



Good People Build Guillotines

A Conversation with Adam Michnik

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This interview was conducted in Russian in 1995 at Headington House, Berlin's home in Oxford, but the original version has not been preserved. It was first published in a Polish translation as 'Dobrzy ludzie budują gilotyne' in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12–13 August 1995, *Gazeta Świąteczna* (the weekend supplement), 10–12. This English translation from the Polish text was commissioned in 1995 from Joanna Trzeciak by Robert Silvers, editor of the *New York Review of Books*, but has not been published until now. The text that follows, which stays close to the Polish version, was edited successively by Robert Silvers, Henry Hardy, Leon Wieseltier (editor of *Liberties: Culture and Politics*) and the translator. It first appeared (with cuts here restored, and without the footnotes, which are Henry Hardy's) as 'I Want to be Able to Say Anything I Wish to Say' in *Liberties* 2 no. 4 (Summer 2022). Berlin would no doubt have edited the text if it had been published in his lifetime: this and its being a translation of a translation should be borne in mind by readers.



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ADAM MICHNIK What do you consider yourself to be: an Englishman, a Jew, or a Russian?

ISAIAH BERLIN I have lived here for seventy years now and people see me as an Englishman. After all, Oxford is the essence of Britishness. But though I have become a bit Anglicised, I am still a Russian Jew. I am a Jew simply because one cannot cease being a Jew, not because I cultivate a Jewish culture or a Jewish tradition. Those are important things; however, we Jews have paid too high a price for them. If I were sure that by drinking this cup of coffee I could, just like that, turn all Jews into Danes, I would do it. I don't know of a single Jew, converted or not, who is free of anxiety; it is as if all Jews feel a vague sense of unease. There are millions of Jews in the world whose children grow up with such a feeling.

Assimilation was not successful. Many Jews cannot assimilate. They are a minority, and minorities suffer, and they strive to be better than the majority. If one lives in a foreign country and doesn't like it there, one can go back to the country one left, either one's own or the one that one's parents left. Only Jews cannot do this, because there is no such country.

AM And Israel?

IB For those who were newcomers there, it was not home. True, those Jews who were born in Israel have their home. But Arabs, their enemies, are there too. They force them into war. Then perhaps it is better to live in New York? In any case, I would not be able to live in Israel. I would be unhappy there.

AM You were born in 1909 in Riga. Leszek Kolakowski, your Oxford friend, calls you in jest 'The Great Son of the Latvian Nation'.

IB Let's just say that I am a peculiar kind of Latvian, and that there are no other Latvians like me. I know only a few Latvian words, *Kur tu tecī, kur tu tecī, gailīti mans?*, which means, 'Where are you going, where are you going, my little rooster?' – from a Latvian folk song. And *Cik maksā?*, 'How much is it?' That's all. But my mother knew Latvian. My nanny taught her.

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AM You come from a well-to-do intellectual family.

IB My father was the adoptive grandson of Isaiah Berlin, who purchased some land in 1862. During the reign of Tsar Alexander II, Jews could buy land. And when the railroads were built, the price of land went up. Berlin became a millionaire. Because a Jew must be either a learned rabbi or a wealthy man, the sons of wealthy men married the daughters of rabbis. Isaiah Berlin did not have any children, so he adopted my grandfather, his sister-in-law's son, who married the daughter of a Hasidic rabbi. The sister-in-law was very poor. She ran a small shop while her husband spent entire days in the synagogue.

We lived in Riga, and my father owned forests and sawmills. Timber and planks went west, and my father went with them. He spoke English, French, and German – he had quite a way with his clients. Everything went well and then 1914 came. The Germans were victorious at Tannenberg and it looked as if they might enter Riga. Jews preferred them to the Russians if only because anti-Semitism among Germans was not as overt as in Russia. But my family feared that they would be cut off from their forests, and they went deep into Russia, to a village that belonged to my father's firm.¹

There were peasants there who cut the wood; the old landowner who was slowly dying; and public servants – officers who had not made it to the front, and their ladies in long muslin dresses. In a word, this was the Russia of Turgenev. We picked mushrooms and blueberries in a huge wood. From a child's point of view, this was an absolute paradise. From there, we moved to Petrograd.

