

Vladimir Osipov: Loyal Opposition?

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Vladimir Nikolaevich Osipov was born in Moscow in the 1930s. He participated from 1958 in informal cultural discussions held at the statue of Mayakovsky.¹ He was expelled from Moscow University in 1959. From November 1960 he edited an early *samizdat* journal, *Bumerang*. In 1961 he was arrested because of the Mayakovsky meetings and sentenced to seven years in a labour camp. During this term of imprisonment he became a Christian.² After his release on 5 October 1968, he and his wife were banned from Moscow and repeatedly harassed up to the time of Osipov's second arrest in 1974.

Osipov founded and edited the *samizdat* journal *Veche* which dealt with questions of national culture and religious life. The first issue appeared in January 1971 and the last one, the ninth, in December 1973. A tenth issue appeared under mysterious circumstances in April 1974, but Osipov disowned it, claiming that the KGB was responsible for its appearance.³ During 1973 and 1974 a legal case was prepared against *Veche*. On 1 August 1974 a new journal, *Zemlya*, the successor to *Veche*, appeared under Osipov's editorship. On 28 November Osipov was arrested in his home town of Aleksandrov⁴ and charged under Article 70 of the Criminal Code which deals with anti-Soviet activities. His wife, Valentina Mashkova, invited Western readers to compare any issue of *Veche* with the article of the Criminal Code in question to see if there was any substance in the charge. Osipov was moved from prison to prison and eventually tried between 24-26 September 1975. Western journalists were not admitted.⁵ Osipov was sentenced to eight years in a strict regime camp; there was an appeal, but the supreme court of the RSFSR upheld the original sentence.

Osipov never tired of insisting on the loyalty and consequent legality of his actions as editor of *Veche*. He considered that loyalty could be critical, but that any criticism must be loyal. If the authorities regarded *Veche* as illegal, then they were deluding themselves. "The whole question", wrote Osipov to Shimanov, "consists in the observation of their own laws by the authorities themselves."⁶ But, in his opinion, the rule

of law could only be achieved gradually and not through political violence. Osipov was thus a realist as far as political change was concerned:

The Soviet leaders will never voluntarily renounce power, and their violent overthrow would lead to their replacement, probably, by an even worse power. The only way is to convince the leaders, by energetic vocal effort, to be more tolerant and humanitarian, to respect the rights of man or, at the very least, their own Constitution of 1936.⁷

He rejected the political maximalism and the use of violence which the organization VSKhSON* advocated:

The announcement, even if only in words, of struggle with the Soviet regime is a profound error. VSKhSON's aim of a coup is harmful from any point of view. Struggle against individual abuses on the part of the authorities, legal statements to defend the Soviet Constitution from its bureaucratic enemies – such should be the main kinds of activity for contemporary protestors. It is indispensable to win the right for a loyal opposition to exist within the framework of the regime. Hence any kind of attempt to found an illegal organization is undesirable. Not discord, but spiritual unanimity in the most important things. It is time the administration renounced such concepts as “enemy”, “renegade”, “criminal”. It is time to listen to the voice of the patriots, to the criticisms of those who are agonized about their native land. In their rejection of the regime the members of VSKhSON were mistaken.⁸

Osipov was above all a tolerant man. He constantly spoke out on behalf of other dissidents whatever their views, and after his arrest in 1974 himself received support from all sides.⁹ He accepted Solzhenitsyn's proposals for Russian development because, in his view, they were realistic and constructive and because Solzhenitsyn “is profoundly tolerant of the ideas of all other men”.¹⁰ Osipov considered the most important virtue to be love for one's neighbour. In his article “Three Attitudes to the Homeland” he showed that true patriotism springs not from heady notions about national destiny but from love, an emotion which makes sense only when directed towards people one knows and with whom one has an affinity.¹¹ He insisted on the primacy of personal love because he did not overestimate the strength and capacities of the average human being. Were we all saints we would be able to love the whole of mankind, “but saints in our life are the rare exception”.¹² There is a refreshing realism about Osipov's approach. When criticizing the political maximalism of VSKhSON, he wrote: “there are no men of iron, and hence we

* For further information on VSKhSON see: J. Dunlop, *The New Russian Revolutionaries* (Nordland, 1976) reviewed by Philip Walters in *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 1, 1977, pp. 23–26. *Ed.*

do not need iron organizations".¹³ Osipov's belief in personal love lay behind his insistence that he was loyal to the Soviet regime.

