

SOLIDARITY

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A Level and Poetic Eye

Alex Comfort writes on George Woodcock

Gandhi's Great Project

The enlightened anarchism of India's grand man of vision



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COVER PICTURE: M K Gandhi during his visit to London in the Autumn of 1931. Photo: Hulton/Deutsch

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AS WE SEE IT

THE END OF COMMUNISM



Ten months that shook the world

From Warsaw to Bucharest (above), from Vilnius to Prague, the signs and slogans of Communism have come down. S K FRENCH gives the background and ponders the aftermath of this post-war annus mirabilis.

AS APPARENTLY impregnable leninist regimes, despite four decades of existence, tumbled like nine-pins in the space of just ten months, only libertarians can claim to have shown no great surprise. Indeed, libertarians have never had any doubts that in the long run these East European governments were doomed to fall, because of their

utter lack of popular support. Attempts at democratisation - the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968 - had been destroyed by force. The stifling of innovation and initiative which such repression caused made the command economies of Eastern Europe increasingly unworkable. Life could only be made tolerable by the development of a black economy to supply anything other than the most

VERBATIM

"WORKERS OF THE WORLD WE
APOLOGISE"

**Banner paraded by Moscow
protesters on the 72nd
anniversary of the Revolution.**

"70 YEARS ON THE ROAD TO NOWHERE"

**Banner carried in Moscow on
demonstration to urge the
speeding up of perestroika.**

"Capitalism, Communism - it's all
garbage".

MSTISLAV ROSTROPOVICH
Soviet conductor in exile

"For Sale: 'An Outline of the
History of the Communist Party of
Czechoslovakia'. Offers. Genuine
reason for sale".

Ad on free noticeboard
Safeway supermarket, Pickering

"As public rage over the poll tax
mounts the Labour front bench
were certain to find themselves
making loyal noises about respect
for the rule of law - they did
exactly the same during the Suez
crisis. It is also mistaken.
Throwing custard pies at
councillors is not part of the
democratic process, but civil
disobedience is - in fact nearly
every democratic advance has
depended on it. What advice would
Labour front benchers have given
the Tolpuddle Martyrs - 'Go home
like good men and wait for the
next election'?"

ALEX COMFORT

basic necessities of life. The
official economies stagnated and
ordinary people, seeing little
alternative, said little and
contributed less.

For libertarians, this situation
is the inevitable consequence of a
system in which working people are
excluded from political life. We
also believe that the tension
between the bureaucrat's theoret-
ical monopoly of managerial power
and the need in real life for
popular initiative to make any
system of production function,
remains the true source of the
revolutionary impulse, even in
liberal democracies.

From the start the East
European regimes were
based on manipulation. As
the Second World War ended
local Communists took
advantage of their positions as
leaders of the anti-German
resistance and their alignment
with, and support from, the Soviet
forces which 'liberated' their
countries, to stake a claim to
participation in their respective
post-war governments. From then on,
elections were manipulated and
opponents intimidated until they
were established as the sole
parties of government.

In East Germany, elections for
the People's Congress in May 1948
gave 66 per cent of the votes to a
single list of Communist-approved
candidates. In October 1949 East
Germany was established as the
German Democratic Republic, with a
Soviet-style constitution. In May
1953 the workers of East Berlin
rose but were crushed by Soviet
tanks and troops.

In Czechoslovakia, elections in
May 1946 gave the Communists 114
out of 300 seats in the Constituent
Assembly, and their leader Klement
Gottwald formed a coalition govern-
ment. In February 1948 they staged
a coup; in March came the notorious
'suicide' of the non-Communist
Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk, and
in May there was a national elect-

ion with a single list of candidates. By the end of 1952 the Party had been purged of all those who did not support the Soviet line.

A very similar process occurred in Hungary between 1947 and 1950, with a Communist-engineered fusion between the CP and the Social Democrats to form the 'United Workers' Party' in January 1948, purges (including the execution of Lazlo Rajk) in the middle of 1949. By the end of June 1950 all ex-Socialists had been dismissed from the government.

In Bulgaria the Communist-dominated Fatherland Front provided the single list of candidates for the November 1945 election and got overwhelming support. Government interference with the October 1946 election resulted in a Communist majority which has been in power ever since.

