

PROBLEMS OF COMMUNISM

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1970

EDUCATION IN THE USSR

Leon E. Fisher
Education: Opportunities
Barbara Tiedtgen
Soviet Army Officer's Education

CONSTITUTION

David J. Goldberg
The Soviet as "Democracy"

Book Reviews
Reviews: 55

SOVIET UNDERGROUND BALLADS

Editor: David J. Goldberg. 1970. 112 pages. \$1.50. (Paperback)

Ballads from the Underground

Selected and Translated by Misha Allen

NOTE: A new genre of social commentary and dissent—magnitizdat—has developed in the Soviet Union. It involves the use of private recording equipment to reproduce, circulate, and perform folk and protest ballads at private gatherings. Magnitizdat—which draws its name from the Russian words magnitofon (tape recorder) and izdat (to publish)—is an underground phenomenon, unsanctioned and deprived of public facilities through which it might be heard, although it is apparently not illegal. Among the most popular performers of the underground ballads are Mikhail Nozhkin and Vladimir Vysotsky, both established Soviet film actors. In the first of the selections presented here,

Nozhkin sings of a quest for social justice and a less materialistic way of life. The next five ballads, all by Vysotsky, tell in true folk fashion of hypocrisy, of alienation, of prisoners and prison camps, and even of the meddlesome Chinese Communists ("A Letter from Workers in Tambov"). The final selection, the anonymous "A Ditty about Bedbugs," satirizes the very distressing problems of life in crowded Soviet apartments.

These ballads from the underground are part of a voluminous collection of Soviet songs on record and tape belonging to Misha Allen. Mr. Allen is a Canadian specialist in Russian culture and folklore, as well as a translator and teacher.

Mikhail Nozhkin

AT THE LENIN MUSEUM

Year by year our life gets better.
Every shop has customers galore.
We grab up food and clothing—
What we need and often something more.
In our apartments crystal stands in rows;
In our homes, ceramics by the pound.
We snobbishly crave imported clothes,
And with junk our wardrobes all abound.

While in the Lenin Museum
There are two overcoats with bullet holes,
Two worn-out suits, a pair of shoes,
A cup, some books, and nothing else.

We should live more austere and simple lives.
Yet we worship fashion, luxury;
Put on airs of greedy merchant wives;

Fill our hankies with deposits;
Spend thousands on our pleasure cars,
And treat them as our precious dears;
Drape ourselves in sealskin and in mink,
And diamond jewels wear upon our ears.

While in the Lenin Museum . . . (refrain)

We live much better now, that's clear.
One might even say that life is great,
The life we labored for from year to year
And justly did anticipate.
Only, we should take great care
Not to soar too high (and fall).
To save our human soul, let us
Once in half a century recall . . .

That in the Lenin Museum . . . (refrain)

THE LENINGRAD BLOCKADE

I grew up during the Leningrad Blockade.
Then neither wine nor women turned my head.
I saw the Radayev Warehouses in ashes laid
And gazed up for my meager dole of bread.

Brave citizens, what were you doing then,
When our city couldn't even count its dead?
You were eating caviar and bread, while I
Scrounged for cigarette butts instead.

Birds were grounded by the bitter cold.
For a thief there wasn't anything to burn.
That winter angels took away my folks,
And I feared that I, too, might succumb.

We were deluged with hunger, malnutrition.
All starved—even the public prosecutor.
We read news about evacuation
And listened to the radio commentator.

It seemed the blockade never would be over,
But our nation in the end won victory.
And now we could really live in clover,
If the volunteer militia'd only let us be.

I beg you kindly, citizens in armbands,
Don't lay upon my soul your grubby hands!
The AUCCTU, I'd suppose,
Our unpatriotic deeds already knows.¹

SERIOZHKA FOMIN

Like any other gang a-roamin',
We sang all night and many a vodka drained.
We never liked Seriozhka Fomin,
Because he always seemed so self-contained.

