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What Became of the Liberal Tradition?—Comments on *Samosoznanie*

SAMOSOZNANIE: SBORNIK STATEI. Compiled and edited by *P. Litvinov*, *M. Meerson-Aksenov*, and *B. Shragin*. New York: "Khronika," 1976. 320 pp. \$9.00, paper.

The volume of collected critical and polemical essays by several authors (*sbornik*) has become a well-recognized genre of Russian political literature. While its antecedents reach into the nineteenth century, its immediate model and inspiration are the collection *Vekhi* (*Landmarks, or Signposts*) of 1909 and the recent *Iz-pod glyb* (*From under the Rubble*). Although there are many points of difference among the contributing authors to such a *sbornik*, there is a common focus and direction, and one can speak justifiably of the volume as an expression of collective opinion. The collection under review, *Samosoznanie* (*Self-Awareness*), aims at carrying on the liberal message of *Vekhi* and at providing a counterpoint to the notions propounded in *Iz-pod glyb*. While the main thrust of *Iz-pod glyb* was ethical, directed at the Russian people in general, *Samosoznanie* is deliberately legalistic and concerns the intelligentsia almost exclusively. This is not to say that none of the authors in the latter (one of whom, E. Barabanov, has contributed to both collections) displays any concern for ethics, quite the contrary, but it is not at the center of their argument.

Whatever their differences, all the authors of *Samosoznanie* claim to carry on the democratic and liberal tradition that they discern in *Vekhi*. In this regard the reviewer shares their basic beliefs and finds their views more congenial than those expressed in *Iz-pod glyb*. It is for precisely this reason that he feels it necessary to point out the weaknesses in their argument and stance.

Inasmuch as they talk only of the intelligentsia, democracy means to them primarily freedom of opinion and information and security from arbitrary and excessive persecution for efforts at securing this freedom. On the other hand, democracy has traditionally pointed to specific ways in which this freedom could be realized and secured, and the absence of discussion of such means in *Samosoznanie* is curious to say the least. Moreover, the definition of liberalism, implicit in the authors' usage of the term, also raises some questions in this reviewer's mind. Indeed, on the pages of *Samosoznanie* liberalism is equated with tolerance of all opinions and respect for the individual's right to know and to externalize his knowledge without hindrance. That this is an essential element of the liberal creed in the West needs no proof. But it is only one element, and one it shares with classical conservatism in its Anglo-American tradition. What distinguishes liberalism from conservatism in this tradition (to which the authors appeal) are specific political and institutional arrangements and viewpoints, such as constitutional settlements and absolute property rights. *Samosoznanie* is not concerned with these (oblivious of B. Kistiakovskii's and P. Struve's pleas in *Vekhi*), and inasmuch as most contributors advocate a humane socialism one may ask whether their claim to liberalism is justified. This would be mere semantic quibbling

of no intrinsic importance were it not related to some other aspects of their stand and argument which raise fundamental questions.

Historically, liberalism was both a political program and a method to bring about an institutional order that would promote and protect individual endeavors; it assumed a legal order and demanded institutional mechanisms capable of securing this order and of protecting the citizens in the pursuit of their private activities. In the West, consequently, liberals directed their efforts at securing rights within the framework of a constitutional arrangement already in existence (as in England and the United States) to be established on the basis of precise rules (as in France or Germany). *Samosoznanie*, however, explicitly rejects consideration of political (constitutional) programs and overt political action (parties, programs, and so forth). Of course, in the context of Soviet reality such discussions and actions are impossible; yet the explicit refusal of the authors of this volume to engage in any form of political discussion and to pursue what they call "unpolitical democracy" (p. 79) and "inner freedoms" (p. 277) is somewhat puzzling. To be sure, nonviolence (which they advocate in the pursuit of their goals) in noncooperation with judicial and institutional practices is a form of political activism (whose effectiveness has been demonstrated in India and the United States) and perhaps the only one available to the Soviet citizen. But to be effective, nonviolence must have a common ground of discourse with its repressive opponent (it did not work in Nazi Germany), for the latter's recourse to coercion is limited by this very common ground. In the absence of such common ground (as in the USSR), to declare in advance one's absolute rejection of active political struggle is to put the oppressor on notice that he has "nothing to fear but fear itself." Furthermore, it deprives the opposition of its most powerful tool—the denial of legitimacy to the system in power. In this sense Solzhenitsyn and his collaborators in *Is-pod glyb* were more radical and consistent, for they refused legitimacy to the Soviet system on metaphysical and moral grounds. One sees nothing of this in *Samosoznanie*.

The concrete form of opposition recognized by *Samosoznanie* and practiced by its authors and their friends in the Soviet Union (and whose history is chronicled on many a page of this volume) is the defense of basic human rights against their violation by Soviet authorities. The importance of this struggle cannot be gainsaid and its effectiveness within limits has to be proclaimed loudly and proudly. Yet, this reviewer cannot help feeling that there is something unsatisfactory in the *theoretical* arguments by which the struggle is justified on *Samosoznanie's* pages. There can be violation of human (individual) rights only where such rights are recognized institutionally. To be sure, some of these rights are acknowledged in theory by the Soviet constitution of 1936, but no institutional mechanism or practice is provided for their implementation. Protest against their violation without protest against the absence of an institutional mechanism or advocacy of an alternative system of implementation seems empty; quite clearly this is how the Soviet authorities see it, and react in consequence. Furthermore, such a position tacitly acknowledges the legitimacy of the Soviet institutional ("constitutional") setup, which only weakens the case. As for appealing to international conventions, this seems to be of very limited effectiveness and can surely not lead to the basic transformation of the system which is necessary to preclude further violations of rights.