He was arrested in 1961 for alleged anti-Soviet activity. He admitted that he had criticized Stalinism and some features of Khrushchevism, but maintained that his criticisms were constructive and that he remained loyal to the Soviet system itself.¹⁴ Constructive criticism was for Osipov a manifestation of love and he found uncongenial and dangerous the attempts made by Shimanov to justify the Soviet State by ascribing a mystical significance to its existence. "A direct and honest attitude towards Soviet laws", wrote Osipov to Shimanov, "is not that worshipping obeisance before the regime which you propose".¹⁵

Osipov's loyalty to the regime was based on his Russian patriotism and did not arise from a need to conform ideologically. His ideal society was an organic one and, in common with many Russian Orthodox thinkers and writers, he tended to identify goodness with wholeness. The pre-revolutionary religious philosopher, S. N. Bulgakov, once compared the lack of harmony and wholeness in 20th century society to the cubist technique of Picasso. In an article about Picasso, Bulgakov claimed that cubism reduced a complete picture to its geometrical components and was symptomatic of an age which was working against *sobornost*, the ideal religious community in which all individuals are united through love in an organic whole.¹⁶ Osipov when a student was interested in abstract art, but, he wrote, "many years later ... abstractionism and related trends became disagreeable to me".¹⁷ As in Bulgakov's case, it was Picasso's work in particular which did not attract him.

How was this ideal organic society to be created? In Osipov's view, openness, trust and honesty were needed. Lack of free speech created the need for deceit and concealment, and dishonesty produced a climate in which men were isolated from one another by mistrust. Osipov preceded Solzhenitsyn in appealing to people to stop leading lives of lying and hypocrisy.¹⁸ Writing about the *Chronicle of Current Events*, Osipov stated that

anonymous contributions nurture fear rather than reassure or encourage. The KGB has such a ramified net of agents that anonymous contributions are in the majority of cases ... not anonymous at all to the KGB. So that from any point of view legal actions are to be preferred to illegal ones.¹⁹

The journal *Veche* was to be a forum for public debate, and for Osipov it was vital that it should not be regarded as clandestine or subversive. Every issue of *Veche* bore the full name and address of Osipov as editor.

After his conversion to Christianity during his first period of imprisonment (1961-68) he saw clearly what the web of dishonesty from which he had escaped was like. Those who were converted in the camps, wrote

Osipov, were frequently "people with a typically Soviet world-view". Such a world-view, he believed, conditioned men to make certain false judgments about their own activity. "The only thing in my life . . . about which I am constantly ashamed", wrote Osipov of his first trial, "is that I admitted that I was guilty."²⁰ He did so, he thought, because he was still imprisoned by a communist world-view and by communist terminology :

I must openly admit that the investigators somehow succeeded in convincing us that "objectively" we were bringing harm to the Soviet State.²¹

When I was 23, two years before the trial, I had been a member of the Komsomol (by conviction) and there easily fell under the hypnosis of the market-place terminology: "enemy", "hostile", "capitalism".²²

Conversion to Christianity led Osipov to honesty and made him suspicious of any attempts to divide people artificially into hostile or competing groups.

For all his belief in the moral potential of the Russian "people", Osipov believed that they would not be capable of responsible political action. Political change could only come from above and not through a spontaneous movement from below :

A popular revolution is generally undesirable.²³

It seems that we must not count on "pressure from below". Our people are not political . . . So must we count on concessions from above? Yes, we must.²⁴

Osipov here demonstrates his political realism and gradualism. He felt closer to the more realistic of the "democrats":* he did not agree with Sakharov that a democratic regime could be introduced into Russia; but he agreed with Roy Medvedev and Anatoli Levitin-Krasnov, who, in turn, according to Osipov, were in agreement with Solzhenitsyn.²⁵ Osipov considered that Soviet citizens had a choice of two ways forward: "to agree to keep Soviet authoritarianism on condition that it renounces Marxism and observes legality or to declare the democratic path and then moan about the fact that it is unattainable."²⁶ He, like Solzhenitsyn, preferred the former way forward.

But Osipov's self-appointed task in *Veche* was not a political one. He constantly reiterated the fact that *Veche* was not concerned with political matters, but with regenerating the moral features of national life. Osipov's

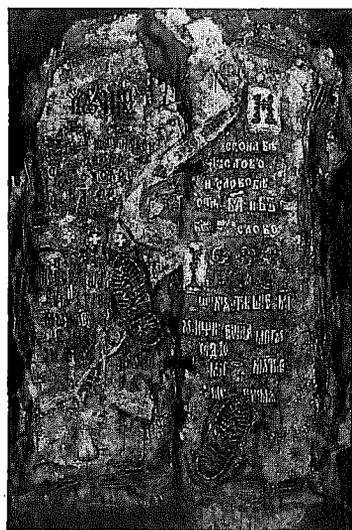
* The "democrats", most prominently Sakharov, believe that the first reform in the USSR should be the adoption of a Western-style constitution guaranteeing democratic rights to the individual. In Osipov's opinion, however, many moderate democrats doubt the efficacy of sudden constitutional reform and believe, like him, in political gradualism. P.W.