Once at Seriozhka's, as we sat about
(It is true we always had reunions there),
We learned that war had broken out
As Molotov's famed words came o'er the air.

At the recruiting office I was told:
"Your plant will defer you—you're too old."

But I enlisted. Seriozhka Fomin didn't bother,
Thanks to the professor, his father.

While I shed my blood for country and for home,
Something always burned me up inside:
I was bleeding for Seriozhka Fomin,
While he sat back and didn't risk his hide.

At last the war was over.
The heavy burden from our shoulders passed.
I met Seriozhka Fomin. Lo!
"Hero of the Soviet Union" on his breast.

¹ The volunteer militia is an unpaid auxiliary police force which wears red armbands and patrols the streets of Soviet cities to combat hoodlums, i.e., thieves, drunks, and loafers. Workers are recruited for these assignments through

local organs of the AUCCTU (The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions), which also maintain work records of all citizens (including arrests and sentences). The thief in this ballad seems not to mind adding a new arrest to his record.

MY FRIEND HAS LEFT FOR MAGADAN

My friend has left for Magadan;
My friend has left for Magadan.
Take off your hats; wish him the best!
He went himself—
Without police, without arrest.¹
Not because he wasn't doing well,
Or 'cause he's an oddball, as some tell,
He simply went.

I know that some will ask, "What for?
Why give up everything you have?
What's out there but labor camps galore
Full of murderers, full of murderers?"
He answers them, "The rumors are untrue.
Moscow has as many murderers, too."
Then he packed a suitcase—only one—
And left for Magadan, for Magadan.

It's not that I'm too old, you know.
(The other night I jumped off a moving train.)
But Magadan's no place for me to go.
Closing chapters, forgetting who I am.
Instead, I'll sing to the sounds of my guitar
Of what he'll see out there so far,
Of what he's never seen before,
Of Magadan, of Magadan.

No guards will beat him on this trip.
He went of his own free will.
He volunteered to work up North,
Having had of us his fill!
And what has God in store for me?
Perhaps to Magadan I'll flee,
And see what my old friend's about,
Myself drop out!

GOD WILLING

You have gone for a short time.
God forbid we should meet again.
I am headed East by cattle car,
Sentenced, God willing, to the mines.

You won't cry and you won't grieve,
Nor see the family, young or old.
I don't give a damn, I'll be out here
Digging the fatherland's gold.

All has stopped; the wheels stand still.
The rails and ties have reached an end.
Had I the tears, the air I'd send,
But tears no longer flow on earth.

Never mind, don't wait, Godspeed!
Don't let my hardship cause you pain.
But remember this, God willing,
Our paths shall one day cross again.

My term will end; I shall survive
And be a free man yet!
But here in exile I sleep on planks
And try my best to forget.

If windswept forests, endless blue I find,
How can I hold my tears?
Kilometers seven thousand lie behind.
Ahead? Seven blue years.²

¹ The fact that the subject of this ballad chose to work in distant Magadan (the normal route there is prosecution and exile) is a particularly bitter commentary on Soviet life.

² The Russian word for "blue" used here (*sineniy*) also means "blue rot," a fungus disease of timber, implying the psychic and physical rot of imprisonment.

A LETTER FROM WORKERS IN TAMBOV

The skies are gloomy over Peking.
Here in Tambov we take a coffee break,
And from our Tambov factory we write
To you who risks so willingly would take.

Because you didn't sign the treaty,
The world must suffer—nations one and all.⁴
Distorting facts, you proved quite clearly
You've cast your lot with General de Gaulle.

We fully treasure every passing day.
But if antiquity one must recall,
It was you who gave the world gunpowder
And also built the ancient Chinese Wall.

We understand you have the people now
To survive three hundred million lost in strife;⁵
But we are sure that even Comrade Mao,
By God, would surely rather cling to life!

In the days when you on rice and water fed,
You manifested internationalism.

We doubt that while you munched on Russian bread
You uttered words about revisionism!

