

# The Opium of Authority

Review

Alice Detroit

1985

a review of

*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. Danilo Kis, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1978

Few *Fifth Estate* readers have illusions about the revolutionary nature of the Bolshevik state, but in case any do remain, this book effectively dispels such illusions. Strictly speaking, Kis's book is not just one more denunciation of the Soviet Union and it does not self-righteously condemn the individuals who were caught up in the revolutionary fervor in the days when the overthrow of the Tsar seemed to promise fulfillment of long-awaited hopes.

We live in different times and it is easy for us to reject the compromises we read about in this book. The characters depicted are close to us in situation and outlook. Their destinies are not as different from ours as ideologues like Irving Howe (whose recommendation besmirches the book's dust jacket) would have us believe.

The author clearly finds affinities between himself and the individuals he describes. Very few are judged harshly, but Kis's position is clear: He heartily disapproves of a person submerging himself to the interests of the state or any outside institution.

We meet characters who were terrorists, pamphleteers, and dissident intellectuals before the revolution. As the new state consolidates itself, these individuals retain varying degrees of personal integrity; they become aware of the enormous discrepancy between the ideal and reality. The state will not tolerate being judged, and it quickly punishes and isolates these "anti-social" individuals.

The reader momentarily feels satisfaction when a bureaucrat in the Soviet regime falls prey to the crushing wheels of the state. We know a little of his background and say, "Good, he'll finally be disabused of his blindness." But the satisfaction turns to disgust as the state's revenge is sketched in terse, ironic understatement.

Boris Davidovich Novsky, the protagonist of the title story, is willing to acknowledge the primacy of the state over the individual but insists on retaining his self-image as a principled revolutionary. When he finally submits and writes his confession, he tries "to incorporate into the confession—probably the only document of his that would remain after his death—a certain wording that would not only cushion his final downfall but also whisper to a future investigator, through the skillfully woven contradictions and exaggerations, that the whole structure of this confession rested on a lie squeezed out of him by torture." (97–98)

For the opportunist, a run-in with the state is not tragic. One clever man has remarkable skills in media manipulation. In a cathedral which had been serving as a brewery since the end of the revolution, he impersonates a priest and conducts a church service in order to prove to a visiting French dignitary (one sympathetic to the regime) that the Soviet government has not outlawed religion. This clever man is imprisoned for reasons which are not clear but he is soon rehabilitated after becoming an informer during his prison term.

Danilo Kis was born in 1935 in a town on the border between Yugoslavia and Hungary where he was a youthful victim of Nazi terror. After his father was killed by the Germans, he went with his mother to live with her relatives in Montenegro, Yugoslavia. A poet, novelist and translator, Kis has also been a professor of Serbo-Croatian literature in various French universities. His novels were written in Serbo-Croatian.

Marxism-Leninism is the current opium of the authoritarian mentality. It gives comfort to the individual who truly believes that The Party both furthers the historical process and knows what is best for everyone. A state system incorporating this principle requires ideological conformity in addition to the usual adherence to social norms. Hence the need for a mind police. Such systems have not been common.

The Inquisitional Church and the New England Puritan Colony succeeded in establishing an order which claimed authority over the individual's thoughts. The Soviet state is their modern counterpart and Kis points out the parallels by setting one of the seven stories in this book in Spain during the Inquisition. Hopefully Kis's insights will temper uncritical enthusiasm for the numerous national liberation struggles which take the Bolsheviks as their model.

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