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Mind Against the Wall: Essays on Lithuanian Culture Under Soviet Occupation.

Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Ed.

Institute of Lithuanian Studies Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1983. 180 pages. Hard cover. Dust jacket.

The book consists of an Introduction by the Editor, Rimvydas Šilbajoris (pp. 5-18) and seven essays as follows: "Russian Communism and Lithuanian Nationalism," by Julius Slavėnas (pp. 17-33); "On the Deformations of Intellectual Culture," by Vytautas Kavolis (pp. 34-56); "Official Soviet Ideology and the Lithuanian People," by Aleksandras Shtromas (pp. 57-73); "Socialist Realism and the Politics of Literature in Occupied Lithuania," by Rimvydas Šilbajoris (pp. 74-106); "The Reception of World Literature in Contemporary Lithuania," by Tomas Venclova (pp. 107-129); "The Press in Lithuania Under the Soviets," by Zenonas V. Rekašius (pp. 130-146); and "The Protection and Restoration of Architectural Monuments in Lithuania After 1950," by Jurgis Gimbutas (pp. 147-180).

The aim of the book is stated clearly in the Introduction:

Occasionally, a Western commentator will react to the voices of exiles from the USSR as one might to those of any political groups crying foul after the loss of their struggle for power. Admittedly, most communities of exiles have politicians among them whose ideas or ambitions are now obsolete and irrelevant to the future of their countries, sometimes in direct proportion to the bitterness of their outcries. In the world as it is today, however, it is important to make a crucial distinction: the voice of the exile is not the grumbling of political malcontents; it is a cry of moral outrage. When the Jews and other peoples under the Nazi gun cried out to the world, they were not lamenting lost comforts or privileges; they sought help against a power whose face was death. It should be clear by now that those who speak of death doing well in Moscow are not engaging in hysterical exaggerations: the statistical evidence alone is overwhelming. Neither is cultural, ethnic, and spiritual genocide a mere metaphor; it is a reality that the free world is morally obliged to perceive and understand. Hopefully, the present volume may contribute to such an understanding, an understanding upon which the very future of mankind depends, (pp. 15-16).

Each essay deals with a specific area, except, perhaps, the article/essay by Aleksandras Shtromas, "Official Soviet Ideology and the Lithuanian People," which is of a more general nature. Shtromas presents a short historical sketch starting in 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, and finishes his survey on the attitudes of the Lithuanians with some personal observations since Shtromas left Lithuania only a few years ago. These observations are very concrete, and we will cite them here at length:

Effects on the People: Apolitization

Such a situation cannot help but produce the effect of political resignation, of social autism. If one does not accept the single political doctrine officially declared as the creed of every Soviet citizen and yet cannot declare himself for another, or even question the official one, then one instinctively begins to withdraw from everything political: an attempt to approach politics has become as repulsive as touching a toad, and engaging in it as dangerous as stepping on a venomous snake. But an absolute apoliticism in an absolutely politicized society, whatever the mode by which one chooses to place oneself above it in an attempt to justify one's stance, is moral cynicism or, at best, escapism. People think as follows: "We fought for eight years and won nothing, losing instead the finest flower of our people. Now we are not fighting and yet, somehow, we live — even better than before. The country is developing; a modicum of prosperity has been achieved. You cannot do much more, because it is force that decides, not reason. And even if we were to come up with something, we still could do nothing by ourselves. So, no use trying. Let us live for as long and insofar as we are permitted to."

But a characteristic of human beings is precisely that they cannot simply "live for as long and insofar as they are permitted

to." Not having an opportunity to express their humanity fully in an official social context, people will seek out other compensations. They either withdraw into themselves or into a narrow family circle, or else they create, on the basis of acquaintance or of some common interests, informal groups of friends. There are all sorts of informal "friendly" groups, but very seldom are they built on common political interests. The higher strata of intelligentsia concentrate on "pure art" and "pure culture," on aesthetics (less frequently also on ethics, which already comes dangerously close to politics), and others turn to sports, the affairs of daily life, and so on. But almost everywhere what dominates is an oppressive feeling of a void of existential meaninglessness, of lack of any real fulfillment.

Since this condition is intolerable to a human being, in an effort to fill the void, to escape the meaningless daily grind, or perhaps to still the pangs of conscience, a person begins to drink. Many of these informal groups in the end gather around nothing more than a bottle of vodka or brandy (or, those who cannot afford that, around "ink" — a fortified, sweet, cheap red wine). This "activity" is especially popular among the *apparatchiks* and official "workers in the arts." To them, drinking has even been elevated to something of a cult, a substitute for a symbol of "caste fidelity," along with all sorts of ideological rituals. "If you don't drink, you are suspect, you are different and, most likely, an enemy; you have to be gotten rid of as soon as possible." (pp. 67-68).

Since in contemporary occupied Lithuania everything is controlled from Moscow, there is very little left for local initiative. Only in some instances of the restoration of old architectural monuments some local initiative may be observed as it can be seen in the essay by Dr. Jurgis Gimbutas. One would expect some local initiative in the area of the press, but there is practically none, as can be seen in the article by Dr. Zenonas Rekašius. Even the format of the main dailies in Lithuania are like that of the Moscow **Pravda and Izvestiya**, i.e., usually only four pages.

The whole dismal, monotonous, and sad situation in Lithuania of today could be summarized in the last lines of Dr. Šilbajoris' essay:

Kubilius' statement serves very well as a conclusion to the present survey. It is evident that efforts to redefine socialist realism in Lithuania so that it takes into account changes in literature and meets the standards of civilized contemporary thought have not been successful, primarily because no one has tried very hard. The reason for this is simple — this supposed literary method and theory is actually a tool of governmental control, as indispensable as all the others used by the regime. The painful thing is the violation of human integrity — a genocide of the spirit that results from all the efforts to portray the enslavement and humiliation of man as the fulfillment of his noblest essence and aspirations. (pp. 104-105).

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