

## SHODDY JOURNALISM

### I.

My forthcoming protest at Balliol marks the twenty second anniversary of Nick Cohen's 'The Pub Philosopher'. Next, I shall point to three cases of Cohen's misrepresentations of facts.

Nick Cohen wrote: 'Russian literature brought him [i.e. Tomin] into contact with Tolstoy's writings on non-violence. In the mid-Fifties, when the Stalinist grip on Czechoslovakia permitted no dissent, he refused to do military service and was jailed for three months. As soon as the 19-year-old was released, he tried to escape to Sweden. He walked through the border forests into Poland, where he sold his watch and bought a train ticket to the port of Szczecin. Before he could find a boat to take him across the Baltic, the police caught him.'

As far as this goes, Cohen was correct, although I could take exception to 'the police caught him', for it suggests that I attempted to escape the police, was chased and caught. It was in October, the nights were cold, and I was sitting in the railway-station in Szczecin. At about 1 am a police patrol arrived, rounding up vagrants. When they came to me, I stood up and told them that I was surrendering myself into their hands, trying to explain to them that I tried to escape from Czechoslovakia to India through Poland and Sweden; Gandhi, who drew on Tolstoy, was my hero because of putting non-violence into practice, and I had hoped to join his followers and learn from them. Although the Czech and the Polish languages are akin, it took the Polish police some time to understand what I was telling them. 'The police apprehended him' would have been more accurate.

Cohen continues: 'He was sent to a four-year sentence in a coal-mine labour-camp. Conditions at the mine were relatively mild and Tomin has never, in any case, been daunted by physical hardship.'

This is false; I never worked in a coal mine.

The story I told Cohen was as follows. I began by contrasting my experience with prisons in Poland and in Czechoslovakia. The prison cell at the Szczecin railway station had no light, no mattresses, just a big wooden plank-bed, on which slept a few poorly clad vagrants. The one I slept next to was trembling with cold, and so I covered both of us with my coat. On arrival at the prison in Czechoslovakia I was subjected to a routine medical check up. Full of vermin, I was shaved head and all.

After three months of pre-trial confinement I was sent to a labour-camp where the prisoners worked in a coal mine. All new arrivals underwent a routine medical examination. When the doctor found that I was short-sighted, he declared me unfit for work in the coal mine. Prisons are establishments of routine, and this was something out of the ordinary. The next prisoners transport was due in six weeks time, and I was left to my own devices. From the early-morning muster of prisoners to the late evening muster the time was mine. In the prison camp were about sixty catholic priests, who smuggled into the camp a lot of literature. (They worked with civilian coal miners at the coal face, where the prison guards would never go.) One of the priests, Father Divisek, gave me a very good textbook of the German language, which I studied assiduously, and with its help I read there my first book

in German, a tiny booklet by Romano Guardini entitled *Das Geheimnis der heiligen Messe* (*The Secret of the Holy Mass*, elucidating the mysteries of the catholic liturgy).

Cohen continued: 'His [i.e. Tomin's] fellow inmates put him in touch with the intellectual currents which would dominate his thinking in the next decade. Talks with imprisoned priests overcame his dislike of Catholicism. A first reading of Marx revealed to him the philosopher's "craving for humanity". Although he never joined the Communist Party, he was able to associate himself with those party intellectuals using Marx to fight for socialism with a human face. His new interest made the philosophy courses in Prague, where Marxism was the only permitted subject, seem worthwhile. He enrolled when he was released after serving a year of his sentence. The two strands came together in 1964 when he published, in a leading literary journal, a condemnation of state atheism and a call for a Marxist-Christian dialogue.'

This is more or less accurate, but allow me to fill in some details: I read Marx in prison during the two and a half months of my first pre-trial confinement. I considered myself an anti-Marxist, but what did I know about Marx? And so I read all the books of Marx, Engels, and Lenin that were in the prison library, but there was no *Das Kapital*. I insisted on obtaining it. Summoned to the Prison Governor, I told him that I was against Marxism in so far as it endorsed violence, but that I would read *Das Kapital* with an open mind. He lent me his own copy.

I appealed against my six month sentence and at the Court of Appeal I used my newly acquired knowledge of Marx and Lenin in my defence (I refused to accept the services of an appointed defence lawyer). My six month sentence was reduced to three months.

