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The character of Townsend Reston carries Aksyonov's message that socialism was an inherently oppressive system of governance which both led to and supplied an ideological justification for the Stalinist regime. His accounts attest to the enormous fear of criticizing the Stalinist regime and the success of propaganda efforts in deceiving the world during Stalin's dictatorship. Further, Reston plays a unique role as a foreigner and the only vocal anti-Soviet character in the novel, never falling prey to the propaganda and remaining stalwart in his opposition to the Stalinist regime. By acting as an outside observer, largely immune to not only reprisals but propaganda, he alone appears capable of seeing things for what they really are. He despises not only Stalin but the Soviet Union as a whole. He clearly believes, unlike any other character disillusioned with the Soviet Union, that Stalin did not betray socialism but exemplified what it entailed in practice. Reston's excellent ability at predicting the future strongly suggests that this perspective, although unpopular, is the correct one and the real message of the novel.

Reston's experiences in the Soviet Union stress two underlying aspects of Stalinist society: the sheer terror felt by the Soviet people of questioning their government and the success of propaganda efforts at weakening their will to do so. The Soviet people lived in fear of retribution for speaking ill of the Stalinist regime, and Reston's futile efforts to try communicating with locals during the Great Purge attest to this. He laments his incapability to have a serious conversation with anyone: "Even the trees in this country seem frightened out of their wits. Before, it was still possible to have a conversation with someone on the street." (270) Aksyonov here paints a dreary scene of life during the worst years of political repression in the Soviet Union. So terrified were the Soviet people of repercussions for speaking to a foreigner that they shunned Westerners like lepers. This grim view is only

further exemplified when Reston approaches Boris Gradov and asks for a few minutes of his time. Rather than risk being seen with Reston, Boris thinks to himself: "I'm being put to a test... To speak... to a foreigner, and what was more, with a journalist... No, that's just too much!" (273) The safest course of action was to act as if Westerners did not exist, and this fearful attitude persisted even after the end of the Great Purge: "After all the horrors of the thirties, it was entirely understandable that the Soviets were afraid to associate with foreigners." (319)

At the same time, Reston's experiences also confirm the belief that Stalin's propaganda machine worked remarkably well. Aksyonov draws a stark contrast between Reston's decidedly anti-Soviet stance, despite the fact that he never suffers personally at Stalin's hands, and the Gradov family's generally pro or at least not anti-Soviet political views. It is in this contrast that one can see the success of Stalinist propaganda. No member of the Gradov family, even in their thoughts, expresses vehement hatred of the system which has so ruined their lives. Influenced by socialist thought, personal tragedy is not enough to unite the Gradovs in opposition to Stalin. When, for example, Nikita Gradov is sent to the gulag his own brother Kirill wonders whether he deserved such a punishment: "... hadn't he always noticed a certain, say, insufficiency of ideological conviction on the part of his brother?" (200) Much of the West proves easily fooled as well, failing to recognize the similarities between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union: "Alas, this simple idea [that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had many parallels] was given no consideration by the liberals. Even Feuchtwanger, who had fled the Nazis, applauded the Soviets." (270) Aksyonov thus portrays socialist propaganda as so effective that it could turn a family against itself and convince the west of the Soviet Union's benignity. He suggests that Stalin's propaganda efforts worked because Soviet-style socialism had immense appeal to both native

Russians and the Western intelligentsia, which in turn painted the USSR in a favorable light. Only on Reston, the “incorrigible anti-Soviet,” (478) does such socialist propaganda prove ineffectual.

Reston needs no reason other than what he sees around him to openly despise the Stalinist regime. To him, quite sensibly, the Great Purge serves as vindication of his long-held beliefs, and he continues his unequivocal anti-Soviet stance. Through virtue of being a foreigner and hence far removed from Soviet culture (he never learns to speak Russian), Townsend sees the Soviet Union more clearly than any native Soviet character. Aksyonov consistently draws attention to this sharp cultural divide when describing Reston’s actions and appearance during a parade in Red Square: “Someone... broke into the ‘International...’ Someone put his hand on Reston’s shoulder, thinking that he was one of them. You bastards, thought the journalist... showing all thirty-two of his American teeth.” (101) On every level, Reston exudes hostility not just to Stalin but to the Soviet Union and socialism in general. His behavior and thoughts all draw attention to the glaring fact that he is a capitalist foreigner, and therefore not a member of the Soviet people. He scorns the Soviet people. He is not with the Soviet people. Aksyonov makes this clear at the end of the demonstration. When his translator calls him “comrade,” Reston angrily shoots back: “I’m not your damned comrade.” (114) Similarly, with the onset of Operation Barbarossa, Reston expresses little compassion for the Soviet people and hopes that neither tyrannical state will survive the war: “I have no pity for them... the people are suffering, but if the result is the ruin of both of these criminal bands [Nazi Germany and the USSR], I won’t weep.” (313) Even when the US and the Soviet Union are allied in a war against Nazi Germany, Reston does not forgive or forget Stalinist repression and persists in his anti-Soviet creed: “...what is this nonsense of democracy and tyranny standing in formation together?” (475) By bearing

no love for the USSR, its culture, its people, or socialist ideals, Reston alone neither harbors reluctance to criticize nor excuses Soviet atrocities.