AM And there you witnessed the 1917 Revolution?

IB Yes. I remember my father took me out onto a balcony of our house. We lived at that time on Vasil'evsky Island, and I saw people with banners that read 'Down with the Tsar', 'All Power to the Duma', 'Down with War'. The crowd was not large and suddenly soldiers appeared. My father said: 'Soon blood will spill. We'd better not watch.' Then the soldiers started to mingle with the crowd and

¹ Andreapol, where the Berlins lived in a blue clapboard house.

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father said: 'It's the Revolution'. The first Revolution, the February one, was liberal, and my parents liked it. Aunts and uncles went to the rallies and were entranced: 'Kerensky's wonderful! Lvov's wonderful! What extraordinary people!'

In the summer, we went to a small town called Staraya Russa. When we came back to Petrograd in September, I saw the posters of the Provisional Government. It had a multitude of parties – you cannot imagine how many of them there were. I saw young people who were tearing down posters and painting the hammer and sickle in their place. I liked that. My father was not enthusiastic. In general, in our circles, no one, at first, saw anything remarkable about this second Revolution. The elevator wasn't working. Newspapers were not being printed. Half the shops were closed. There were leaders of some sort. Everyone had heard of Lenin and Trotsky. They were always mentioned together as though they were some kind of company or other.

AM Lenin and Trotsky Inc.

IB Exactly. I believe that Lenin was a fanatic, a dangerous one, though an honest man. Trotsky, however, was a terrible hoodlum. And he had to be hanged. Why? I was never able to understand. Perhaps because he was a Jew and one could expect the worst from him.

There was a strike and the trams were not running. At first the tram drivers' union did not support the Bolsheviks, but the situation changed gradually until it turned around completely. At the time we were already living in one room, because there was nothing to heat the apartment with. There was only peat. Food was in short supply. I remember standing for hours in line wearing gigantic *valenky* – soft felt boots – waiting with the adults for I don't know what. I didn't go to school.

My father supplied timber for railroads – under the Tsar, under the Provisional Government, and under the Bolsheviks. No one would touch us. My father was summoned to Section no. 2 at the offices of the Cheka,² but then he was released. Yet he feared and hated Communism, and he decided to leave. We left in 1920 in a

² The secret police.

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completely legal manner. Since my father was an Anglophile, he decided that we should go to England.

AM To London?

IB No. A friend of my father's, an Englishman, told him, 'Mr. Berlin, we Englishmen do not like towns. We like to live in the bosom of nature.'³ So my father found a house in a suburb some distance from London, a village in the truest sense of the word, in the middle of nowhere.³ There I went to school. The only English I knew was a poem, 'Daisy, Daisy ...', and I recited it in a horrible Russian accent. According to my mother, I used to come home from school crying. But after a month I was already speaking English. Around New Year's Eve, I acted in an old English play, *Babes in the Wood*: that is, I became Anglicised.

AM And then you studied at Oxford?

IB I was there for four years, and I graduated from the faculty of ancient and contemporary philosophy and ancient history. I enrolled at Corpus Christi College. My grandfather in Riga, a pious Jew, could not understand how I could study in a place with such a name.

AM Weren't you ever religious?

IB My family was not observant. My parents went to synagogue the same way people go to Anglican church: five, six times a year. When pious Jewish boys went home on Friday afternoon – when the Sabbath began – I remained at school. But I knew I was a Jew. I knew the Bible, and I could read it in Hebrew.

AM How about Yiddish?

IB My grandfather and grandmother spoke 'the jargon', as it was called at the time, and my parents used it in their own circle. I don't speak or read Yiddish, but I understand about every other word.

³ Surbiton.