In his very suggestive article, "Pravda gumanizma," E. Barabanov attempts to give a theoretical and metaphysical foundation to the defense of individual rights. Unfortunately, he starts with a confusion (alas, becoming quite general nowadays) between Humanism (in the Renaissance—and only correct—meaning of the term) and humanism in the sense of humaneness or, as French philosophes called it in the eighteenth century, *philanthropie*. While Humanism did in truth imply a glorification of the in-

dividual and his creativity, it did not involve the notion of rights. The latter stems from the concept of "lawfulness" that was introduced into philosophic and political discourse in the seventeenth century and which presupposes a regulative system of autonomous norms (quite far from Renaissance voluntarism!). Barabanov argues that Humanism subsumes every individual's right to develop and enhance his creative spiritual potential to the maximum. It is doubtful, however, that such a notion can serve as the foundation for a juridical system of rights that can be implemented institutionally; and certainly it is an inadequate metaphysical underpinning for the understanding of the nature of *zoon politikon*, that is, a member of society. Barabanov's definition can as readily justify bohemia and anarchy, in which case the notion of a violation of rights (in the juridical sense) would be irrelevant (as Leo Tolstoy realized long ago). One does sense in *Samosoznanie* a metaphysical yearning, a yearning for a spiritual definition of the individual, but it does not go beyond a vague Christianity, hardly substantial enough to provide a solid foundation for the defense of concrete civil rights.

A similar vagueness bedevils the "longing for history"—a longing for a sense of continuity and stability—which B. Shragin writes about. Seemingly in answer to this longing, G. Pomerants argues for an enlightened *pochvennost'* (rootedness) in a stimulating and thoughtful article. One cannot agree more with Pomerants's argument, but as it involves an analytical and rational discrimination between various kinds of ties to the past and soil one wishes for specific criteria—and these are not provided. As many remarks in *Samosoznanie* make clear, and as the inclusion of Richard Pipes's chapter 11 from his *Russia under the Old Regime* confirms, most contributors believe that in Russia, at least since the early sixteenth century, there was nothing but the tradition of the state and the autocracy, hence the weakness of liberalism and the facile triumph of October 1917. Therefore, they argue, it is the task of the contemporary intelligentsia to develop an alternative tradition, and to this end it is imperative that basic rights of free expression of opinion and access to information be guaranteed in Russia. (Oddly enough, Pomerants [p. 238] recalls approvingly the famous dictum of the Slavophile Konstantin Aksakov—which he erroneously attributes to his brother Ivan: "the power of authority [belongs] to the tsar, the power of opinion [belongs] to the people.")

The rational orientation of *Samosoznanie* stands the authors in good stead in singling out the characteristic essence of the Soviet system—and this is their most important contribution to an understanding of contemporary Soviet politics. In line with Alain Besançon's brilliant analysis (*Court traité de soviétologie à l'usage des autorités civiles, ecclésiastiques et militaires*, to appear shortly in English), they see the Soviet system as an *ideocracy*, that is, the ideologically preconceived notion of what is to be has to be taken for reality and treated as such, and the existing reality which does not tally with this notion is to be denied existence. This forces every Russian to live in a total lie and, to the extent that he becomes a conscious personality, he develops a schizophrenic intellectual life that leads to spiritual annihilation. This is precisely what Solzhenitsyn protests against on ethical, religious, and metaphysical grounds, and here the authors of *Iz-pod glyb* and *Samosoznanie* are in agreement. Thus, if a harmonious synthesis of the two approaches could be developed, it might lead to a more satisfactory political stance and an effective program of action.

Unfortunately, in dealing with this aspect of the Soviet system some contributors to *Samosoznanie* resort to facile sociological analysis and an abuse of pseudoscientific jargon, so that—with rare exceptions—their prose is quite indigestible. Stylistic and verbal clumsiness bespeaks awkwardness of thought, which of course detracts from *Samosoznanie*'s effectiveness. By contrast, the appealing and emotional style of *Iz-pod glyb* proves an effective and popular tool of persuasion. Unlike the latter, which appeals

to emotions and the ethical sense (as did the Slavophiles), *Samosoznanie* resorts to rational argument and appeals to the intellect (following Herzen's example). While it may be impossible to evaluate the sophistication and coherence of an emotional appeal, an intellectual and analytical approach has to be judged and evaluated on the level of rational argument. In this respect it must be said frankly that *Samosoznanie* is disappointing; it does not even approximate the level of logical, political, and philosophical sophistication that we ought to expect from men who aspire to succeed the contributors to *Vekhi*. In fact, in their naïveté, loose logic, and thin informational background, the contributors to *Samosoznanie* remind us rather of the pre-Decembrists and Decembrists with whom they otherwise share many similarities that would be fascinating to explore.