Do you fear the revanchists there in Bonn?
That Washington threatens to overwhelm?
But didn't someone state at the UN
That we are always set to give them hell?

You have no need for missiles or for bombs.
Don't fan the flames of war. We'll have you know
That, if the need arises, we are poised
To inflict on them a thermonuclear blow.

If it's for fruitful action that you itch,
There is plenty right at home for you to do.
Kill your flies; exterminate your sparrows;
And do something about your birthrate too!

As for our way of life, we here know better.
May we suggest you let such matters be,
As stated in the CC's special letter,⁶
With the line of which we all here quite agree.

Anonymous

A DITTY ABOUT BEDBUGS

There lives in my apartment
A clan of bedbugs red,
Each one from childhood known to me.
And all that friendly family—
By their smell, the color of their eyes—
From afar I'd recognize.

With the bedbugs I concluded
A separate little pact.
By steering clear of turpentine,
Kept our friendship quite intact.

But one night at seven thirty

When to snoozing I did fall,
Alas, I squashed a bedbug
'Twixt my finger and the wall.

Since then they have been raging
In a vengeful, bloody mood.
I've even captured black ones
From a tropic latitude.

Now a million bedbugs roam my flat
Set to chomp me up on sight,
And only in the bath or toilet
Can I find some peace at night.

⁴ Presumably the reference is to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, from which the Chinese People's Republic and France both abstained.

⁵ This alludes to Mao's boast that the CPR could lose 300

million persons and still be a great power.

⁶ It is not clear what Central Committee document is meant here, but it obviously was a Soviet rebuttal to Chinese criticism.



[OSA](#) / [Guide](#) / [RIP](#) / [1956](#) / [RFE/RL Background Reports](#) : [Subjects](#) | [Browse](#) | [Search](#)

The text below might contain errors as it was reproduced by OCR software from the digitized originals, also available as [Scanned original in PDF](#).

BOX-FOLDER-REPORT: 67-1-174

TITLE: Russ - Ballads from the Underground Selected and Translated
BY: MISHA ALLEN
DATE: 1971-2-19
COUNTRY: Soviet Union
ORIGINAL SUBJECT: CAA

--- Begin ---

X/5 - RUSS - BALLADS FROM THE UNDERGROUND

SELECTED AND TRANSLATED BY MISHA ALLEN

MUNICH, 19 February 1971 (CAA) The following article appeared in Problems of Communism, November-December 1970.

NOTE: A new genre of social commentary and dissent--magnitizdat--has developed in the Soviet Union. It involves the use of private recording equipment to reproduce, circulate, and perform folk and protest ballads at private gatherings. Magnitizdat--which draws its name from the Russian words magnitofon (tape recorder) and izdat (to publish)--is an underground phenomenon, unsanctioned and deprived of public facilities through which it might be heard, although it is apparently not illegal. Among the most popular performers of the underground ballads are Mikhail Nozhkin and Vladimir Vysotsky, both established Soviet film actors. In the first of the selections presented here,

Nozhkin sings of a quest for social justice and a less materialistic way of life. The next five ballads, all by Vysotsky, tell in true folk fashion of hypocrisy, of alienation, of prisoners and prison camps, and even of the meddlesome Chinese Communists ("A Letter from Workers in Tambov"). The final selection, the anonymous "A Ditty about Bedbugs," satirizes the very distressing problems of life in crowded Soviet apartments.

These ballads from the underground are part of a voluminous collection of Soviet songs on record and tape belonging to Misha Allen. Mr. Allen is a Canadian specialist in Russian culture and folklore, as well as a translator and teacher.

Mikhail Nozhkin

AT THE LENIN MUSEUM

Year by year our life gets better.
Every shop has customers galore.
We grab up food and clothing--

What we need and often something more.
In our apartments crystal stands in rows;
In our homes, ceramics by the pound.
We snobbishly crave imported clothes,
And with junk our wardrobes all abound.