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AM Joseph Brodsky, in his essay commemorating your eightieth birthday, wrote that he owed his mental health in large part to people belonging to the Oxford class of 1930. He had in mind you and the [11] poets Stephen Spender and W. H. Auden. Unlike you, those two were very leftist. Spender even belonged to the Communist Party, although he was soon expelled for doubting the guilt of the defendants in the Stalinist trials.

IB But he wasn't really a Communist. He wrote a book about Communists, not a good one. I asked him then, 'Why not write a book about us instead?' He said he wanted to start out with something strong, authentic.

Auden in those days did not acknowledge any traditional norms. He believed, for example, that anyone who made it into history and was not married was a homosexual. 'Kant?' I asked him. 'Yes, he too, as well as Jung and Descartes. Probably the same with Diaghilev and Stravinsky.'⁴ He was a fanatic about this.

Auden followed his lover to Spain during the civil war. When he couldn't find him, he went to the Minister of International Affairs and asked, 'Do you know where my friend Tony [Hyndman] is?' General Franco's troops were positioned at the border, but Auden was oblivious to it. He visited the chief of the Communist Party, who was actually a worker, and said, 'The Party should adopt a decisive stance on homosexuality.' He was told, 'Please get out. At once! You want to tear the Party to pieces.' Can you imagine this worker talking with Auden about the Communist Party line on homosexuality? They threw him out and so he did not even need to resign from the Party officially. This was the end of his Party career, in 1938. But, again, Auden was never really a Communist.

AM And did you go to Spain?

IB No. But I collected money to send packages there. I signed petitions. And I might even have taken part in some kind of rally in support of the Republican government. I was neither a member of the Party nor even a sympathiser.

⁴ IB may be misremembering what Auden said, unless Auden was simply mistaken: both Jung and Stravinsky were married, the latter twice, while Descartes fathered a daughter (who died in infancy).

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AM In all your essays one can see a love for the Enlightenment. What, according to you, is the connection between the cult of the mind, Jacobinism, the Reign of Terror, and the Revolution?

IB Jacobinism in some way derives from Enlightenment thought. The great French intellectuals of the eighteenth century believed in the objective laws of social evolution. They thought that once we discovered them, we would live according to them. And those who did not obey the laws and, through their own ignorance, caused themselves pain, would be isolated. Jacobins thought that the world was drowning in darkness and backwardness, of which it should be cleansed, and that people who were opposed to this must be destroyed. This is the consequence of fanatical rationalism.

AM In some sense, Robespierre and the guillotine are a peculiar consequence of the Age of Enlightenment.

IB The philosophers of the Enlightenment were, on the whole, decent people, for example Holbach, the Encyclopedist. They were against cruelty, against violence, against obscurantism. Against the Church. And in the end all their opposition led to the Great Terror and the guillotine. Auden told me at one point that there is a straight road leading from Rousseau to the Gulag. But here he exaggerated.

AM On the other hand, you saw a clear precursor to totalitarianism in Joseph de Maistre, a conservative.

IB The world, according to him, is incurably sinful. From the fact that man is the only animal that kills the members of its own species, he concluded that man should be ruled with an iron fist, and for that one needs an authority beyond questioning. This is already Fascism.

AM Can you conceive of conditions under which the Church could defend liberal values?

IB Yes, it does so from time to time. But that is not its nature. Custine was right to hold that those who agree with a liberal Catholicism betray it, although of course there are liberal Catholics.

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AM It seems that in Catholicism there is a conflict between values and freedom.

IB I would not rule it out. Christianity does not allow stomping over men; none the less, Christians always try. This goes back to the Church Fathers. Augustine was the first to decide that one could apply torture to heretics. Fanatical Catholics are terrible people.

AM And what was the intellectual climate in England in the 1930s?

IB There are no intellectuals in England. There are intellectuals in Russia and in Catholic countries, in Italy and in France, because the intelligentsia was born out of the dominance of the clergy in public life. No one in England would say, 'The Anglican Church is our enemy.' Likewise in Sweden, no one would say, 'Lutherans are terrible people.'