Most notable, however, is Reston's loathing of not just Stalin but socialism in general. He does not consider Stalin to be the root cause of the tyranny and repression he witnesses. It is the ideology of the Soviet Union, socialism, which he most fundamentally detests. Consequently, he is skeptical of any policies the Soviet Union undertakes. Everything is grist for his proverbial mill: "He saw only absurdity and brazen impudence of the government... and did not doubt for a moment that they would crush this NEP of theirs as soon as it had ceased to be useful to them." (99) Here, Reston sees through the lies into the harsh totalitarian reality. He remains dubious of the government's good intentions, hinting at his distrust of not just Stalin, but the entire socialist system he controlled. Likewise, when his translator asks him if he is sympathetic toward "our country," his response is shockingly blunt: "'No, I'm not,' growled Reston under his breath." (101) Aksyonov's word choice is striking. The translator could just as well have asked Reston whether he was sympathetic towards Stalin, but instead reveals that Reston's hatred of the Soviet Union evidently goes far beyond its leadership; he abhors the socialist principles it is based on. Other characters, such as Nina Gradov, despise Stalin but support the Soviet Union as a whole, merely wanting a different man to lead the nation. For Reston, the problem is far more fundamental. He holds socialist doctrine, the ideological core of the Soviet Union, chiefly responsible for the nation's tragedies.

Reston even goes so far as to compare the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany, arguing that they are both tyrannical socialist regimes: "The Western intelligentsia rejected the racist variety of socialism but had easily taken the bait based on class." (270) The wording here is key. Through Reston's internal monologue, Aksyonov implies that the evil of both oppressive

governments stemmed from their adherence to socialism, and he does not mention the far more commonly used word “totalitarianism” to describe Stalin and Hitler’s dictatorships. Aksyonov draws attention to the fact that Hitler’s National Socialism stemmed from the same ideology as Stalin’s proletarian socialism, and hence their regimes shared many fundamental characteristics. Reston adamantly defends the comparison: “Iosif really only had one equal in the world - Adolf... he tried to communicate the... entirely identical character of the two regimes... ‘As far as I’m concerned, these Nazis and Bolshies are all one of a kind...’” (269, 270, 313) Even in the Western world, Reston’s views expressed here would have been considered unduly critical of the Soviet regime. The West, then and now, drew a firm distinction between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. But Reston, as usual, cynically defies societal norms and chooses to believe what he sees: the two nations were really quite analogous. Not just because evil men ruled them, but because the evil men adhered to an inherently evil ideology - socialism. Whatever the world would have him believe, Reston stands firm in his opposition to the entire system so based on an ideology which he sees as absurd and a recipe for tyranny. So should we all, Aksyonov hints, given socialism’s terrible historical track record.

While Reston’s experiences and stated political beliefs all paint the Soviet Union and Stalin in a negative light, he is a relatively minor character, especially when compared to pro-Soviet ones such as Cecilia Rosenbloom or Nina Gradov. So why think he embodies the moral that Aksyonov is trying to teach his readers? Simple: unlike any other character, he predicts the Soviet Union’s grim future almost perfectly and exhibits next to no naivety. In his first appearance with Ustryalov, who argues that the Bolsheviks will soon sacrifice their ideals and the USSR will be westernized, Reston remains doubtful. He is subsequently vindicated when, years later, Ustryalov is so afraid to speak with a Westerner he does not

dare to let Reston interview him: “Does this mean your theory has collapsed, Ustryalov?” (114) Likewise, Reston foresees the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact at a time when the Soviet Union was an avowed enemy of Nazi Germany: “Despite the fact that the two regimes now anathematized each other, there would be a rapprochement between them in the very near future.” (270) He even forecasts the upcoming anti-Semitism which would break out following World War II, culminating with the Doctors’ plot (1952-1953): “Of course, for the time being Stalin was not crushing the Jews, but he’d get around to it eventually.” (270) Reston correctly takes official Party doctrine with a grain of salt and realizes what is in store for the Soviet people while the native Soviet characters remain naively optimistic and unsuspecting of the true horrors they will soon suffer through. That Reston was right about concrete historical events implies he was also right to abhor socialism and see it as the root cause of Stalinist tyranny.

To conclude, Aksyonov uses the character of Townsend Reston as a vessel to freely describe the Soviet Union as it was and thereby suggests that its fundamental flaw was faith in socialism. Uniquely immune to Stalin’s propaganda and political reprisals, Reston plays a vital role as an observer free of pro-Soviet bias. For Reston, however, it is not enough to criticize Stalin alone, but the socialism so integral to the Soviet regime. His accuracy at predicting the future and his consistently vindicated distrust in the Soviet regime all point to the message of Aksyonov’s novel that socialism is a repressive system of government which lends an ideological justification for dictators as tyrannical and cruel as Stalin or Hitler to hold power. Of course, Aksyonov does not depict Reston as uniformly admirable. Like many foreign characters, he often appears arrogant and tries to fit what he sees into a Western view of the world. Rather, Aksyonov portrays Reston as a model of the proper, strongly hostile attitude one should have toward not just Stalin, but the socialist doctrine which allowed the

Bolsheviks to gain control of Russia in the first place. On the surface, Aksyonov's novel is simply anti-totalitarian. More profoundly, as Reston exemplifies, it is anti-socialist.

Generations of Winter posits that socialism - not a betrayal of its principals - was what made Stalin's ironhanded rule of Russia possible. Socialism was an evil ideology from its very inception which spawned oppressive regimes such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and provided an ideological rationalization for the atrocities they committed. Aksyonov thus implies that historians ought to view socialism and the USSR as negatively as they would Nazi Germany.