While in the Lenin Museum
There are two overcoats with bullet holes,
Two worn-out suits, a pair of shoes,
A cap, some books, and nothing else.

We should live more austere and simple lives.
Yet we worship fashion, luxury;
Put on airs of greedy merchant wives;

Fill our bankbooks with deposits;
Spend thousands on our pleasure cars,
And tend them as our precious dears;
Drape ourselves in sealskin and in mink,
And diamond jewels wear upon our ears.

While in the Lenin Museum ... (refrain)

We live much better now, that's clear.
One might even say that life is great,
The life we labored for from year to year
And justly did anticipate.
Only, we should take great care
Lest we soar too high, (and fall).
To save our human soul, let us
Once in half a century recall. . .

That in the Lenin Museum . . . (refrain)

(PT0)

[page 2]

X/5 - RUSS (1) - BALLADS FROM THE UNDERGROUND...

Vladimir Vysotsky

THE LENINGRAD BLOCKADE

I grew up during the Leningrad Blockade.
Then neither wine nor women turned my head.
I saw the Badayev Warehouses in ashes laid
And queued up for my meager dole of bread.

Brave citizens, what were you doing then,
When our city couldn't even count its dead?
You were eating caviar and bread, while I
Scrounged for cigarette butts instead.

Birds were grounded by the bitter cold.
For a thief there wasn't anything to bum.
That winter angels took away my folks,
And I feared that I, too, might succumb.

We were deluged with hunger, malnutrition.
All starved--even the public procurator.
We read news about evacuation
And listened to the radio commentator.

It seemed the blockade never would be over,
But our nation in the end won victory.
And now we could really live in clover,
If the volunteer militia'd only let us be.

I beg you kindly, citizens in armbands,
Don't lay upon my soul your grubby hands!
The AUCCTU, I'd suppose,
Our unpatriotic deeds already knows.[1]

SERIOZHKA FOMIN

Like any other gang a-roamin',
We sang all night and many a vodka drained.
We never liked Seriozhka Fomin,
Because he always seemed so self-contained.

Once at Seriozhka's, as we sat about

(It is true we always had reunions there),
We learned that war had broken out
As Molotov's famed words came o'er the air.

At the recruiting office I was told:
"Your plant will defer you--you're too old,"

But I enlisted. Seriozhka Fomin didn't bother,
Thanks to the professor, his father.

While I shed my blood for country and for home,
Something always burned me up inside:
I was bleeding for Seriozhka Fomin,
While he sat back and didn't risk his hide.

At last the war was over.
The heavy burden from our shoulders passed.
I met Seriozhka Fomin. Lo!
"Hero of the Soviet Union" on his breast.

[1] The volunteer militia is an unpaid auxiliary police force
which wears red armbands and patrols the streets of Soviet
cities to combat hooliganism, i.e., thievery, drunkenness, and
brawling. Workers are recruited for these assignments through

local organs of the AUCCTU (The All-Union Central
Council of Trade Unions), which also maintain work records of all
citizens (including arrests and sentences). The thief in this
ballad seems not to mind adding a new arrest to his record.

[page 3]

X/5 - RUSS (2) - BALLADS FROM THE UNDERGROUND...F-112

A LETTER FROM WORKERS

IN TAMBOV

The skies are gloomy over Peking.
Here in Tambov we take a coffee break,
And from our Tambov factory we write
To you who risks so willingly would take.

Because you didn't sign the treaty,
The world must suffer--nations one and all.
Distorting facts, you proved quite clearly
You've cast your lot with General de Gaulle.

We fully treasure every passing day.
But if antiquity one must recall,
It was you who gave the world gunpowder
And also built the ancient Chinese Wall.

We understand you have the people now
To survive three hundred million lost in strife;[5]
But we are sure that even Comrade Mao,
By God, would surely rather cling to life!

In the days when you on rice and water fed.
You manifested internationalism.

We doubt that while you munched on Russian bread
You uttered words about revisionism!