Cultural life in England was under the influence not of Communism but of the left. Who wasn't a leftist? Evelyn Waugh is an exception and he was even more than conservative. He was a Fascist sympathiser although he didn't advertise it. But he contributed to a magazine that published writers from the extreme right with Fascist sympathies.

AM And T. S. Eliot?

IB He was a pleasant, placid, slightly conservative poet. While he was greatly respected, he was much further to the right than many realised.

Towards the end of the war, the poet Archibald MacLeish, who was the director of the Library of Congress, visited England, and wrote an article for *The Times* about the need to rebuild the libraries destroyed by the Fascists. Three days later *The Times* published a letter from Eliot saying, 'My friend Archibald MacLeish holds that Fascists allegedly destroyed some libraries. National Socialism exists but it is entirely different from the regime which reigned until recently in Italy and still exists in Spain.' According to him, Fascists

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were decent people. They destroyed Europe? This can't be! Europe for him was destroyed not by Fascists but by National Socialists.⁵

I knew Eliot personally. He was an anti-Semite, though no worse than others of this kind. After the war, in an article commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I wrote: 'Jews, of course, are hard to put up with, but one has to tolerate them in a democracy. Plato and Eliot do not agree with that.'⁶ Someone sent this article to Eliot. I was in the States at the time, at Bryn Mawr College, and Eliot, who had also lectured there, sent me a very polite letter. 'I hope your bedroom is more comfortable than mine was. As far as I can recall, the central heating works pretty badly. I hope it is not too noisy at night and that you are able to sleep peacefully.'⁷ And finally: 'What you wrote about me is not true. I have nothing against Jews. I am a poet, not an anthropologist. Racial matters do not interest me. The only thing I have against Jews is that they have not converted. They could have converted to Christianity at the time of the Roman Empire, but they didn't.'

I responded: 'Dear Sir, you should not think that Judaism is just a religion. You cannot say "an atheistic Catholic" or "a Godless Baptist", but you can say "a Godless Negro" or "a Godless Jew". Everyone knows that being Jewish does not imply only going to synagogue. It is something more.'⁸

He responded: 'I understand you, but you are wrong. Racial matters do not interest me. I have nothing against Jews in Palestine. Anywhere else they will have trouble. When we have more time, we should continue this interesting correspondence.'⁹

⁵ Archibald MacLeish, 'A New Renaissance: Intellectual Needs of Liberated Peoples: Lending Libraries on a World Basis' (an article not a letter), *The Times*, 3 May 1944, 5f–g; 'T. S. Eliot, 'Books for the Freed World' (letter), *ibid.*, 8 May, 5d. IB's recollection of Eliot's letter is imperfect.

⁶ POI2 224 (like those that follow, not a verbatim quotation).

⁷ 'I remember spending a night at your "deanery", in the most fantastic bedroom and bronze bed of the most opulent Vanderbilt–Astor–Gould period (1900?). And a mysterious heating system which could not be controlled, but blew a hot sirocco wind all night.' This in fact appears in Eliot's second letter (9 February 1952). For this correspondence see E 277–83, where this passage is omitted.

⁸ E 279–80.

⁹ E 281–3.

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He had been sending me books to review for his journal, the *Criterion*, but after this exchange of letters he became somewhat reserved and our relations cooled. But as a poet he was a genius.

AM What did you think about the future, back in the 1930s?

IB That there would be war. That all young men like Spender and Auden wrote as if there was a bomb nearby ready to explode at any moment. As if they expected some sort of disaster, something terrible. As if something was approaching that would consume them. Consume all of Europe.

AM You left Oxford and philosophy for the duration of the Second World War, joined the diplomatic service, and were sent to the British Embassy in Washington.

IB I went there in 1941. My task was to get America involved in the war, and in the end I succeeded!

AM Perhaps the Japanese helped you a little.

IB Certainly. They attacked Pearl Harbor. But there was no agreement between Japan and the Third Reich to fight together. Japan did not have to invade America, but it did. America, and the Catholic Church in particular, did not want to fight at all. Could Roosevelt have avoided the war with Germany? Maybe yes and maybe no.

