

Victor Zaslavsky, 1937–2009

Victor Zaslavsky was a living legend for my Moscow circle of friends, young intellectuals who lived and studied in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. He was already an émigré, teaching at the University of St. John's in Newfoundland, Canada. One Italian journalist managed to bring to the USSR his book *Il Consenso organizzato*, published in 1981 in Bologna, later translated into English as *The Neo-Stalinist State: Class, Ethnicity, and Consensus in Soviet Society* (1982). My university classmate who read in Italian remembered years later that this book helped him understand the nature of Soviet society under Leonid Brezhnev better than anything that he had read before or since.

I met Victor and his wife, Elena Aga-Rossi, for the first time in the spring of 1991 on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, where both of us were visiting professors. Nobody could imagine then that the USSR would come to an end so rapidly. Yet, Victor was one of the few foreseeing the consequences. In April 1992, in the special issue of *Daedalus* on “the exit from communism,” he explained that the Soviet collapse had happened along the nationalist lines created, and for a long time successfully controlled, by the communist regime. He also wrote about “the enormous responsibility of the international community to pursue actively a policy facilitating the peaceful coexistence of nation-states emerging on the territory of the late USSR and Yugoslavia, and to forge new principles of supranational integration.” Almost two decades later, this last sentence seems quite prophetic.

Victor knew personally what he studied. He was born in Leningrad (now again St. Petersburg) in September 1937 into a family of Old Bolsheviks who had prudently abandoned politics. His father was a metallurgist and chemist; his mother was a physician. Because of Iosif Stalin's “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign, however, Victor could not enter Leningrad State University, where he wanted to study history and literature. In contrast, the Mining Institute was unable to enroll a sufficient number of future engineers during the 1950s, so the limiting “clause” for Jews was suspended. After several years of working as a young geologist, Victor abandoned the mining industry and began to teach the sociology of art at the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute. In 1975, however, he and his family were forced to emigrate from the USSR. Victor was neither a dissident nor a victim of the Soviet regime. His decision to leave the Soviet Union was not dictated by ideological or political beliefs. In the 1970s, Jewish organizations in the west, especially in the United States, contended that Soviet Jews wanted to emigrate because they were persecuted on religious grounds. This was a convenient story, but it did not correspond to the truth. Living among the émigrés, Victor conducted a sociological field study, and quickly confirmed that few émigrés cared much about the Jewish religion or their heritage. What drove them to leave was the same feeling that motivated Victor: the realization that they, and especially their children, would not be able to advance in Soviet society, receive the best education, and pursue professional careers of their choosing.

In emigration, Italy was Victor's first host country. The Socialist Party of Italy should be especially credited for noticing this talented émigré from the USSR. The monthly journal of the Socialist Party, *Mondoperaio*, began to publish Victor's articles on the failure of reforms in the USSR during the 1960s and on the rise of “neo-Stalinism.” Later these articles developed into the book *Il Consenso organizzato*. Yet, Victor could not find a teaching job in Italy, so he followed his nephew and sister to Canada, where he became a sociologist at the University of St. John's in Newfoundland.

Victor's intellectual interests were as diverse as his life experience. His contacts spread far and wide, from California to New York, all across Europe, and, of course, Russia. For thirty years, Victor remained on the editorial board of *Telos*, the magazine founded by the energetic Paul Piccone. Victor combined scholarship with fiction writing and art collection. He received a literary prize for his short stories. At Victor's advice, the Italian publisher Sellerio began to translate and publish a series of works of contemporary Rus-

sian writers, including novels by Iurii Tynianov, Fazil' Iskander, Boris Khazanov, Liudmila Shtern, I. Grekova, and Boris Iampolskii. All those novels, previously unknown to Italian readers, appeared in Italy with Victor's introductions.