Do you fear the revanchists there in Bonn?
That Washington threatens to overwhelm?
But didn't someone state at the UN
That we are always set to give them hell?

You have no need for missiles or for bombs.
Don't fan the flames of war. We'll have you know
That, if the need arises, we are poised
To inflict on them a thermonuclear blow.

If it's for fruitful action that you itch,
There is plenty right at home for you to do.
Kill your flies; exterminate your sparrows;
And do something about your birthrate too!

As for our way of life, we here know better.
May we suggest you let such matters be,
As stated in the CC's special letter,[6]
With the line of which we all here quite agree.

Anonymous

A DITTY ABOUT BEDBUGS

There lives in my apartment
A clan of bedbugs red,
Each one from childhood known to me.
And all that friendly family--
By their smell, the color of their eyes--
From afar I'd recognize.

With the bedbugs I concluded
A separate little pact.
By steering clear of turpentine,
Kept our friendship quite intact.

But one night at seven thirty

When to snoozing I did fall,
Alas, I squashed a bedbug
'Twixt my finger and the wall.

Since then they have been raging

In a vengeful, bloody mood.
I've even captured black ones
From a tropic latitude.

Now a million bedbugs roam my flat
Set to chomp me up on sight,
And only in the bath or toilet
Can I find some peace at night.

[4] Presumably the reference is to the 1968 Nuclear
Non-Proliferation Treaty, from which the Chinese People's
Republic and France both abstained.

[5] This alludes to Mao's boast that the CPR could lose 300
million persons and still be a great power.

[6] It is not clear what Central Committee document is meant
here, but it obviously was a Soviet rebuttal to Chinese
criticism.

[page 4]

X/5 - RUSS (3) - BALLADS FROM THE UNDERGROUND...F-113

MY FRIEND HAS LEFT
FOR MAGADAN

My friend has left for Magadan;
My friend has left for Magadan.
Take off your hats; wish him the best!
He went himself--
Without police, without arrest.[2]
Not because he wasn't doing well,
Or 'cause he's an oddball, as some tell.
He simply went.

I know that some will ask, "What for?
Why give up everything you have?
What's out there but labor camps galore
Full of murderers, full of murderers?"
He answers them, "The rumors are untrue.
Moscow has as many murderers, too."
Then he packed a suitcase--only one--
And left for Magadan, for Magadan.

It's not that I'm too old, you know.
(The other night I jumped off a moving tram.)
But Magadan's no place, for me to go,
Closing chapters, forgetting who I am.
Instead, I'll sing to the sounds of my guitar
Of what he'll see out there so far,
Of what he's never seen before,
Of Magadan, of Magadan.,

No guards will beat him on this trip.
He went of his own free will.
He volunteered to work up North,
Having had of us his fill!
And what has God in store for me?
Perhaps to Magadan I'll flee,
And see what my old friend's about,
Myself drop out!

GOD WILLING

You have gone for a short time.
God forbid we should meet again.
I am headed East by cattle car,
Sentenced, God willing, to the mines.

You won't cry and you won't grieve,
Nor see the family, young or old.
I don't give a damn, I'll be out here
Digging the fatherland's gold.

All has stopped; the wheels stand still.
The rails and ties have reached an end.
Had I the tears, the air I'd rend,
But tears no longer flow on earth.

Never mind, don't wait, Godspeed!
Don't let my hardship cause you pain.
But remember this, God willing,
Our paths shall one day cross again.

My term will end; I shall survive
And be a free man yet!
But here in exile I sleep on planks
And try my best to forget.

If windswept forests, endless blue I find,
How can I hold my tears?
Kilometers seven thousand lie behind.
Ahead? Seven blue years.[3]

[2] The fact that the subject of this ballad chose to work in distant Magadan (the normal route there is prosecution and exile) is a particularly bitter commentary on Soviet life.

[3] The Russian word for "blue" used here (sineva) also means "blue rot," a fungus disease of timber, implying the psychic and physical rot of imprisonment.

TD/1740/71