In Romania the Communist-dominated 'Ploughman's Front' formed a government (at the King's request!) in March 1945. In November, preceded by violence against opposition groups, this government again won an election. In July 1946 leaders of the National Peasant Party and other members of the opposition were arrested for treason and sabotage, and by the end of the month the party itself had been dissolved. Next the King was 'persuaded' to abdicate. In March 1948 the 'People's Democratic Front' got 91 per cent of the vote at the election. 1949 saw the usual series of trials and purges.

As for Poland, June 1945 saw the election of a pro-Soviet 'Government of National Unity'. Elections in January 1947 gave this government 348 seats to the Peasant Party's 28. In the early part of 1948 the Socialist Party was fused with the CP, and the Peasant Party also joined the government bloc. By the end of 1949 Poland, too, was having its purges. By the middle of the 1950s Eastern Europe had had its politics and economies thoroughly Stalinised.

A different situation arose in Yugoslavia, where under Tito the Communists had taken a major (and uncompromised) role in resisting German invasion. They, too, however, suppressed their political opponents, but nonetheless achieved genuine popularity. As has been often pointed out, this popular support enabled Tito to steer a line independent of Moscow.

By contrast, the other regimes of Eastern Europe have been dependent upon Moscow's support precisely because they imposed themselves upon their populations. They permitted the stationing of Soviet troops upon their countries' soil in order to establish themselves and thereafter never dared to get rid of them. They followed the Soviet model of economic development (i.e. heavy industry) which provided few consumer goods, and permitted their bureaucrats privileges denied to the remainder of the population.

If libertarians alone were unsurprised by the collapse of the Iron Curtain regimes, few if any anticipated its timing. Leaving aside the lack of popular support, and also the cumulative achievement of the thousands of men and women who have spent (and often lost) their lives in principled resistance to Communism: the victims of the gulags, the work camps, the political mental hospitals; two additional factors single themselves out as precipitating the downfall of the East European apparats.

First, the fatal impact of the mass reception of foreign broadcasting on the Communist censorship and propaganda system. It is to television that credit should go for opening the first chinks in the Iron Curtain. As provision of television sets grew, so East Europeans were able to discover what was going on in neighbouring countries, and to make graphic comparisons between their life and life in the West.

Second, it is clear that the revolution could not have come without the clear indication from the Soviet Union that it would no longer intervene militarily to support the satellite regimes. The covert abandoning of the 'Brezhnev doctrine' was of key importance. Although Mikhail Gorbachev could not possibly have intended to set in motion the process that has swept away one Communist government after another, he nonetheless withdrew from them the option of playing the Soviet card.

The big question is, of course, which way will the countries of Eastern Europe go now? Free elections in East Germany favoured the party offering the fastest reunification of the two Germanies, the Christian Democrats. But it is far from clear that the East German population knows and wants the policies for which the Christian Democrats stand.

Now that West German bosses are discovering that many East German workers are poorly trained and unused to labour discipline, West German workers' fears of being vulnerable to cheaper East German labour are proving unfounded. East Germans are therefore likely to rapidly discover that non-state capitalism has its downside, too - that it is as bad living in a country which has all the goods in the world but where you can't afford medical treatment as living in a country which has few goods but medical treatment is free. Nor is the rest of Eastern Europe likely to want to surrender such benefits as the state has been able to provide.

To date, throughout Eastern Europe, the strength of the opposition has been that its demand for basic human rights has united a wide spectrum of political views. Now that political pluralism is possible, the opposition must fragment. On the other hand, the former Communist Parties have split

into two; a more or less large 'reformed' party calling itself social-democratic and meeting with some success, and an old-style hardline rump party with little or no support. Probably, therefore, these countries will opt for some kind of social-democratic system.

But it should not be entirely forgotten that there are long-buried traditions of libertarian socialism in Eastern Europe. Bulgaria, to give but one instance, had a significant anarchist movement up to the Second World War. If people are given the chance to get used to democracy the time will surely arrive when they will again ask whether it should stop at the factory gate.

As for the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's reforms have created some of the conditions for a revolution from below. The nationalisms in the non-Russian republics are there. Glasnost may yet let us see an internal Soviet critique of Lenin which will destroy the legitimacy of the Communist Party's rule in a way which has not been necessary in Eastern Europe, for the reasons already mentioned. At the same time, the Gorbachev reforms have yet to produce the improvements in every-day living standards which are the principal guarantee that democratisation will gather popular support.

