

NEUE LITERATUR

Skilling, H. Gordon: Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe.

Macmillan Publishers, Oxford 1989, 293 S.

Gordon Skilling, professor emeritus of political science of the Toronto University, the author of the fundamental volume on the Prague Spring (*Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 1976) and of many other pioneering works on contemporary Eastern Europe, has published yet another book with a challenging topic. Is there already an independent society in Communist Central and Eastern Europe? What does the word "independent" mean? Briefly, it is a society which exists in parallel to the official one; it is a new type of society in a progress of challenging the established rules of social behaviour, whose nonconformist members, belonging to a distinguished minority, insist on reading, discussing and writing what they consider relevant – contrary to what the Communist officialdom prescribes to its subjects.

"It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't; one should read everything... More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read", wrote a century ago Oscar Wilde in one of his brilliantly frivolous plays. Half a century after Wilde's death this absurdity became a fact of life in Central and Eastern Europe, and it was precisely against this absurd suppression of elementary human rights that individuals, in the "Other Europe", raised their voices. This is why *samizdat* emerged in the late 1950s among these courageous individuals, who were often risking their lives in producing a few copies of typewritten poems and later novels. They rejected the collective wisdom of Communist dictatorships, epitomized in Alexander Fadeev's definition of free literature as one, which "recognizes in all questions concerning life and literature the leading role of the Communist Party" (Second Soviet Writers' Congress in 1954). In spite of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, which only since 1988 – that is the year where Skilling's survey stops – began to dismantle (selectively!) censorship in the Soviet media, and the parallel but independent democratization process in Poland and Hungary, in the remaining Communist countries, Czechoslovakia included, the oppressive censorship does persist and with it the natural desire to defy it through *samizdat*.

Skilling symbolically compares the work of *samizdat* authors with that of medieval scribes of the pre-Gutenberg era. Only by the clandestine application of more advanced xerox methods of reproduction, as had occurred in Poland even before the creation of Solidarity, could one speak of an achievement roughly comparable to the Gutenberg invention. The Polish *samizdat* produced, regardless of the suppression of Solidarity after 1981, an amazing flood of printed publications, especially newspapers, which surpassed in quantity anything observed hitherto in the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia. The number of clandestine publishing houses reached the figure of 100 by 1986,

with 400 to 600 periodicals and about the same number of books published annually, amounting to several thousand copies. This helped to undermine the military regime of General Jaruzelski and contributed to the incredible restoration of political freedoms which we can witness in that country today (see D. Beyrau and I. Bock, „Samizdat in Osteuropa und tschechische Schreibmaschinen-Kultur“, *BohZ* 29 [1988] 288). Skilling provides brief surveys of independent publishing activities in other European Communist countries including Yugoslavia. He also sketches a brief but illuminating history of the unique Chinese version of wall-*samizdat*, the *datzepao*.

It is, however, Czechoslovakia that is Skilling's major preoccupation since he knows its recent history most intimately. Indeed, "if the Russians invented *samizdat*", wrote one Czech emigré publicist, "it is undoubtedly the Czechs who perfected the system and turned it into an art". Other nations may have produced vaster quantities of *samizdat*, it was the Czechs who have concentrated on quality to that effect that since the early 1970s the unofficial publishing "houses" like *Petlice* or *Expedice*, and about a dozen of others, have produced hundreds of volumes of prose, poetry, drama, literary criticism, historical and philosophical essays.

The driving force behind these activities are members of Charter 77 human rights movement, about whom Skilling already published an important book eight years ago. After surveying *samizdat* and other nonconformist activities, Skilling devotes the larger part of his book to the intriguing concept of the "independent" or "parallel" society, which has been slowly emerging in Central and Eastern Europe since the early 1970s. Profiting from earlier theoretical studies about the "second society" and the "second economy", written for instance by the Hungarian scholars Elemér Hankiss and István Kemény in the early 1980s, Skilling makes his own significant contribution to analyzing and defining this new political phenomenon, without whose impact the most recent dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe cannot be fully understood. These involve the whole sphere of human culture, ideology and social communications, and must include such seemingly excentric and negative phenomena like the musical underground of rock culture in Czechoslovakia or the para-political "Orange Alternative" in Poland.

Having finished the impressive tour de force throughout every single Communist country in Europe and the USSR in the quest for a "second polity" (Skilling's favorite term after the "*second polis*", a definition introduced by the Czech Catholic dissident Václav Benda), Skilling's conclusions may appear today, especially after the amazing changes in Hungary and Poland, rather restrained and pessimistic ("It is not yet clear how far such independent activities will be tolerated by the Soviet and East European regimes", p. 238). In the preface, however, Skilling welcomes the recent hopeful changes as a sign that a major shift in state-society relationships has been underway. And yet, in his last sentence, he retains his caution against a premature euphoria of wishful thinking: "New repression may set clock back and render the vestiges of an independent society less significant in the short run but still potentially important for the future".