When I was re-imprisoned after my Polish escapade, I learnt that the Prison Governor had been imprisoned. The misappropriation of prison funds, of which he was allegedly accused, was widespread, and so I could not help thinking that the Governor's lending to me *Das Kapital* had something to do with his imprisonment. There was one more thing that might have counted against him. After the reduction of my sentence to three months at the Court of Appeal, for the remaining fortnight of my three months sentence I was put in a prison-wing in which the cells had the doors open during the day. On a Sunday, in the biggest cell, I organized a cultural event: anyone who could recite a poem, recited, anyone who could sing, sang, whoever could perform gymnastics, performed. Suddenly the door was shut. The prison guards accused me of organizing a prison riot. Summoned to the Governor, I explained to him what we had been doing, and suggested to him that such events ought to be organized and supported by the prison staff. After a long discussion he agreed with me in principle.

## II.

Nick Cohen wrote: 'Tomin, on his own admission, did not play a great part in the blossoming of freedom in Czechoslovakia in 1968.'

Cohen wrote to me on 10/9/89: 'We are very keen to do a feature on you.' When we met, he told me he wanted from me the story of my life. 'The blossoming of freedom in Czechoslovakia in 1968' co-determined the whole subsequent course of my life.

I contributed to the coming of Prague Spring 1968 by promoting Marxist-Christian dialogue in the mid-1960s. In 1968 it was Marxist philosophy as such to which I turned my critical attention. I noted the conceptual similarity between *scholé*, that is 'leisure', 'time for free activities', understood as 'time for philosophy', which dominated the Greek philosophic thought of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and 'free time' as it was prominent in the thinking of Karl Marx, understood as the time during which men and women fully develop their human potentialities. Communism was to be governed by the principle, according to which every member of the society would contribute to its well-being according to his abilities, while society would satisfy every one's human needs. I realized that Socrates acted according to this principle when at his trial he proclaimed: 'What is my due? (36b5) ... What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, who needs free time for exhorting you? There can be no reward so fitting as being given free meals in Prytaneum.' (36d4-7) Socrates was giving the Athenians his best – exhorting them to look to themselves, to seek virtue and wisdom before looking to their property, and to look to the well-being of the state before looking to its might and wealth (36c) – and he required satisfaction of his basic human needs as a proper reward. Socrates' act helped me to realize that the humanities, philosophy in particular, need not and ought not to wait for some remote and nebulous vision of communism. Properly understood and properly cultivated, humanities operate on this principle. One gives society one's best, and by satisfying one's needs society enables one to give it one's best. Moreover, by doing so, one does one's best for oneself. This is again profoundly Socratic, for Socrates freely admitted that he pursued philosophy primarily for his own benefit: 'looking at the argument mostly for my own sake, but perhaps for the sake of my friends as well' (Plato, *Charmides* 166d3-4, tr. D. Watt)

Such were the thoughts with which I was preoccupied in the spring of 1968, intending to incorporate them in 'Three essays on the theory of knowledge', the first of which was published in the Czech *Philosophic Journal* towards the end of 1968 (*Filosofický časopis* No 5, 1968) – we preserved a lot of freedom for a whole year after the Soviet invasion.

Politically, the months January – June 1968 were marked by a power struggle between the progressive faction in the Communist Party, supported by writers, artists, and established philosophers and the conservative faction, supported by the Soviets. In this struggle I was engaged only as an observer. On June 26 censorship was abolished, and on June 27 a prominent Czech writer Vaculík published his *Two thousand words*, in which he exhorted 'workers, farmers, officials and clerks, artists, and all citizens' to take the cause of freedom into their own hands. In response, streets in the centre of Prague were filled with groups of people freely discussing the situation in the country. In this unfolding and exercise of true freedom I participated actively, engaging in heated discussion that every day lasted late into the night; it was only then that freedom in Czechoslovakia in 1968 truly blossomed. Those who were engaged in the preceding months of the power struggle of the political factions were conspicuously missing on the streets. Many men and women, especially young people – for it was mostly the young who enjoyed this freedom of expression to the full –

expressed views that were sharply critical of the Communist Party and the preceding years of its absolutist rule, but I did not hear a single voice advocating the restoration of capitalism.

Two incidents of those heady days are deeply engraved in my mind. A group of young people on Wenceslas Square discussed the economic and foreign policy of the government, in particular economic aid to countries in Africa and Asia. An element of racism, repressed under the rule of the Communist censorship, underlay much of the talk. One young man was particularly self-assured in his racial superiority, and so I took him to task. After that, the discussion took a very different turn. The following day, on my own, in one of the streets in Prague Old Town I met that young man. As soon as he saw me, he headed towards me. I remember wondering how many teeth would be missing in my mouth after he finished with me. He addressed me with the words: 'I fully deserved what you did to me yesterday. I could not sleep last night. I was wrong and you were right.'