Meanwhile, the declarations of independence by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia represent a trotskyist-style 'transitional demand' with a vengeance! Gorbachev surely has no desire to go down in history as the man who presided over the breakup of the Soviet Union; yet is it possible to rerun the Czechoslovakia 1968 scenario and still promote perestroika? Forty years of Communism has virtually obliterated the real socialist message. Socialism has to be reinvented in Eastern Europe, and forged with the strong 'green' consciousness which four decades of heavy pollution from state-run industry have finally engendered.

IN REVIEW

MAHATMA GANDHI

Cosmic wheeler-dealer

Only the 'enlightened' anarchism of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi makes comprehensive sense of our modern spiritual plight, argues GEOFFREY OSTERGAARD, and we ignore it at our collective peril.



Bart de Ligt
The Conquest of Violence
Pluto Press, £7.95

Judith Brown
Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope
Yale University Press, £16.95

Bhikhu Parekh
Colonialism, Tradition and Reform
Sage Books, £10.95

Gandhi's Political Philosophy
Macmillan, £29.50

it difficult to accept this claim made by a man who a few years later became the leader of the Indian National Congress and who is still revered as 'the father of his nation'. Few have gone as far as Albert Meltzer in labelling him a 'fascist', but even those who admire Gandhi for popularising non-violent action have expressed reservations. One such was Bart de Ligt, the Dutch anarchist, whose book, originally published in 1937, has now been reissued with an informative new introduction by Peter van den Dungen. As the latter notes, de Ligt admired "the great Oriental leader" but deplored the tendency to treat him as "an

I, too, am an anarchist - but of another type", said Gandhi in 1916, referring to Indian terrorists of the time. Most Western anarchists have found

infallible messiah"; and he criticised sharply Gandhi's inconsistencies and his willingness to compromise non-violence by serving - non-combatantly - in three British wars.

Gandhi's compromises were prompted by the hope that demonstrations of loyalty to the British Empire would be rewarded by the granting of Dominion status to India. After 1919, when he drastically revised his view of the Empire, he refused to support any further British wars and advocated nonviolent resistance as a way to combat invasions of one's country; but to the end of his life he continued, albeit reluctantly, to acquiesce in the Congress policy of relying on armed defence.

De Ligt's major theme is "the more violence, the less revolution". In essence, what he did was to marry the principled non-violence of the pacifist tradition with the militant direct action and total non-cooperation advocated by syndicalists. The result is the first clear statement of the anarcho-pacifist strategy of non-violent revolution, in which resistance to war is seen as the banner under which the people mobilise for and then carry through the social revolution which will end capitalism and imperialism and, with them, the wars they engender. The late 1930s were not propitious for promoting such a strategy, but the core idea is attractive, and twenty years later influenced those radical pacifists like Michael Randle (currently on bail charged with springing George Blake) who initiated the campaign against preparations for nuclear war.

Gandhi, working in a situation very different from that of Western revolutionaries, did not favour the hoisting of the banner of war resistance. He chided typical war resisters (of whom de Ligt, a trenchant critic of 'bourgeois pacifism', was not one) for addressing symptoms rather than causes. But he, too, pursued a

strategy of non-violent revolution. As he conceived it, this was to be a total revolution involving, not the seizure of power, but the transformation of every aspect of life, political, economic, social and moral; and its scope was not confined to India, but was to encompass eventually the whole world. We must insist that this was Gandhi's grand (not to say grandiose!) project if we are to begin to understand him.

We must also recall the Chinese proverb: "the longest journey begins with the first step". For Gandhi 'the first step' was the political revolution in India, the ending of the British Raj. Even this effort, Gandhi argued, could not be taken successfully unless serious efforts were made to transform other aspects of a degenerate Indian society. But as a 'practical idealist' Gandhi was mainly concerned throughout his public career, after his return to India from South Africa in 1915, with the political revolution. As a result he became deeply immersed in Indian politics. When this involved his organising mass non-violent action against the Raj, Western anarchists have found it possible to applaud him. When, however, it also involved his becoming leader of the main nationalist party and, in this role, engaging in negotiations and compromise, they have reached for their standard textbook of criticisms.

Anarchists disposed to voice such criticisms will find much in Judith Brown's new biography - by far the best to date - both to support and to undermine their views. In two earlier specialist works, dealing with Gandhi's role in Indian politics in the years 1915-22 and 1928-34, she portrayed Gandhi in a startling new way. The older, simplistic view of Gandhi the Mahatma, establishing his possession of charisma and then using it to mobilise the adoring but oppressed masses in the heroic

and non-violent struggle for independence, was heavily discounted. Instead, we were presented with Gandhi the Wheeler-Dealer, establishing his power base in Gujarat and then moving out across the subcontinent, contacting 'local influentials', acting as 'linkman', 'master-broker' and 'mediator' between communities and layers of politics, and managing 'networks of power and loyalty' - all with the aim of achieving political independence. This, despite some qualifications made by Brown, was a brutal new image, but it is one which makes sense to 'realists' who see politics as about power and its use in pursuit of conflicting interests.