AM Were you ever afraid that Hitler would win the war?

IB Certainly I was. But the English were not; their main shortcoming is a lack of imagination. Frenchmen calculated that Germany would win, hence they surrendered. But Englishmen simply could not imagine that foreign soldiers could put their feet on their soil. That is why they were not nervous and did not panic.

Neville Chamberlain did not like Hitler and Nazism, but for him Russia and anti-Communism were decisive. Chamberlain thought: it's too bad about Jews, it's unfortunate that Hitler is obsessed with them, but what can one do? After all, he is fighting Communism, and that is what is important.

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This is what many people at the top thought. Most others were unconcerned about such things. It was hard to believe that there would be war. If it were not for a leader like Churchill, Germany would have occupied England. Somebody else in his place might have proposed to bargain with Hitler. Like Stalin in 1939, he would have thought that it was possible to bargain, for example using Mussolini as an intermediary. It was Churchill who was against this. No matter what others said, he did what he wanted.

I have always believed in the role of the individual in history. If Churchill had been struck by a falling brick at some point, and if Halifax had become prime minister, he would have made a deal with Hitler. For a year nothing would have happened, and then Germany would have suddenly invaded England.

AM I have heard that Churchill liked reading your war reports from Washington.

IB That is a myth. My job was to report on the state of public opinion in the United States and about the power structure in Washington. I was a journalist, a chronicler of political moods. The difference between me and an ordinary correspondent was that my telegrams were in code.

It wasn't hard work. Americans told everyone everything. There were no secrets, other than military secrets of course. Hence it wasn't difficult for me to understand what was going on there. The telegrams I dispatched every week made it to the ministers and were also sent to our ambassadors. Churchill received them as well. [12] Undoubtedly he read them, but I don't think that he talked about them. This much can be said: he knew who I was. His wife, however, had heard of an American songwriter named Irving Berlin, who had given a lot of money to her charitable fund.¹⁰ So when Churchill said that he would like to meet Berlin, his wife thought of Irving. And here began the misunderstandings.

AM Misunderstandings?

¹⁰ Probably the Aid to Russia Fund, which she chaired. Here IB mistells the story: Clementine Churchill told her husband that Irving Berlin was in London, and wanted Winston to thank him. Churchill thought she meant Isaiah.

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IB When they met, the following conversation took place. Churchill said, thinking of my reports: ‘What, among the recent reports you have sent, is the most important?’ Berlin, not understanding a thing, said, ‘I suppose *White Christmas*.’ Churchill, thinking that he was dealing with a crazy man who, to top it off, spoke with an American accent, said, ‘What do you mean?’ Silence. Churchill’s wife: ‘We are extremely grateful to you. You do such important things, and now this generous gift.’ Churchill, not understanding a thing, said, ‘What kind of gift?’ Silence. Churchill: ‘Are you going to participate in this year’s election?’ Berlin: ‘You know, sir, until now I never took part in the elections, but now I am not sure about anything.’ Churchill: ‘When do you think the war will end?’ Berlin: ‘Mr. Prime Minister, when I get back to the United States, I will tell my children and my children’s children that the Prime Minister of Great Britain asked *me* when I thought the war would end.’ Churchill: ‘So you’re an American?’ Berlin: ‘Yes.’ Churchill’s wife: ‘I told you that this is the wrong Berlin.’

AM When did you meet Churchill for the first time?

IB I ran into him by chance in the White House when he came to Washington. ‘What you are doing’, he said, ‘is very important. Please continue.’ Later, during the Cold War, I met him at a dinner party in London. We did not talk much, but I remember what he said – that we must decide which to bomb first, Paris or Rome, if the continent is conquered by the Russians. I didn’t like Churchill much as a human being, but if it were not for him, none of us would have survived. I, in any case, would not have.

AM In your essay ‘Meetings With Russian Writers’ you described your stay in post-war Russia.