The Drowned Church by Valentina Kropivnitskaya (mentioned in "Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union", pp. 235-7) expresses the bewilderment and nostalgia for the past felt by many contemporary Soviet artists.

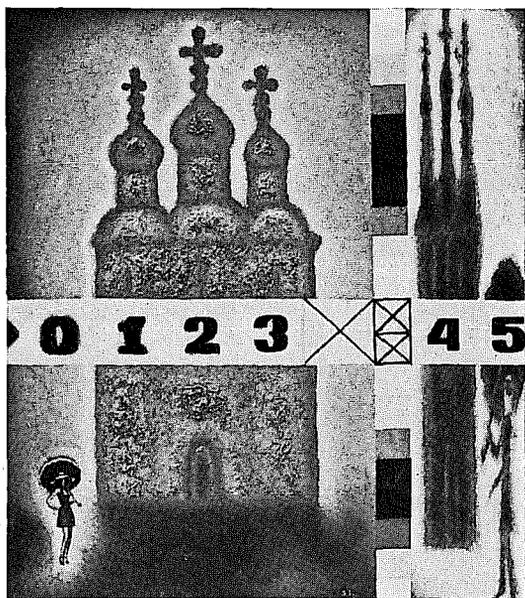
Below: Landscape of Vladimir by Eduard Zelenin (see p. 236) portrays one of the churches in Vladimir. A sequence of numbers superimposed across the church represent contemporary reality.

Below: The Gospel according to St. John by Dmitri Plavinsky (see p. 236). Unlike icons in which every line and all lettering have to be "legible", this picture portrays lettering which is defaced and no longer decipherable.



Right: The Reflected Church by Oscar Rabin (see p. 236) shows a Russian village of wooden houses, which when reflected in a pond reveal a church, now destroyed.

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Above: Towers in Svanetia, a region of Georgia. A group of young Georgians attended a religious festival of the Svany and described their impressions in a document printed on pp. 261-3.



The chairman of the China Buddhist Association, Mr. Chao P'u-ch'u, photographed in Tokyo (August, 1963). The history of this Association is discussed in "Buddhism in Modern China", pp. 220-8.

determination to allow men of all kinds to express their views in *Veche* obscured his own essentially humanitarian, liberal and moral mission. Western commentators have often been disturbed by the absence of any clear ideological line in *Veche* and by the persistent appearance of unacceptable chauvinist, antisemitic and nationalist sentiments.²⁷ As one commentator put it, "the main thing about which the editors of *Veche* do not agree is who they are and what they want in the end. Are they monarchists? Not monarchists. 'Loyal opposition'? Not really. Orthodox? Not all of them. Antisemites? Again, apparently, not all of them".²⁸ From the very start, Osipov had frequently to refute misconceptions about the role and character of *Veche*.²⁹ *Veche*, then, did not consistently come up to Osipov's own standards. This has meant that Osipov's own integrity has been overshadowed. Shortly after his arrest one Western journal commented that "the KGB has clearly taken action against him because of his political views".³⁰ If Osipov had read this he would surely have felt that the whole purpose of *Veche* had been misunderstood.

The failure of Osipov's experiment has given many people a clearer insight into the ill-defined nature of legality in the Soviet Union. "The collapse of *Veche* and *Zemlya*", wrote "16 Soviet People" protesting against Osipov's arrest, "speaks of the fact that, in breach of the Constitution of the USSR, which guarantees freedom of the press, even the publishing of manuscript [typewritten, Ed.] loyal journals is a threat against the state structure."³¹ As Tverdokhlebov pointed out at the same time, "after the many arrests of '72 and '73 this is the first arrest of this type, in which a man is arrested who has not concealed his intellectual activity. Nothing should divert our attention from this fact".³² It is impossible not to admire Osipov's quixotic experiment. The attempt to test out the possibility of "loyal opposition" was worth making.

¹ See: V. Osipov, "Ploshchad Mayakovskogo, statya 70-aya", AS (*Arkhiv Samizdata*) 527, August 1970, hereafter cited as "Ploshchad". (The *Arkhiv Samizdata* is a collection of *samizdat* documents produced by Radio Liberty.)

² For Osipov's activities in the camps and impressions of him see: E.K., "Mordovskaya stranitsa", *Russkaya Mysl*, 20 November 1975, p. 5; V. Osipov, "Berdyayevsky kruzhok v Leningrade", AS 1163, January 1972, *Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 104-5, hereafter cited as "Berdyayevsky"; "Zayavlenie po povodu vykhoda t.n. 10 nomera *Veche*", AS 1790, 25 May 1974, hereafter cited as "Zayavlenie"; V. Osipov, "Ploshchad", p. 15.