In her new biography, where she is concerned with Gandhi the individual and not merely with Gandhi the political leader, Brown paints a more rounded picture. She sketches his view of the world and of India's place in it, outlines his social and economic as well as his political ideas, and briefly discusses the philosophy underpinning his activities. If she dwells mainly on his political role, she does not ignore or belittle the times when Gandhi retreated from 'high politics' to engage in 'constructive work', such as promoting village industries, encouraging communal harmony, and trying to put an end to untouchability. One point she makes about his political leadership is worth emphasising. The influence he exercised was ephemeral and fluctuating; it waxed and then waned several times, depending on the demand for his special skills. He was not, as commonly portrayed, the great driving force of Indian nationalism. As he himself appreciated and accepted without bitterness, he was used by India's politicians when they felt the need of his services, and then at other times politely ignored.

In the last few years of his life, they ignored him almost completely. It was in these years,

as independence approached and his fellow countrymen engaged in mutual mass communal slaughter, that he came to see just how badly he had failed in his mission. But it was in these years, too, that he demonstrated again his unique capacity to influence others. Through his peace marches in the killing fields and his fasts in Calcutta and Delhi, he succeeded in calling a halt to the slaughter. His success was only limited and temporary, and the price paid for it was soon exacted: three bullets in the breast fired from the gun of a Hindu fanatic.

In Brown's assessment, the man thus martyred was 'no plaster saint'. Like the rest of us, he made both good and bad choices, and got caught up in compromises. And it is a mistake to think that the British Raj was evicted as a result of his satyagraha campaigns. Although when taken together they played a significant part in encouraging Indians to shed their fear and acceptance of the Raj and to realise their own strength, no single satyagraha campaign, including the famous Salt March of 1930, led to any immediate or major political concessions. Gandhi's real significance, Brown opines, lies not in what he actually accomplished, which is far less than he is often credited with, but in this: "Fundamentally he was a man of vision and action who asked many of the profoundest questions that face humankind as it struggles to live in community... As a man of his time who asked the deepest questions, even though he could not answer them, he became a man for all times and places".

Just how profound were these questions and how broad the scope of his vision may be gathered by reading Bhikhu Parekh's two volumes, the first an analysis of Gandhi's "political discourse" and the second a critical exposition of his political philosophy. The former includes a fascinating

discussion of Gandhi's views on sexuality and his curious (to Western eyes) experiments of sleeping naked with women of his ashram. Parekh argues convincingly that Gandhi's theory of sexuality formed an integral part of his theory of politics and that the sexual experiments were connected with his search for the sources of "spiritual power". His sexual views are fundamentally flawed but they include some profound insights, which feminists have since taught us to appreciate - notably, that there is a close relationship between 'masculinity' and impulses towards aggression, violence and domination of others. As always, Gandhi acted on his insight and deliberately set out to cultivate his 'feminine' qualities in an effort to become "half-woman".

On the other topics discussed, which include Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation, his position in the Indian debate between ancient and modern, his philosophy of non-violence and his technique of satyagraha, his criticisms of both capitalism and (marxian) communism, and his approach to the problem of untouchability, Parekh is usually both a skilful expositor and a judiciously sympathetic critic. But on one matter, of special interest to anarchists, I think he misreads Gandhi. He notes, correctly, that Gandhi saw the state as "violence in a concentrated and organised form", and as "a soul-less machine" that could "never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence". He notes also that Gandhi wanted India, once the British had quit, to develop as a "non-statal polity" composed of a non-pyramidal network of largely self-sufficient and self-governing "village republics".

He mentions, further, a proposal made by Gandhi after independence and, indeed, on the very eve of his assassination - a proposal which provides an important clue to what Gandhi the non-violent revolution-

ary was about. It was that the Congress which he had done so much to build up should dissolve itself as a political party and be reconstituted as a "constructive work" organisation, dedicated to helping India's villagers achieve real independence. But Parekh also suggests that, by the time he made this proposal, Gandhi had come round to accepting the need for India to develop as a modern state; and moreover that, although his theory lagged behind his practice, he recognised that the state was not simply "organised violence" but was also "a moral and spiritual institution".