IB I was sent to our embassy in Moscow right after the Potsdam Conference in September 1945, and I remained until January 1946. The British did not have an adequate staff, so they decided that I should go because I spoke Russian. They did not want me to stay any longer and they offered me a post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I refused, mainly because I don’t like to have anything to do with classified information. This presupposes a double life, and I want to be free, I want to be able to say anything I wish to say.

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AM When you were in Russia, you met Akhmatova and Pasternak.

IB I arrived on the day of an official dinner in our embassy. J. B. Priestley, a leftist writer, a welcome visitor in the Soviet Union, was the guest of honour. If someone thought that Soviet literature was the conscience of the world, he had to be feted. Priestley was a bit out of sorts, however, during this dinner. Perhaps his visits to the collective farms and factories had tired him out. Besides, the Soviet authorities blocked royalties for translations of books, and he liked money. In any case he left early. I took his place between Tairov, the theater director, and Korney Chukovsky, the literary historian and translator. Sergey Eisenstein sat opposite me. That day I met a few writers who had not been allowed to see foreigners, but I met Akhmatova by accident when I went to Leningrad.

AM This, however, was more than an accidental encounter.

IB We spent the whole night in her apartment. Everyone thought that something happened between us. Nothing did. We sat in opposite corners of the room and only talked.

The second time I saw her was right before my departure from Russia. I was returning to England through Leningrad and Finland, so I went to visit her and we talked for some three hours. Then, when she came to Oxford to receive an honorary degree, we spent a week together, but she was angry at me. According to her, there was some mystical connection between us, a spiritual connection, and we should suffer together, though staying apart. And I had permitted myself a vulgar act: I had got married. I invited Akhmatova to dinner and she completely froze out my wife. She spoke nicely to me, but I know that she never forgave me – she was a Russian legend, and I had deserted her.

AM You also wrote about your meeting with Pasternak.

IB Yes. I went to visit him in his dacha in Peredelkino, and we talked for a long time. Pasternak was an anti-Semite.

AM In what way?

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IB At least in the sense that whenever I said the word ‘Jew’, he shuddered. He knew that he was a Jew and he did not deny it. Heine said somewhere that the Jewish religion is not a religion but a misfortune,¹¹ and that is what it was for Pasternak, because he would like to have been a blonde, blue-eyed Sadko, a Slavic poet. His anti-Semitism is evident even in *Doctor Zhivago*. That’s why Ben-Gurion did not want him to be translated into Hebrew.

AM You had no illusions about the Soviet Union, yet you never spoke about Communism in hysterical terms.

IB In Russia, I was followed openly by NKVD plainclothesmen. They did not want to spy on me, merely to intimidate me. I felt that all the Russians I met were simply suffocating. I thought: What should I have done had I not emigrated? Shot myself in the head.

I knew that Stalin was waging the Cold War, that he imprisoned and even murdered Russian prisoners of war who came from Germany. It was clear that we couldn’t even begin to think about peace, that there could be only something in between: neither peace nor war. However, I did not support the proponents of Cold War rhetoric. I saw it up close, for I was in the States in 1949 when Senator McCarthy was out of control.

I did not want to think like the professional anti-Communists, because they thought only about how to mount a defense against Russia. But I never thought that Russia would actually go to war, unless the Soviet leaders sensed a weakness in their opponent. Perhaps if the French Communists had come to power, the Soviets might have come to their aid, and maybe even have occupied France. Luckily for us it never happened. I don’t know why, but I was not afraid of it.

Even after the Cuban Missile crisis – I was at Harvard then – I did not think that it would come to war – although more than a few Americans believed that the Third World War was around the corner.

¹¹ ‘Judaism is not a religion, but a misfortune’ is in fact attributed to a fictional version of Heine by Israel Zangwill in his *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (London, 1898), 319 (354 in the Philadelphia edition).

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AM What did you think about the future of Communism back in the 1950s?

