

Underground Notes by Mihajlo Mihajlov

(Sheed Andrews and McMeel; 204 pp.; \$10.00)

Jeri Laber

Mihajlo Mihajlov is often called the "Solzhenitsyn of Yugoslavia," and in many ways this characterization is apt. Hated and feared by the rulers of their countries, both men are symbols of uncommon courage to sympathizers at home and abroad. Years of imprisonment have not broken them; rather, in each instance, the ordeal has engendered deep religious commitments. Each conveys a messianic zeal and uses as an atheistic foil a prominent dissident within his own country—for Solzhenitsyn, of course, it is Andrei Sakharov; for Mihajlov it is Milovan Djilas.

Mihajlov and Solzhenitsyn differ, however, in a most significant way. For Mihajlov religion is firmly linked to democratic socialism rather than to the benevolent authoritarianism Solzhenitsyn has come to espouse. Mihajlov and Djilas share the ideal of an open, democratic society, while Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov do not.

Underground Notes, Mihajlov's essays on literary, social, and philosophical themes, is the kind of "hostile propaganda" that has sent the author to prison three times, most recently in February, 1975, when he began a seven-year sentence. These diverse essays, ranging in subject matter from Karl Marx to Anna Karenina, have one unifying theme: the belief that a religious renaissance is emerging in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Mihajlov sees totalitarianism as the greatest of all evils, since it attempts to destroy the free human spirit, the bond between an individual and his spiritual being. Yet it was only when confronted with the restraints of imprisonment that he discovered the link between freedom and religion:

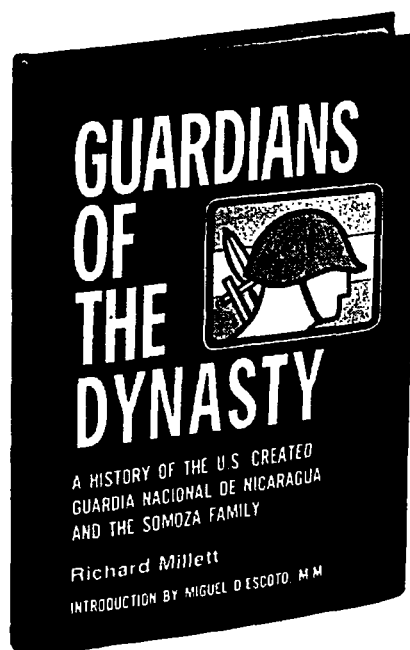
"Only when man feels that by submitting to oppression he is losing his soul, his 'I,' himself forever—and that this loss is worse than any physical torture or even death—only then can man rise against totalitarian dictatorship. And that feeling is a religious one. Its name is—faith."

Thus it is in Russia, where totalitarianism is most oppressive, that Mihajlov sees the first glimmers of a religious renaissance. He believes that "only Russian thought, only Russian samizdat literature, is genuinely meaningful in our world" and that writers like Solzhenitsyn, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Sinyavsky-Tertz are the harbingers of a new, post-Communist consciousness, a sense of religious purpose that was lost in the nineteenth century and is now being reborn under totalitarianism.

Mihajlov, in exploring the prison camp experiences of Soviet writers such

as Solzhenitsyn, Panin, Shifrin, and Sinyavsky-Tertz, points to a paradox: Those prisoners who "sold their souls" to survive were the ones who perished, while those who were faithful to their spiritual selves found the psychic energy to live. This observation is not confined to those with a religious bent: Terrence Des Pres, in his interviews with Nazi concentration camp survivors, arrived time and again at the same paradox, which he describes in *The Survivor*, a book Mihajlov has probably never read.

The Soviet religious writers go



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further, however: They identify many prison situations where inner strength actually influenced "events which appear to be innocent of man." From this they conclude—a belief Mihajlov shares—that if man follows his inner voice (faith), a mysterious force (God) will shape the external events in his life. Moreover, Mihajlov observes, the existential problem posed by oppression is not unique to that situation: Those who may never face the prospect of arrest and imprisonment must nevertheless confront sickness, tragedy, and, ultimately, death. They cannot avoid the spiritual choice that confronted Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, who was forced to prepare for death before he had learned how to live.

The political bent of Solzhenitsyn's *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* jolted Mihajlov, who had identified closely with the *Gulag* author's religious views. Mihajlov rejects Solzhenitsyn's authoritarianism, reasoning that "Solzhenitsyn is verily The Great Witness, but it was not his destiny to comprehend the meaning of his own experience."