Parekh's suggestion is, I think, erroneous. Gandhi certainly did make statements which can be interpreted as 'acceptance' of the state - for example, when he spoke of "a non-violent state" or countenanced the possibility of state ownership of large-scale industries such as the railways. But the 'acceptance' was always de facto, possibly also de jure in the sense in which a state's authority is perceived as legal by the bulk of its citizens. It never involved, however, Gandhi's acknowledgement of the state's alleged moral role.

Gandhi's ambiguities about the state are better interpreted in the light of his Euclidean view of moral ideals ('Euclidean' because a straight line can be clearly defined but no actual line conforms with the definition). "Enlightened anarchy" (his own phrase) was, and remained to the end, Gandhi's ideal. Ideals must be taken seriously as a guide to action but, in the nature of things, humans can only approximate ever more closely to their ideals. The state, therefore, will as a matter of fact continue to exist until humans - or least enough of them - develop sufficient strength to live together peacefully without it. This, of course, is not how Western anarchists, with their talk of the 'abolition' of the state rather than its 'withering away', view the matter. But the idea, and its

related notion of 'the inevitability of gradualness', is central to Indian anarchism.

Parekh is a far better guide on the related subject of Gandhi's conception of politics. Until Gandhi arrived on the scene, politics in India was largely confined to a tiny Westernised elite. Then Gandhi, through his satyagraha campaigns, brought the masses in their millions into politics. He also got involved in state politics and its compromises, but he never equated politics with affairs of state. He vastly extended the notion to embrace all activities which strengthen the capacity of people to become self-reliant, morally autonomous, and co-operative beings. What he called "constructive work" in the villages and elsewhere was therefore for him also politics. In retreating periodically from "high politics" i.e. state politics, he continued to be in politics - pursuing what in his last years he came to see as the more important kind. But, with even greater originality, he went further and sought to transform our very conception of what politics is, or should be, about. He referred to this transformation as "the spiritualisation of politics".

Politics as presently conceived is about power and the use of power to promote or reconcile interests that are deemed to be inevitably conflicting. For Gandhi, this kind of power is "material": it appeals to the baser, animal impulses in humans, exploits their weaknesses, and involves the manipulation of others in ways that may be covertly or overtly violent, or both. It is the kind of power that pervades much of our political, economic, social and domestic life. It expresses itself in domination over others, and the object sought is the furtherance of one set of supposed interests at the expense of another. But, Gandhi believed, there is another kind of power: "spiritual". Unlike

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"material power", it appeals to the higher impulses in humans, recognises the divine element in each and every person, and expresses itself in relationships characterised by positive non-violence - in another word, by love, in the sense of good will and respect for others. Domination over others is absent, and humans cooperate as equals in seeking to achieve goals that are in the interest of all. Put in another way, Gandhi strove to transcend the politics of (material) power and replace it by a new politics - that of truth and its correlative, love.

As Parekh notes, this novel conception is grounded in Gandhi's reinterpretation of Hindu metaphysics. Western political philosophy is anthropocentric: it starts from some view of humanity and its nature. But Gandhi's political philosophy, following the Hindu tradition, starts from his view of the cosmos. According to this view, underlying the world of appearance and of particulars there is Brahman, the cosmic spirit, which is the one ultimate reality, uniting all living beings and also all things. Humans may think of this spirit as either personal or impersonal, or both. Gandhi tended to think of it as impersonal. Hence his statement that the ultimate reality is Truth, and his preferred equation - not 'God is Truth', but 'Truth is God'. Further, Non-Violence is the obverse of Truth, and so for practical purposes the way to Truth. Hence Gandhi's coinage of the term satyagraha, commonly mistranslated as 'non-violent resistance' but meaning literally 'the resolute searching for, and insistence on, Truth'.

Because it is the ultimate reality, Truth exists in the absolute sense; but humans, whose nature is part animal as well as part divine, can only grasp relative truths. From the perspective of the practitioner of satyagraha, therefore, the essence

of a conflict is not the pitting of power (in the material sense) against power, but the pitting of relative truth against relative truth, with the object of bringing both sides nearer to Truth. This provides an epistemological justification of non-violence: no one party knows the whole truth, so no one should impose by violence their relative truth on others. But there is also an ontological justification, reflecting the nature of being. All humans are manifestations of the one cosmic spirit. As such they must be respected as individuals and their individuality cherished. But the individual is neither the first nor the last word. Given the relativity of the cosmic spirit, then, in Auden's phrase, "no one exists alone", and 'the unity of mankind' is no mere rhetorical phrase or pious goal, but an existential - if generally unperceived - fact.