IB In his memoir Spender gives an account of our conversation at the time. He asked me what was the most pleasant thing that could happen in my life. ‘The end of the Soviet Union,’ I told him, ‘but of course we will not live to see it.’

Some time later, I was sitting at a dinner next to Mrs Thatcher. She asked me: ‘You know everything about Russia. Please tell me: When will this terrible regime end?’ And I responded that in a place where the secret police number three million, only war can topple a regime. ‘What pessimism!’ she said, very irritated. ‘How can you judge the situation so badly? How can you even say such things?’ Offended, she grew silent. Luckily, it was I who was wrong.

I have an old childhood friend who is a member of the Communist Party and a professor of history. Two years ago, I asked him, ‘What is going on with the Russian Revolution now?’ ‘Not much,’ he answered: ‘uncertain country, uncertain times, uncertain people.’ You were not saying that during the last seventy-five years, I said. And he said: ‘Just you wait, there will be nationalism in Russia. And this will be worse than Stalinism.’

AM And what do you see as the sources of nationalism?

IB There is a theory that when you take peasants, who have for generations lived in villages, away from a traditional and patriarchal way of life, and transplant them to the city, they won’t any longer have anything to believe in, hence they begin to believe in the nation. But the Germans were nationalists already in 1807, when there were no peasants in the factories. Nationalism, by the way, is a German invention. I think that in the final analysis nationalism is a result of harm inflicted. Germans held a deep grudge against the French for the harm they inflicted on them.

AM Do you think that the nineteenth-century divisions between the left and the right hold true today?

IB In my opinion, yes.

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AM Perhaps there is another alternative, such as Popper's open society and closed society.

IB But it's all the same. The open society means liberalism. And the closed, conservatism. Conservatives in Russia are old Communists who want to preserve what was there.

AM Solzhenitsyn, too, is an opponent of liberalism.

IB You know who Solzhenitsyn reminds me of? An Old Believer. Have you seen *Khovanshchina* by Mussorgsky? You will find there a climate of opposition to everything that is new and liberal. Solzhenitsyn is a monarchist by nature. He wants the tsar back. He wants the Old Russia with the tsarist officialdom, the *chinovniks*. His conservatism and traditionalism are very nostalgic.

AM What do you think of the wave of conservatism rolling over the world?

IB It is a reaction against the failure of liberalism. People become conservative because it is something new for them. Take the United States: they elected conservatives to the Congress, even though they are political hooligans. The same holds for England. Here we have something called the New Right, who are awful people. But the whole post-war liberal world gave people nothing in which one could strongly believe. They need some kind of flame, and because reason does not give it, they were enveloped by boredom and a feeling that life has no meaning. I believe that boredom is the main reason why people go to war or get involved in revolution. The main reason for the events of 1968 was that the students got bored.

However, young Poles may not like my advice, which is that compromise is unavoidable, that there is only so much freedom and so much equality; so much happiness and so much independence; so much democracy and so much tradition. One has to keep things in proportion, or else nothing will hold together. Everything will collapse and you will have to start from the beginning. What young person would want to march under these slogans?

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AM On the one hand, we want tolerance, freedom, pluralism; on the other, if we are to fight for our goals we need consistency, courage. This is the paradox of toleration. If I were tolerant ...

IB ... you would be sitting with your arms crossed, doing nothing. This is the old story that conservatives speak of: 'You liberals believe that there can be different points of view, so when you are the majority, you forbid us nothing. And then we gain the advantage, the scales tip, and we can indeed block you.'

The idea that there is a paradise of some sort that we will reach in the end, either a liberal paradise or some other one, is an illusion. There are values which people believe in and you have to fight for these very things. Victory will never occur because certain fundamental values are mutually exclusive. The ideal world is impossible to attain. We must, however, do everything to approximate it.

A rough draft of this translation from 1995 is in the New York Public Library, **MssCol 23385, Series I: Robert B. Silvers Files 1955–2016**, b. RBS1012 f. 5. Thanks to the Manuscripts and Archives Division, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, for supplying a copy.

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