The development of the argument on the nationalist forces that tore the USSR apart represents another of Victor's significant contribution to Soviet studies. Victor was one of the first to grasp that the nationalist forces in post-Stalinist society were an organic product of the Soviet project, not something "primordial" that preceded the Soviet experience. He demonstrated that the construction of the Stalinist state as a multinational federation, with numerous institutions, including the passport system, actively promoted "Soviet nationalism" and ultimately produced the bureaucratic-intellectual elites who functioned as shareholders in the common Soviet enterprise. As long as there were enough resources to distribute, those national elites were part of the "organized consensus." Once the system descended into crisis mode, however, those elites chose to save their position and power. In other words, the economic and political choices made by the elites played a larger role than ideological passions and temporary mass mobilizations. When H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse published *L'Empire   clat  * (1978) predicting that the USSR would start collapsing from Central Asia, Victor disagreed. Central Asian republics, he argued, were the most subsidized of all regions of the USSR and thus the most interested in the status quo. Indeed, the Soviet collapse led to a "neo-Malthusian situation": tribal warfare in Tajikistan and the Fergana Valley, and nationalist authoritarianism with paternalistic clannish systems elsewhere in the region.

When the Soviet archives finally opened to researchers, Victor's research focused on the long-time connections between the Soviet Union and the Italian communists, especially on the role these connections played in Italy's political history after 1943. Using new documents, he wrote, together with Elena Aga-Rossi, *Togliatti e Stalin: Il PCI e la politica estera staliniana negli archivi di Mosca* (1997). This book covers an impressive array of topics, from the general assessment of Stalinist foreign policy to the place of Italy in Stalin's Mediterranean strategy, from the PCI's preparations for a civil war in 1944–48, to the details on the USSR's financing of the PCI during and after Stalin's life. The book explores the Stalinist mind-set of Palmiro Togliatti and his colleagues, the unique combination of revolutionary militancy with the pragmatic, prudent, even cynical calculation of "correlation of forces." In 2006, Victor performed another great service for history, publishing *Pulizia di classe: Il massacro di Katyn*, later translated into English as *Class Cleansing: The Massacre at Katyn* (2008), which brought to light new details and circumstances on the extermination of 25,000 Polish officers, Soviet prisoners of war, by the NKVD under orders from Stalin and Lavrentii Beria in April 1940. Victor devoted particular attention to the long "after-life" of the Katyn affair, which Stalinist lawyers fraudulently ascribed to the Nazis at the Nuremberg Trial. All the Soviet leaders, including Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev, studiously avoided admitting Soviet involvement, despite their knowledge of it.

Victor's works earned him acclaim across Europe. The Katyn book was translated into many languages, and in 2008 he received the Hannah Arendt Award for Political Thought. In Italy, the reception was markedly cooler, with the exception of several historians of communism and the Cold War. Victor ascribed this to the problem of the "hegemony of the left" in Italian cultural and intellectual life, a phenomenon related, in turn, to the tormented conversion of Italian intellectuals from fascism to communism in the 1930s and 1940s. For decades, this phenomenon sharply narrowed the space for honest introspection in Italian intellectual life. Victor was convinced that this bias would be overcome only when Italian intellectual life becomes fully integrated into broader European and trans-Atlantic currents of ideas and discussions. In 2002, he founded, jointly with Gaetano Quagliariello, a new journal in Italian, *Ventesimo secolo*, to register and amplify those new opportunities in the spheres of scholarship and education. In November 2005, Victor helped to create a new English-language graduate program in Lucca (IMT—Istituzioni, Mercati, Tecnologia) where young Italian intellectuals can mingle with young scholars from Russia and eastern Europe, as well as from the United States.

In November 2009 we met twice, at two conferences on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In Washington, D.C., he presented his paper on the quiet transformation of the PCI into a postcommunist party. He said to me: "I still cannot believe that there is not a single com-

munist in the Italian Parliament.” Two weeks later, we attended a workshop in Brescia, Italy. Victor was as alert and vigorous as ever. We planned on writing a book and organizing workshops together. Victor’s untimely death caught him literally in upward flight.

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February 2010