It follows, that in doing violence to others, by exploiting and oppressing them, we do it also to ourselves. It follows, too, that the pursuit of my (or my side's) interest at the expense of the interests of others is the pursuit of an illusion; there is only one real interest, that of all. And beyond human unity there is the unity of humans with other living beings and with nature. To pursue purely human interests at the expense of these other interests is thus also to pursue illusion.

If all this sounds like mystical nonsense, we would do well to pause and ask ourselves: What do I think life is all about? Why do I believe what I believe and do what I do? What are my own metaphysical assumptions? (If 'commonsense' inclines me to say "none", they are probably those of 'dualistic realism'). My own hunch, strengthened after reading Parekh's volumes, is that Gandhi, even if he failed to come up with wholly satisfactory answers, was on the right track. I can see how, if we read him correctly and understand

what he was really about, we might begin to construct a truly universal philosophy for the inhabitants of planet Earth.

The rather ridiculous, frail and ugly little man who swapped a barrister's top-hat and tails for a peasant's loin-cloth to become Churchill's "half-naked fakir", and who blended traditional wisdom with modern insights, beckons us forward to the post-modern world. 'Beckons' is the right word. Millions may have treated him as a messiah, but he did not think of himself as such, much less as an 'infallible' one. "There is no such thing as Gandhism", he once said. "Let no one say that he is a follower of Gandhi. It is enough that I should be my own follower". So, no followers and hence no leader; only an invitation to join him in the search and the struggle. Thus spoke Gandhi the anarchist - "but of another type".

● It was with inexpressible sadness that we learnt that Geoffrey Ostergaard died on 22 March 1990, at the age of 63. He will be sorely missed.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

One of the best of a rather dour bunch

George Woodcock
Letter to the Past

Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Canada, \$25

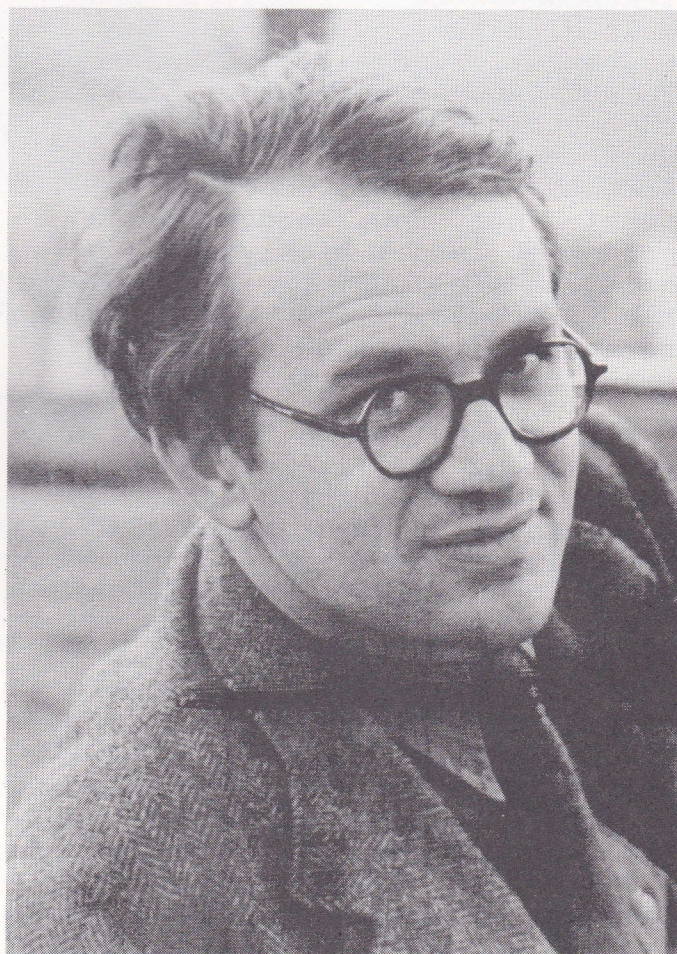
Beyond the Blue Mountains

Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Canada, \$25

WHAT A REMARKABLY likeable anarchist George Woodcock is! One can think of others, if one's acquaintance has been wide - Marie-Louise Berneri, John

Hewetson, Herbert Read, for a start - but in general we tend to be a rather dour bunch, the more so if our anarchism has been a political theory rather than a self-maintaining way of life. Woodcock's anarchism is a self-maintaining way of life and his focus is wide, extending over a huge raft of important scholarly books. So is his sense of fraternity and openness to the ideas of others - the Doukhobours, the Buddhists, the Oblate Fathers or the South Seas Islanders; fraternity is great in theory but I for one find it damn difficult in practice, especially if one is by inclination a scholar as Woodcock is.