Towards the end of July the pressure of the Soviets on the Czechoslovak Communist Party intensified. After a crucial meeting between Dubcek and Breznev, hundreds of people assembled in the Old Town Square around the Jan Hus monument. Those who wanted to speak climbed up to the statue. Those who did so proclaimed passionately: 'Communist are worse than fascists! Communists have no right to govern the country! Let's remove them from power!'. As passions became more and more inflamed, I took the stand and said that such calls were suicidal. A number of men shouted: 'Get him down. He talked in the same way in the night when we made a protest at the Radio station.' But the voices 'Let him speak' prevailed. I talked for some twenty minutes, and remember saying: 'I was in prison with dozens of Catholic priests. Who among you did anything to improve the situation of Christians in our country during the years of the anti-Christian witch hunts? When the Communist Party started the process of its renewal, when it relaxed and finally abolished censorship, you call for its demise? If there is any chance for the country to get through all this unscathed, to preserve the freedom of press and the freedom to travel, avoiding the Soviet invasion like that which happened in Hungary, that chance depends on the Communist Party staying in power. If the Soviets invade us, who will come to our help? France, England, the U. S. A.?' – The subsequent discussion took a very different turn.

### III.

Nick Cohen wrote: 'Tomin, to the envy of his colleagues, had found work in the University of Hawaii at the time of the invasion.'

In fact, when five Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia in the early hours of August 21, 1968, I was in Prague. I and my wife were woken up just after 7am by a phone call from a neighbour. We switched on the radio; the radio announcers reported on the progress of the Soviet military forces. The radio announcer stopped talking when the soldiers entered the broadcasting room in the Radio station.

I wrote a poster in Russian: 'You invaded our country. We do not want you here. Go home!' With the poster I went onto the main thoroughfare called Obránců míru (Defenders of

Peace). Opposite the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Home Office) stood a row of houses in which lived prominent government and party officials. Russian soldiers stood in front of each entrance. On a momentary impulse I posted the poster on the wall between two entrances. An army officer snatched the poster from the wall, tore it to pieces, and ordered a soldier to arrest me. The soldier did not move; the officer did not repeat his order and did not attempt to arrest me on his own. I crossed the road to join a disturbance on Letenská pláň, a huge plain full of Russian soldiers and armed vehicles. A young Czech photographed the tanks and Russian soldiers ran after him. Young people got in their way and the photographer escaped. Then a row of lorries began to form along the road, I joined people on one of the lorries. Waving Czechoslovak flags – the streets were lined with lampposts decorated with Czechoslovak flags, for the country was prepared for the visit of the President of Yugoslavia – and shouting 'Go home' in Russian and in Czech, we drove towards the Prague airport, in the opposite direction to Soviet armoured vehicles that were pouring into the city from the airport.

A few hours later I returned to Letenská pláň. A group of young people had surrounded one of the tanks. Soldiers were offering them leaflets explaining the invasion as a brotherly help against counterrevolutionary forces. I took one leaflet and read the first sentence aloud, translated it to Russian, and asked the soldier: 'Have you seen any counterrevolution in this country?' The soldier replied: 'People threw stones at our tank.' I said: 'It must have been awful. I could not understand why you invaded the country. Now I know, some terrible Czechs threw stones at your tank. Or can you tell me any other reason? Do you know what counterrevolution is? Have you seen any Czechs fighting Czechs? You invaded our country, we have every right to shoot you, let alone throw stones at your tanks.' At that point the officer of the unit had enough of it and ordered the crew to retreat with the tank into the bushes surrounding the Ministry.

The next day I went to the city centre. In Na příkopě, one of the main streets, students offered the public big sheets of paper and felt tip pens to make posters. I wrote my poster in Russian, in big red letters: 'Soldiers of the army of occupation, learn to think for yourself, why did we welcome your fathers with flowers and love, while now no Czech will offer you a piece of bread or a glass of water.' With that poster I went to the Old Town Square where Russian soldiers with armoured vehicles were surrounding the Jan Hus Monument. I posted the poster on the wall of the Old Town Hall at the opposite corner of the Square. A group of Czechs immediately formed a protective wall around me. I was about to go away when somebody told me that a Russian soldier wanted to come and see the poster but was ordered to get back. And so I turned to the poster and read it aloud. As I finished reading it, I remember noticing that all the Czechs disappeared, and immediately afterwards I was seized by Russian soldiers and dragged behind the wall of armoured vehicles around the Monument. I was ordered to stand facing an armoured vehicle; a soldier was standing behind me, poking his rifle in my back. Then another officer came and asked what was going on. The officer who ordered my capture replied: 'We caught three Czechs today and let them go. But this one must be handed over to the KGB.' The newcomer asked: 'Are you the officer in charge of the unit?' – 'No.' – 'So go away'. The new officer then asked me what happened. I said: 'They have beaten me up, stepped on me, broken my glasses, and they do not even allow me to sit down.' – 'Sit down and tell me!' I sat down but did not

speak. The officer thought, quite rightly, that my throat was dry and I could barely talk. He ordered a soldier to bring me some water. The soldier did so, but I refused to drink. The officer thought I was afraid it was poisoned and ordered the soldier to have a sip. I said: 'I am not afraid to drink it, but I shall not accept any water from you before you apologize for what your soldiers did to me.' He apologized; I drank the water, told him about the poster, and then I talked:

'My father began to teach me Russian during the war. I was seven when the Red Army liberated our town, a small tank division stayed for a few days near to where we lived. I recited Russian poems to the soldiers, standing on a tank ... I was in my mid-teens when I began to read Russian literature in the original, and I loved it. I read Pushkin and Lermontov, Gogol and Turgenev, Chekov and Gonczarov, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky ... With my wife we went hitchhiking around East Germany for our honeymoon. In Dresden we saw East German soldiers who strongly reminded me of Nazi soldiers. Then we saw a group of Russian soldiers and I shall never forget the joyful relief at the sight of them. But now, after you invaded our country, I shall never again be able to look at Russian uniform with pleasure.' – One of the soldiers surrounding us exclaimed: 'How can you dare to say such words?!' The officer rebuked him: 'Be silent!' – Suddenly there was a noise. A soldier who stood guard had fallen asleep and his rifle fell on the ground. The officer shouted at him, the soldier picked up his rifle and continued standing on guard. I told the officer: 'You are an old soldier. I believe you fought in the Second World War, yet I am sure you never saw your soldiers so demoralized and psychologically exhausted as they are now. Why? You were misinformed about the situation in Czechoslovakia. You were told to go and help the Czechs and Slovaks to fight counterrevolution, but there has been no counterrevolution, and you found the whole country united, resisting you in a non-violent manner. The first duty of an officer is to acquire reliable information about the situation into which he leads his soldiers. When you return, look up your 'informers'!' – The officer said: 'When we return home, we take them by the throat and throttle them.' – At this point I said: 'It is getting late, my wife must be getting worried, let me go.' The officer let me go.

In October of 1968 I went to the U. S. A. together with another Marxist and two Christians from Czechoslovakia to take part in a travelling seminar, organized by Student Christian Organizations. This provided me with an opportunity to talk about the non-violent resistance of the Czechs against the Soviet invasion at Princeton University, at the University in Newark in Delaware (on these two occasions I was on my own), at Boston University, at Harvard University, at Mac-Allister College in St Paul, Mac Cormic University in Chicago, The Theological seminary in St. Louis, The University of Hawaii, Pacific University in Stockton in California, Theological Faculty in Dubuque Iowa, Duke University in Durham in North Carolina, Vassar College in Poughkeepsie (on this occasion I was again on my own).

Our last joint engagement was in Durham University in North Carolina. An academic took the stage, waving in his hands dozens of newspapers that reported on our travelling seminar all through the U. S. A.: 'How did it possible that this Marxist infiltration was allowed to take place? The old forms of the Communist propaganda proved to be ineffective, and so Moscow devised new methods? Aware that the hearts of the U. S. citizens have become sympathetic to the Czechoslovaks, they sent here their propagandists from Czechoslovakia?

Here you can see the results!' poking the pile of newspapers with his finger. Then I broke the awkward silence that followed: 'As I was explaining to you, there was no counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia. Until now I racked my brains, trying to fathom why the Russians invaded the country. But now I have found out. The idea of the travelling seminar was conceived in the autumn of 1967. The Soviets learned about the great opportunity it offered them to disseminate Marxism in the U. S. A. And so they thought hard how to condition the American public so as to be most open and susceptible to it. And so, as the date of the travelling seminar was approaching, they invaded Czechoslovakia.' The absurd situation I thus painted was greeted with welcome laughter. The seminar ended well.

About a month after returning home, out of the blue, I received an invitation to the University of Hawaii for the academic year 1969/70, to give two courses of lectures, on Marxist Ethics and on the Theory of Knowledge, and a seminar on the problems of Marxist-Christian Dialogue. I accepted the invitation, and in September 1969 I arrived in Hawaii with my wife and two sons. I enjoyed every minute of my work at the Hawaiian University.

Nick Cohen continued, this time accurately: 'To their [Tomin's colleagues'] astonishment, his [Tomin's] and his wife's "sense of responsibility" for the ideas behind the Prague Spring brought them back. He was not, of course, allowed to work at the university and found a job as a turbine operator in a Prague power plant.'