For Mihajlov religion and democracy are linked: Those who believe in democracy are religious people, "whether they are aware of it or not, and no matter what they consider themselves to be." He observes that Solzhenitsyn, a Christian and a religious man, "is fighting for an anti-Christian, authoritarian system, while the [atheistic] scientist Sakharov is voicing his support for a Christian social program."

Mihajlov tackles a wide range of problems in these essays. Sometimes his thinking seems rather simplistic, sometimes he contradicts himself or appears to be bending his theories to fit reality, but most often he is original and provocative. He takes issue with his fellow dissidents as well as with the authorities. He is wary of organized religion, warning the Catholic Church that it must either make its peace with the Communists or join the religious renaissance at the risk of losing some of its worldly powers. He does not shrink from the simple truth that dissident nationalist movements are unnatural partners in the fight against totalitarianism, since democratic liberties are not national but international concerns. He believes that evil is also international and that "the increase of evil on one part of the planet can be felt everywhere."

The man who wrote these essays is himself a victim of evil. Confined at this moment in a Yugoslav prison, his fine mind and remarkable talents now cope with hunger strikes and solitary con-

finement. Fearing for his future, we nevertheless find some comfort in this book, which testifies to his faith, his courage, and his independence as well as to his extraordinary will to survive.

To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account by Saul Bellow

(Viking; 182 pp.; \$8.95)

Suhail Hanna

There must have been something frank and intimate about the relationship between Abba Eban and Lyndon Johnson. "I had heard," Saul Bellow reports in *To Jerusalem and Back*, "that Johnson once received Eban with the words, 'Mr. Ambassador. Ah'm sittin' here scratchin' my ass and thinkin' about Is-ra-el.'" In his latest book Bellow does more than just think about Israel. He meditates about her, rejoices in her triumphs, agonizes in her failures, cringes at her desires, marvels at her destiny, flaunts his rhetoric in the face of her sense of history. He is the Bellow of the brilliant novels, exhibiting a controlled yet energetic style, bursting with wit, delicate with cynicism.

Cast into a diary-travelogue format, the book roams over Jewish concerns emanating from the streets, offices, and homes in Israel to the intellectual circles of England, France, and America. While Bellow's wife, Alexandra, takes up residence at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she is to teach mathematics, Bellow matriculates in the fall of 1975 as an "interested inexperienced observer," an American refugee-in-residence in a baffling Israel. Instead of imprisoning himself in a library carrel to do some writing or in a café to do some reading, he navigates among the people—politicians, poets, barbers, professors, masseurs—freely and frequently, going from one place to another, interviewing, probing, prodding, assessing, observing, listening, resolving, and recording what he sees and hears and his reaction to it all.

To Bellow the modern age has produced an Israeli political state that seems to depend, even thrive, on tensions for its existence: a state that has reached the bitter crossroads of per-

petual war or precarious peace with its Arab neighbors. The articulation of the hazards of either road is what Bellow seems to be hearing. Many voices are hoarse. Most will probably never be otherwise. At least it is difficult to imagine them otherwise. In a conversation with the novelist David Shahar, Bellow's very American—one suspects it is purposely assumed—and evenhanded approach to the Arab-Israeli crisis evokes this outburst from Shahar: "They don't want our peace proposals. They don't want our concessions, they want us destroyed!" He slams the table. "You don't know them. The West doesn't know them. They will not let us live. We must fight for our lives. It costs the world nothing to discuss, discuss, discuss. And the French are whores and will sell them all the weapons they want, and the British too. And who knows about the Americans! And when the Arabs at last have their way, perhaps the French and the British will be nice and send ships to evacuate our women and children."

There is, it seems, some poignancy in all this rhetoric, particularly now that most Arabs, in the midst of a peace offensive nurtured after the 1973 war, no longer speak of Jewish annihilation. If they are to speak at all, they are likely to stutter through thoughts of reconciliation. Still, Shahar's view represents a definite, if not dominant, mood in Israel, a mood Bellow heard from different quarters expressed with varying measures of paranoia. The frequent bomb blasts in Israel, the gun battles at the borders, the attacks on Israeli interests outside the country, all fuel this mood.

The wars, especially the 1973 war with Egypt and Syria, left the Israelis in