³ For the dispute concerning *Veche* No. 10 see: V. Osipov, "Ekstrennoe zayavlenie dlya pečati", AS 1705, 7 March 1974; "O vykhode 10 nomera zhurnala *Veche*", AS 1706, 20 April 1974; "Po povodu vystupleniya V. Osipova protiv zhurnala *Veche*", AS 1787, 17 April 1974; "Zayavlenie: Ot redaktsii zhurnala *Veche*", AS 1791, 12 June 1974; I. Ovchinnikov and A. Ivanov, "Otkrytoe pismo . . .", AS 1966, 5 September 1974.

⁴ "Obrashchenie po povodu aresta Vladimira Osipova", AS 1993, 29 November 1974, hereafter cited as "Obrashchenie".

⁵ For reports of the trial see: "Novy prigovor Vladimiru Osipovu", *Posev*, October 1975, p. 12; "Sud nad Osipovym", *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii*, No. 37, 30 September 1975, pp. 7-9; "The Trial of Vladimir Osipov", *Soviet Analyst*, 16 October 1975, p. 7.

⁶ V. Osipov, "Otkrytoe pismo Gennadiyu Shimanovu", AS 1732, 29 April 1973; *Iz zhurnala "Veche"*, Posev (series "Volnoe slovo") 1975, p. 14, hereafter cited as "Otkrytoe pismo".

⁷ V. Osipov, "Pyat vozrazhenii Sakharovu", AS 1696, April 1974, p. 3, hereafter cited as "Pyat vozrazhenii".

⁸ V. Osipov, "Berdyayevsky", pp. 164-5.

⁹ For example: "Obrashchenie"; A Tverdokhlebov, "Zayavlenie v zashchitu Vladimira Osipova", AS 1953, 30 November 1974, hereafter cited as "Zayavlenie v zashchitu".

¹⁰ V. Osipov, "K voprosu o tseli i metodakh legalnoi oppozitsii", AS 1760, May 1974, p. 5, hereafter cited as "K voprosu".

¹¹ P. M. Walters, "A New Creed for Russians? The Ideas of the Neo-Slavophiles", RCL Vol. 4, No. 3, 1976, pp. 29-30, hereafter cited as "A New Creed".

¹² V. Osipov, "Tri otnosheniya k rodine", AS 1147, 25 March-2 April 1970, *Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 103, pp. 220-1.

¹³ V. Osipov, "Berdyayevsky", p. 163.

¹⁴ V. Osipov, "Ploshchad", pp. 6-7.

¹⁵ V. Osipov, "Otkrytoe pismo", p. 14.

¹⁶ S. N. Bulgakov, "Trup krasoty", *Tikhie dumy*, Moscow, 1918.

¹⁷ V. Osipov, "Ploshchad", p. 3.

¹⁸ V. Osipov, "Trus ne igraet v khokkei", 7 January 1972, *Posev* May 1974, p. 38. See also: B. Litvinoff, "L'Affaire Ossipov et le Problème du Nationalisme Russe", *Est et Ouest*, 1-15 September 1975, p. 17, hereafter cited as "L'Affaire Ossipov".

¹⁹ V. Osipov, "K voprosu", p. 9.

²⁰ V. Osipov, "Ploshchad", p. 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ V. Osipov, "Berdyayevsky", p. 157.

²⁴ V. Osipov, "K voprosu", pp. 8-9.

²⁵ P. M. Walters, "A New Creed", p. 28.

²⁶ V. Osipov, "Pyat vozrazhenii", p. 4.

²⁷ See, for example: B. Litvinoff, "L'Affaire Ossipov"; E. Ternovsky, "Vladimir Osipov", *Russkaya Mysl*, 23 October 1975, p. 8; V. Lamzdorf, "Veche No. 5", *Posev*, May 1974, pp. 39-43.

²⁸ V. Lamzdorf, "Veche No. 5", *Posev*, May 1974, pp. 42-3.

²⁹ For example: V. Osipov, "Zayavlenie redaktsii zhurnala *Veche*", AS 586, 1 March 1971; V. Osipov, "Pismo v redaktsiyu zhurnala *Vestnik RSKhD*", 26 November 1972, *Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 106, pp. 294-6.

³⁰ "Osipov Arrested for 'Loyal' Opposition", *Soviet Analyst*, 16 January 1975, p. 3.

³¹ "Obrashchenie", p. 1.

³² A. Tverdokhlebov, "Zayavlenie v zashchitu", p. 1.