yet another attempt by established literary figures to move beyond the constraints of official literature. The harsh reaction from the Kremlin was due as much to the unsanctioned nature of the group effort as it was to the content of individual pieces of writing. Aksyonov and some of his colleagues are now émigrés.

Such episodes surprise Westerners; they show the persistence, the resilience, the unpredictability of nonofficial creative effort in the Soviet Union. An unofficial culture (both "high" and "pop") continues to survive; it is alive, though not always well.

The existence of this "parallel" culture extends beyond literature and the arts to politics, the law, and the economy. It makes Soviet reality inordinately difficult for an outsider to comprehend. Despite its monolithic official self-portrait, Soviet society is full of contradictions.

Two books by Russian émigré lawyers—Konstantin Simis's **The Corrupt Society** (Simon & Schuster, 1982) and Dina Kaminskaya's **Final Judgment** (Simon & Schuster, 1983)—focus on "the system" and how Soviet citizens get around it. The system, as they explain it, reminds one of Swiss cheese: quite solid wherever there is cheese, but riddled with holes. The problem is that the holes sometimes lead nowhere.

In an anecdotal account drawing upon a successful legal practice and not a few unsavory clients, attorney Simis conducts a tour of the USSR's private "second economy." There, bribery is the grease of commerce, entire factories exist only on paper, and underground millionaires in the Georgian Republic are brought to trial only after too blatantly overstepping the bounds of discretion. "Homo sovieticus," Simis maintains, "is not immoral, he simply has two separate systems of morality [public and private]."

Dina Kaminskaya, Simis's wife, achieved renown in the USSR by representing political dissidents in court. In her overview of the Soviet legal system, Kaminskaya condemns the general bias in the USSR against the accused but comes to the defense of some aspects of Soviet justice. As a defense attorney, she often won mitigation of sentences and occasionally even outright acquittal, suggesting that the wide gap between the rights guaranteed in theory by the Soviet constitution and the actual dispensing of justice can at times be bridged.

Western reporters in Moscow, unlike émigré writers, are able to observe the paradoxes of everyday life in the USSR with a certain detachment. *New York Times*man Hedrick Smith and the *Washington Post*'s Robert Kaiser offer vivid portraits of

Soviet society in, respectively, **The Russians** (Times Books, rev. ed., 1983, cloth; Ballantine, 1977, paper) and **Russia** (Atheneum, 1976, cloth; pocket, 1980, paper).

Noting the mixture of cynicism and idealism in his Soviet friends, Smith observes that "Don Quixote could be a Russian hero." With a sure eye (and ear) for detail, he adds a special human dimension to his portrait of the half-modern, half-backward Soviet society. In figures of speech, folk sayings, and superstitions, Smith notes, much of Old Russia remains in the new. "So strong," Smith writes, "are the inhibitions against shaking hands across the threshold, for fear that it foreshadows a quarrel, that I came home to America hesitating to reach my hand through an open door."

The persistence of traditional Russian values in the USSR, despite a thick overlay of state ideology, is likewise documented in British sociologist Christel Lane's **Christian Religion in the Soviet Union** (State Univ. of N.Y., 1978, cloth; Allen & Unwin, 1979, paper) and in her **The Rites of Rulers** (Cambridge, 1981, cloth & paper). Many postrevolutionary public rituals, she contends, from mass patriotic parades to marriages held in "Palaces of Weddings," draw heavily and perhaps unconsciously on Russian Orthodox tradition and symbolism. The Kremlin has imposed the new "political religion" of Marx and Lenin, without entirely eliminating the old Orthodox, and even vestiges of pre-Christian, forms of worship.

The diverse religions and cultures of the USSR's many ethnic groups —almost half of the population is non-Russian—further impede generalizations about the Soviet Union. The history of these peoples and of Moscow's behavior toward them—the Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Tadzhiks, and the rest enjoy considerable cultural and political leeway—is the subject of **Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices** (Praeger, 1978), edited by Jeremy R. Azrael. Nonspecialists will find Hélène Carrére d'Encausse's **Decline of an Empire** (Newsweek, 1979, cloth; Harper, 1981, paper) a more readable treatment of the same issues, though the title implies far more serious erosion of Moscow's authority in the hinterland than most U.S. specialists consider likely.

In the Soviet Union, those who reach the top—as scientists, artists, dancers—are generally also those with the most to reveal about the boundaries between official and unofficial culture.

Dancer Valery Panov tells his story in **To Dance** (Knopf, 1978, cloth; Avon, 1979, paper). A maverick performer from Vilnius, Panov was celebrated during the 1950s and '60s for his unique interpretations of classical and avant-garde ballet. At first apolitical—the dance, he believed, "couldn't be manipulated to fool oneself or others"—Panov eventually came to resent official interference in artistic decisions, as well as the empty, "showcase" style of the Kirov ballet company. His favorite role was the clown-puppet (controlled by a powerful magician) in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. He danced the ballet as a metaphor for Stalinist (and, more generally, Soviet) repression.

Panov was so taken with the West during his first tour outside Eastern Europe in 1959 that worried KGB supervisors sent him home early. Barred from foreign trips for the rest of his life, Panov became the "bad boy" of Russian dance; only his virtuosity saved him from harsher punishment. Ambivalent authorities

declared him Honored Artist of the Dagestan and Russian Republics but prohibited him from staging his own unorthodox ballet about an 18th-century rebel-hero.

After applying for exit visas to Israel in 1972, Panov and his dancer-wife Galina endured a series of debilitating ordeals. Finally, in 1974, thanks in part to a sustained publicity campaign in the West, the Panovs were allowed to emigrate.

The career of the greatest collector of Russian avant-garde art, George Costakis, also ended in the West. This remarkable Greek, who was employed for decades by the Canadian embassy in Moscow, began after World War II collecting works by "unofficial" pre- and postrevolutionary artists like Chagall, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Rodchenko, whose experiments with modernism were considered too Western or decadent to be openly exhibited. Costakis's apartment, crammed from floor to ceiling with paintings, became a legendary private museum and a "must" stop for Soviet intellectuals and savvy Western visitors.

Costakis's goal—to rescue a generation of Russian artists from public obscurity—was partially fulfilled during the late 1970s, when he applied to leave Moscow. Under the agreement he reached with the authorities, Costakis was allowed to take with him about 20 percent of his collection to display in the West. Moscow's respected Tretiakov Gallery—really a museum—agreed to buy the rest, promising to build a new wing to house the artwork. (It has not yet been built, however.)

An elegant, illustrated volume, **Russian Avant-Garde Art** (Abrams, 1981), edited by Angelica Zander Rudenstine, with an introduction by S. Frederick Starr, allows us a glimpse of the Costakis treasures. Norton Dodge and Allison Hilton peek behind the mask of socialist realism at **New Art from the Soviet Union** (Acropolis, 1977), a slender collection of more contemporary work.

The lesson to draw from the zigzag experiences of many Soviet artists is that one generation's officially unpalatable experiment may become the source of the next's condoned pleasure. But the pleasure is not always for its own sake. In the Soviet Union, the rival champions of official and unofficial art have political messages to convey—a circumstance that leads to chronic disputes over artistic method and technique, when it does not lead to censorship and repression.

"Art should teach high moral principles," says a character in **The Ascent of Mount Fuji** (Farrar, 1975, paper only), a play about moral guilt and betrayal in the Stalinist era by Chingiz Aitmatov and Kaltai Mukhamedzhanov. "But how?"