

BORIS KAGARLITSKY

BY JOHN FEFFER

IN THESE chaotic days of Soviet decline, Moscow is both a depressing and an exhilarating place. Economic distribution and political administration have collapsed. Ethnic and territorial battles are being fought in the hinterlands; lines of political command no longer issue forth from the center. After nearly six years, *glasnost* is losing its edge and *perestroika* has failed to put goods on shop shelves. Politically, however, there is a "Moscow Spring."

A key figure in this political renaissance, Boris Kagarlitsky, is also a leading light of the independent left. He is the author of *The Thinking Reed*, a study of the Soviet intelligentsia, and one of the founders of the now defunct citizens' movement, the Moscow Peoples' Front. But Kagarlitsky is not wasting time mourning. Like many Muscovite intellectuals these days, Kagarlitsky is everywhere at once, organizing, writing, traveling to the West, establishing a newspaper modeled after the English *Guardian*. On the last day of a recent trip to Moscow I managed to schedule an interview with him. Our discussion touched on the issues that were current in October 1990: the radical economic program supported by president of the Russian Republic Boris Yeltsin, the rightward drift of the new Social Democratic party, the Solzhenitsyn proposal to create a Russian rump state. But first I asked him why the Moscow People's Front no longer existed.

KAGARLITSKY: There are different reasons. The easiest explanation is that the Moscow People's Front was created as a broad movement which was a substitute for political parties. Also there was the feeling that the situation was not ripe for political parties. So creating a broad movement was a better option. I'm sure that conditions for real political parties in this country are still not ripe. So, in that sense, the dissolution of the MPF is a very negative phenomenon. In the formation of political parties, the MPF was one of the main casualties because people left for different parties. It was somehow

fragmented. That is one explanation. The second explanation is that the MPF was a sort of democratic socialist left-of-center organization. At the same time, it was more or less tolerable for the media and it was possible to have a sort of left-wing hegemony within this movement. Later the cultural and political situation shifted to the right, and now public opinion is completely dominated by the neo-liberal right-wing ideologies promoted by the Communist Party. Quite a lot of people deserted to the right; for example, they went into political parties that had nothing to do with the original program of the People's Front.

Why wasn't there a synthesis of the neo-liberal and what we might call the democratic left into a union of democratic forces?

There is no common ground. Why wasn't there a synthesis of General Pinochet and socialists in Chile? There are lots of different reasons, but one is that one party wanted to kill the other! That's the same kind of situation we face. They are not yet killing us, but that's the only difference.

Clearly there was common ground in Czechoslovakia that permitted such a synthesis within Civic Forum: social democrats with very right-wing agricultural parties, for instance.

The left in Czechoslovakia is so weak that it is afraid to have its own policies and defend its own values. Therefore it is supporting the right-wing policies within the general framework of the democratic coalition. There is no left behaving as a left. While in the Soviet Union, we feel much better politically. If you make opinion polls, you can see that the population is generally on the left and shifting more to the left. The political community is also shifting very rapidly to the right. That's a very interesting phenomenon. And that's why we feel that the neo-liberals have no option other than dictatorship.

Many people have been saying that a major element contributing to left

political sentiment, egalitarian values, is eroding in the Soviet Union.

That is certainly false. Rather, it is growing fast. Opinion polls stress that. For example, opinion polls show that only 15 percent of the population supports the Russian government program.

The Yeltsin-Popov program?

Exactly. Fifteen is nothing, I think. The real level of support is even lower because the opinion polls are made by the polling centers more or less controlled by the Russian government. The personal support of some people like Yeltsin is much larger than the support of their policies. That is another example of the barbarism that we are facing: political barbarism. That is why they try to avoid political votes and fix instead on personalities. Yeltsin is very much in favor of electing himself as president—he and his allies don't really want a real parliament elected. They don't want real legislative bodies elected, because then they would have to campaign on issues and not on personalities—and then they would fail.

What about trade unions?

There are no trade unions in this country. There are official trade unions which are not trade unions; traditionally they were part of the party system. Now the union leadership realizes that serving the party is no solution, but they don't have any other function than serving the party institution, because that is what their structure is created for. That's how the structure is formed. Now they're looking for a new master and are trying to serve the government rather than the Communist Party. That's why they have insisted on having no strikes for the 500 days, supporting the government program, participating actively in the implementation of the government program, and explaining to the people the need for sacrifices. That's the official trade unions. And the unofficial trade unions are so weak we also must not count on them.

Could you describe the work you're doing now?