These two unpretentious, beautifully written and very candid volumes cover his whole career, from his birth in Winnipeg to his



DECISIVE YEAR: George Woodcock in 1948. The following Spring would see him returned to a new life in Canada.

present recognition as a senior Canadian writer and thinker, something he richly deserves but probably, after a lifetime of considerable aggro from both Right and Left, didn't expect, or at least did not take for granted. I enjoyed these books greatly, especially the first volume, which covers a period when he and I knew some of the same people - he more than I - and tended to espouse the same causes. I enjoy them particularly because they indicate what Woodcock was actually thinking, not obvious at the time because except in print he tended to keep his own counsel.

Many people have written about schooldays in England during the 1920s, but Woodcock's account is marked by a kind of insightful aloofness which I am sure was there as the events occurred. He was learning to be self-reliant and self-directed, but some of the vignettes, such as the account of a Romany funeral where the horse was shot and the caravan burnt, must have been seen poetically at the time to be written about so convincingly now. Woodcock is a good poet (and a highly self-critical one), but prose is surely his first medium, and some of these retrospective passages are outstanding.

Not so many people have written - yet - about the literary scene in London just before and during the War, the years of Orage, Cyril Connolly, the Langham community and Middleton Murray, whom Woodcock sized up very accurately, Now magazine and Poetry Folios, which Peter Wells and I initially printed by hand at Langham. My footprints and his largely coincided, though he had the advantage of eight years of maturity (I was still very wet behind the ears) and since I was a busy medical student with limited time for literary contacts apart from actual writing, he knew much better the people I occasionally met, people like George Orwell; I corresponded with them, he talked to them.

The Forties are long enough past to be in line as a book- and thesis-writing topic, and Woodcock's book is the best source so far to which all those little Ph.Ds can go. It gives an excellent picture of what was and was not in our minds at the time, and also of how untouched by it, in spite of the bombing of London, we somehow were. Neither our determination not to fight under somebody else's orders nor our commitment to anarchism were in fact ever really tested, as they would have been anywhere else in Europe; something people could hold against us but generously never have done. This separateness is also part of the story, which Woodcock brings out as I don't think anyone else has so far done.

The first volume takes us up to the imbecile anarchist trial of 1943, an outlier of the kind of censorship which Mrs Thatcher longs to reimpose today, and Woodcock's decision to return to Canada. The second is occupied very largely with his extensive, formative travels, ending with his Doukhobor contacts and a bizarre symposium at Rideau Hall on the future of the arts in Canada, at which by invitation the uncompromising anarchist took his place with the great and the good, viewing the proceedings with the same level eye.

With sure aim, Woodcock ends with Krishna's sermon on acting without coveting the fruits of action. The Bhagavad Gita, oddly, has more in common with his idea of anarchism, and mine, than those who think primarily in political terms could imagine - something neither of us might have acquired without spending time and receiving education in India, and something likely to be very important in 21st century thought, from politics to physics. This book may also prove important and formative in that uneasy-looking but promising century.

ALEX COMFORT

THE SATANIC VERSES AFFAIR

Obsessed with God's Will

From A EL NOOR, London:

In my article 'Who is afraid of Satan?' (Solidarity #21), I put forward the following ideas:

1. Capitalist technology undermines all traditional cultures and belief systems;
2. A traditionalist culture or belief system under threat will often defend itself by regressing to fundamentalism;
3. Religious fundamentalism is reactionary - spiritually, culturally, socially and politically;
4. A historical (and psychological) interpretation of religion is an essential component of the struggle against religious fundamentalism;
5. In the absence of a historical interpretation of religion people will accept a religious interpretation of history;
6. Atheist socialists and nationalists in Islamic societies have failed to produce and promote a historical interpretation of Islam;
7. Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses is a contribution to the struggle against Islam, which forms the major obstacle to spiritual, cultural, social and political progress in Islamic societies.

