

Beatrix Campbell meets the architect of perestroika

# Moments Of Truth

Tatyana Zaslavskaya is the director of the Soviet National Public Opinion Research Centre, an MP and president of the Soviet Sociology Association. She wrote a major critique of the Soviet economy in 1983, leaked to the West as the *Novosibirsk Manifesto*, which anticipated Gorbachev's perestroika process by two years

In *The Second Socialist Revolution* (IB Tauris, 1990) you describe the process of your own political self-discovery. Tell us about that drama.

You are right to speak of drama, because it was very difficult to achieve change. Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, all of us who were in a scientific institute or university had to follow the ideological rules and norms. But through thinking and reading, our minds were moving in directions not confirmed by society.

So for me there appeared a crack. What was I to think, what was I to teach students or write in my books? It's really difficult to have such a crack in yourself.

In about 1981 or '82, I was ill with a very heavy depression, because it was impossible to study the problems which I wanted to. You know, the Brezhnev era was a time of very dark reaction. We radical, progressive scientists tried to express our ideas in a hidden form, thinking that clever readers would understand and use them. But the ideological controllers discovered what we were trying to say quicker than the readers did!

Your book gives a very powerful picture of you somewhere around Novosibirsk, with agricultural village people who live on little or nothing, working in a barren, oppressed place. The feeling that emerges is that your scientific and political expertise come very strongly from there. Did listening to the people there help you to survive?

I don't know. I have had luck in my scientific life. I graduated from the Moscow University economics faculty, where I was already *persona non grata* because of my original and disobedient way of thinking.

But then the Academy of Sciences picked me. For 12 years I worked in Moscow, until at the beginning of the 60s the atmosphere in Moscow economic life also became very conservative.

At this time, the Novosibirsk Institute of Economics was organised and I was invited there. There were very young people there, radical, democratic. Academician Aganbegyan was the director and he gathered a very creative team of people together. We lived 3,000 miles from Moscow and 30 kilometres from





Novosibirsk, so party controllers visited us only one or two times a month. All other time was ours to discuss and write what we wanted. If I'd stayed in Moscow, I'm quite sure that I wouldn't be as I am now.

**The collection of data, sociology, public opinion polls - all this is fantastically important to perestroika because, as you say in the book, here is a society which lives with a silence about itself. How do you cope with the fact that much of the new knowledge is such bad news?**

**But it was normal to have negative information before. Of course, the majority of official information in the press and the speeches of our leaders was optimistic. We had bad information.**

**So you were Cassandra?**

No! But not a convenient person. Lucky for me, I was elected early on, at first a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences and then a full member. That has a very high scientific status.

**You were powerful?**

Not so much powerful as prestigious and respected. For example, the censor felt uncomfortable telling me what could be published, and he'd say: 'You can understand... of course you are right... but I ask you please, let us....' Every day was a fight to publish.

The *Novosibirsk Manifesto* was written for our scientific seminar in Novosibirsk in 1983. There are no state secrets in it, but it was censored.

**Is it published yet?**

Not in Russian. But it was necessary to have it at the seminar, so I went to Aganbegyan and he said, 'Let us publish it for official needs' - that means restricted publication, where everyone who sees a copy has to sign and return it. We published 150 copies. One phrase - about the need for radical change to the whole system of relations of production - was treated as most dangerous.

**Can we talk about the 'whole system'? The government has decided to postpone any radical reform of prices for another three years. What do you think about that?**

I talked about price reform in 1986, over three years ago. I believed it was necessary because economic relations were basically upside-down. It was impossible to stimulate effective production if prices had no content, no meaning. Some were very high and others were only half the actual production cost. But prices were stable, so reform made sense.

Time passed, nothing was done and we got rather fast inflation with fluid prices.

In this situation it seems to me not such a good idea to reform prices. But our government and Prime Minister Ryzhkov now think it's necessary. But not Gorbachev. Gorbachev wanted to calm the population, because nobody believed that the state would compensate their loss. So Gorbachev says, 'Don't worry, no price reforms for two or three years,' and Ryzhkov weeps!

**What do you think?**

I think it could be explained to people what will be gained and what may be lost. We have undertaken two public-opinion studies on price reform. About a year ago 20% had no opinion, the others were divided: about one-quarter for and three-quarters against reform.

Our last study showed that now, about 40% have no determined opinion. So they are thinking, and the rest are equally for and against. I think support for reform will increase and the conditions will then exist for making changes. Because this is the first step to economic reform.

**That means economic reform will be very slow. But aren't people's needs, as well as their expectations, very high?**

Yes, they had high expectations that many goods would be on the shelves, but those expectations have not been realised, and I think that at least for one or two years they can't be realised.

**Will Gorbachev survive?**

We have so many unexpected events now that any predictions are very conditional. Our public-opinion studies show that Gorbachev has high prestige: 77% support his politics. Last year, 46% named him Man Of The Year. But the social situation is so dynamic, so complex, we don't know how events will develop.

**In your book, you present a stiff challenge to conventional wisdoms about marxism. You challenge Marx and Engels about the market. You challenge, implicitly, leninism and bolshevism about the right of the vanguard party to rule. But you remain optimistic about socialism. What is socialism now?**

**I would be thankful if you could explain what socialism is!**

**Do you want to be a socialist, a communist? Does it matter?**

I am a communist because I am a member of the Communist Party, but now we find people with quite opposite views in the Communist Party.

The Academy of Sciences was asked about two years ago, by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, to analyse all available research and writing and to ask what socialism is.

A special theoretical seminar has been working, already for rather a long time, and we have had many very interesting reports discussing the history of socialist views, from Utopian socialism, the Marx/Engels stage and Lenin, the problems of property and socialism, the modern capitalist countries, Swedish socialism, and of course our own distorted form.

Unfortunately, the result of all this work up to now is that the notion of socialism can't be determined strictly scientifically. The main tradition was that socialism is a kind of society, just as we constructed in our country. But now, when we see the negative results, it's very hard to identify a theoretical notion of socialism with our own practice.

**The informal world of civil society: personal life, consumption, the reproduction of everyday life, is in crisis in the Soviet Union. And women bear the burden of that crisis. How will that sphere be reformed?**

The status of women is much worse now than for some years, because they are engaged in this sphere - for example, shopping. It takes much more time and labour to get the necessary goods, and then to cook, because now there's nothing, no potatoes, no butter and so on. If perestroika is to be successful, there must be good shopping! Then women will be more free. Our Supreme Soviet has a special committee for women's problems, and they are working out some laws in favour of women.

**But is there any concern with the problem of men? The problem of patriarchy?**

Indirectly. For example, there is consideration of a law where men would get the right to stay with the children if the family decides that would be best.

**Political life in the Soviet Union is now filled with many different movements and political projects. Are you pleased by this pluralism or are you afraid of it?**

Both. I am pleased, of course, because this is a necessary way of activating the population. And the process can't be refined, pure, with white gloves, because it is the voice of people who have no traditions of civilised political life.

On the other hand, when I see with my own eyes very reactionary movements, so aggressive with their threats - I also get threatening letters - it is not pleasant. But I think that is a necessary price for the political development of society.

**Do you think the Communist Party should split?**

I think it should, because it's a very strange phenomenon, a political party which is at least three different parties.