The Socialist Party. The delegates you see there [the people we were walking with] are delegates to Moscow City Council and members of the Socialist party. All the parties are small—and I stress that the situation is not ripe for real parties—on the other hand, there is a real need to organize. That means we have to build the party right now. Though we can't expect much progress—it's not a real efficient organization. Though strangely enough we are getting a lot of public support without having a strong organization.

Is your long-term goal to become a mass party?

Yes. We are not going to build a parliamentary party. But that's why we're getting more deputies in Moscow than the other parties, because we are not acting as a parliamentary party.

Where do you expect the mass support to come from?

The traditional support will come from the workers and also a very important part of the working intellectuals, people like computer professionals. Skilled workers also, who are a very important part of our activist core.

Are there any indications that workers are really interested in becoming politically active?

It depends. The unskilled workers are not very interested in getting involved politically. But they will be forced into politics whether they want it or not. Because the political program of the government will force them to resist, whether they want to participate in government or not. The problem is whether they have any tools for resistance or not. And I think that we are the only political force in the country trying to create itself as the tool for popular resistance.

Some say that workers may get involved but not constructively—only in reaction.

That's exactly what the right-wing liberals say, and that's exactly why they want dictatorship. It's not constructive for their program. Of course workers will resist their program and that will be very unconstructive! That's why we're on the other side of the barricade.

What do you think of the Social Democratic party?

It's one of the most right-wing parties in the country now. It's even to the right of the liberals.

You don't think that some kind of coalition is possible?

No! We would rather work with the liberals—they're not as far right as the Social Democrats. The main problem is how and why they call themselves Social Democrats. It's an epistemological problem which has nothing to do with their politics or ideology.

What do you mean when you say that they're more right wing?

They are very skeptical about any sort of economic redistribution and any kind of regulation: typical of the most far right-wing Social Democrats in the West. Social Democrats in the West always insist on the importance of mixed economy, social redistribution, and regulation of the market, and the importance of the public sector in the mixed economy. While the Social Democrats in the Soviet Union are exactly the opposite. They are against redistribution, they support the private sector as opposed to public sector, they are in favor of deregulation, and they are hostile about defending wages as an alternative to the liberal project. In this sense, they are not social democrats.

Do you support the idea of a Slavic rump state?

Yes. We are in favor of Russia being a federation. But this federation must include all the territories that belonged to pre-Imperial Russia, that belonged to Russia for more than 200 years. The borders of the republic which were drawn in the 1920s and 1930s were drawn completely artificially. It's like feudal borders of 12th century Europe, which had nothing to do with ethnic or cultural differences but just depended on how dynasties had their marriages.

Do you feel uncomfortable being in the same league as Solzhenitsyn on this?

I feel very uncomfortable, especially because at least one half of our leadership is Jewish. On the other hand, it means that there is probably some objective reason for this position because people with very different social, ideological concepts coming from very different backgrounds agree about this thing. But the vision of historic Russia that we have is completely different

from Solzhenitsyn's vision. His vision includes hatred toward the north Slavic nationalities, which is completely different in our case. And his position on Central Asia is particularly revealing. We are very much against disengagement. Creating historical Russia doesn't mean that we have no responsibilities. Disengagement now would mean that those terrible republic bureaucracies that exist in Central Asia will get more control over the population and establish authoritarian and anti-democratic states there. We don't mean disengagement—we want to go from empire to commonwealth. To do this we must create the historic Russia.

We see now the disappearance of many economic alternatives in Central and Eastern Europe. Not only the concepts of self-management proposed earlier in the decade but more recent alternatives proposed by Civic Forum and so on. Do you think, first of all, that such a process is inevitable in Eastern Europe and second of all, will this also be the case here in the Soviet Union?

Absolutely. It is completely inevitable. What is happening is the great historical revenge of bureaucracy and *nomenklatura*. Establishing capitalism means re-establishing the old ruling groups as the new ruling elites and legitimizing them. And they are very efficient and are the only organized force in society so far. Though it is probably much easier to resist this elite in its private capitalist form than in its totalitarian form; in this sense, this process has a positive side. On the other side, there will be a revival of self-management and socialist alternatives quite soon, since the socialist alternatives disappeared as a possible option because of the *nomenklatura* control.

We have a historic task—to reconstruct the democratic movement. One of the leaders of the independent trade union movement has said: "This is the second dissidence beginning." He is upset because for him it means to begin again from zero, especially when it seems that more and more the left wing is going to be pushed out of the legal and political scene and pushed into the underground and repressed, legally. But I think we are well-prepared for that. The experience of the first dissidence was quite useful for the second. So we are not beginning from zero.