Two criticisms of the article appeared in the following issue. Liz Willis argued that I failed to deal with the internal power struggles within Islamic societies which may have contributed to the response to The Satanic Verses, nor did I mention other struggles, notably by women, against Islamic fundamentalism. True. Both issues require separate articles.

It is a common tendency of the left to reduce a struggle between

ideas to a political power struggle. I wanted to emphasis the significance of ideas in the struggle against religion because the thinking of the left is dominated by economic and political categories, neglecting psychological and spiritual issues. This neglect, a by-product of marxism and its "base and superstructure" theory, can cost dearly, as the Iranian experience has shown.

As for the women's issue, I stated clearly in my article, "Women's liberation may well be the most explosive social issue in Islamic societies". I never underestimated the significance of women's struggles in Islamic societies. However, if women try to achieve their liberation while being dominated by Islamic beliefs, or while lacking a coherent critique of Islam, their struggle is doomed to fail. This has been demonstrated more than once in the recent past.

Alison Weir is upset by my article (and by Rushdie's book). She feels the article lacks compassion for the beleaguered Muslim community in the UK. She states her dilemma: "Yes, we want anyone to publish what they want (except pornography) but also... we want the large number of Muslims in our midst not to be misheard or misunderstood".

I did not address the 'freedom of speech' issue because this can be dealt with adequately by liberals. I insist that Muslims everywhere be heard and understood. Does this imply that I - or Ms. Weir - have to refrain from a critique of Islam?

My article was a reminder of the right, and the duty, of socialists to criticise religion. Too many people on the left have succumbed to political or emotional blackmail and failed to come out openly against Islamic fundamentalism in

its fanatic attack on Rushdie (burning his book in public, taking public oaths to assassinate him, burning shops selling the book, etc. I assume Ms. Weir is opposed to book-burning, but she seems to equate criticism of the ideas motivating the book-burners with persecution.

Criticising ideas does not imply persecution of the people who uphold these ideas. I defend the right of any group of believers anywhere to preach and practice their faith without being persecuted, but I insist in return on the right to criticise, blaspheme, and ridicule any belief, anywhere, without being persecuted myself.

I consider The Satanic Verses as a cry of pain by a sensitive writer deeply troubled by the suffering which Islamic beliefs inflict on Islamic societies. Sure, this book is not a historical interpretation of Islam, it is a work of fiction designed to ridicule Islam. I consider ridicule a legitimate, though insufficient, weapon against religion. It is often very effective, as the Rushdie affair shows. In their outrageous response to the book, the Islamic authorities revealed the nature of their beliefs, thereby promoting further criticism. The book thus contributed to the struggle against Islam. This process is painful to believers, but it is positive, for it will help rid some minds of an outdated, authoritarian belief system. This applies to any religious fundamentalism, be it Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim, and ought to be supported by any principled atheist.

Fundamentalist religion is obsessed with God's Will, not with human welfare. It is the struggle against fundamentalism that is motivated by compassion for actual, living people. I suggest Ms. Weir direct some of her compassion for the beleaguered Muslim community in the UK towards the young women beleaguered within that community. She need not accept my views, she could conduct her own research in

an Islamic community to find out from young women how Islamic beliefs of their fathers affect their lives. If she finds the results disturbing she will face a new dilemma: to spare the peace of mind of the fathers by allowing the daughters to succumb to total subordination to Islamic patriarchal authoritarianism, or to support the daughters' struggle to liberate themselves from authoritarian domination at the expense of outraging their fathers and the religious authorities.

THE POLL TAX

Tinted telescope

From JOHN KING, Melbourne, Australia:

Greeting from the Antipodes! The two pieces on Russia (Solidarity #19) were interesting, but one issue neither writer raised is the degree to which a restoration of full-blooded capitalism is on the agenda. For once, though, I'm inclined to agree with Tariq Ali, who said in a recent radio interview here that socialists can once again look to the USSR with hope (not to the bureaucracy, but to the many strands of opposition, which will prove uncontrollable).

As ever, there's little real politics down here. Despite the election campaign the two main parties look more like Tweedledum and Tweedledee than ever. But neither of them has yet come up with anything as daft as the Poll Tax. What is Solidarity's analysis of the the anti-Poll Tax movement? There are obvious parallels with the Anti-Poor Law movement of the 1830s! And the scope for mass disobedience seems greater than for quite a long time, or am I looking at things through rose-tinted spectacles?

All the best.