

CURRENT BOOKS

FELLOWS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center

**POLITICAL PILGRIMS:
Travels of Western
Intellectuals to the Soviet
Union, China and Cuba**
by Paul Hollander
Oxford, 1981
524 pp. \$25

Since the 1920s, a good many Western philosophers, artists, journalists, novelists, scientists, and critics have trekked to Marxist states in search of utopia. Many found what they went looking for—or thought they did. And that is the mystery that draws Hollander, a Sovietologist and Hungarian émigré, to his subject. For these pilgrims—independent individuals such as George Bernard Shaw, Edmund Wilson, Susan Sontag—made their livings by pointing out contradictions and

unmasking hypocrisy in their own societies. Yet a short stint in Russia or Mao's China or Castro's Cuba transformed these professional doubters into "true believers." Why were they so easily duped—or so willing to be duped? Looking at the records of their travels, their glowing testimonies, Hollander seeks answers.

During the 1930s, massive unemployment and poverty in the West disillusioned many intellectuals. The Depression seemed to signal collapse, capitalism in its death throes. By contrast, the Soviet "experiment," as biologist Julian Huxley saw it, was successfully applying "scientific principles" to social and economic organization. Poet Pablo Neruda extolled the Soviets' glistening new hydroelectric plants. Theodore Dreiser thrilled at the modesty of Stalin's quarters, reading into them the triumph of social equality and the end of privilege. Shaw was impressed by Soviet "rehabilitation procedures" that made "ordinary men" out of "criminal types." But beyond the institutional and material accomplishments, many Westerners thought they sensed a general moral uplift. John Dewey, the famed American educator, believed the great appeal of the new Soviet world was "psychological rather than political," and critic Edmund Wilson deemed it "the moral top of the world."

If Stalin purged his foes mercilessly and signed a pact with Hitler, that did not mean the utopian dream was dead. Chastened by Soviet developments, the next great wave of pilgrims, that of the 1960s and '70s, sought out the communes of China, the work brigades of Cuba. This time many were fleeing the "ravages" of Western prosperity—the cash nexus, growing bureaucracies, increasing work specialization, stultifying schools. Now they searched for spiritual goods—"wholeness," a sense of community—often turning a blind eye on economic or institutional flaws.

Thus, philosopher Simone de Beauvoir waxed lyrical over the Chinese countryside: The simple ways of the rural populace suggested "harmony" between land and people, people and government. Even journalist James Reston discovered there what American life "must have been like on the

frontier a century ago." In Cuba, workers chanted while they worked; it seemed to Susan Sontag as if the whole country were "high on some beneficent kind of speed."

And if imperfections soon became apparent in China, in Cuba, or in North Vietnam, there was still Mozambique. There was still, as a group of Swedish students told George Kennan, Albania.

Hollander recognizes that many pilgrims were tricked by elaborate "techniques of hospitality"—modern "Potemkin villages," beatific guides, honorific tributes. But most travelers proved all too eager to be taken in. This willingness to believe stemmed from more than a desire to witness social justice; it derived from a need among Western intellectuals to be appreciated. In earlier times, during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, intellectuals had struggled to advance secular values—science, reason, progress, liberalism. But now that those values have triumphed in the West, many intellectuals feel excluded. Hence, argues Hollander, they resort to championing more elusive, transcendent ideals (e.g., community) and imagine that in some distant land, some Albania, those values reign supreme. (A weakness of the book, though, is Hollander's failure to discuss the exceptions, individuals such as André Gide who did see beyond their illusions as a result of journeys to communist countries.)

This fantasy, which blurs personal problems and public issues, could be forgiven, Hollander maintains, were it not so harmful to the societies from which the intellectuals come. Public censure of institutions has become a rite of passage for modern intellectuals, and dissent is protected, even rewarded, in the West. But a society derives much of its self-image from its more articulate spokesmen; and if these spokesmen see nothing but ill, a nation may begin to doubt its own worth. In their eagerness to believe that distant Marxist utopias provide all answers, Western intellectuals, Hollander concludes, have demoralized their own societies.

Hollander provides a fascinating account of the 20th-century political pilgrims, allowing them generous room to speak for themselves; his conclusions may be a shade simplistic.

—James Lang ('78)

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

by Salman Rushdie
Knopf, 1981
446 pp. \$12.95

Born in Bombay in 1947, on the midnight of India's birth into freedom, Saleem Sinai is endowed with magical gifts — as are the thousand other Indian children born at the same instant. Like them, he is both master and victim of his fate, in a destiny implacably, and often disastrously, twinned with the country's. The son of a Muslim businessman,

Saleem has adventures spanning affluence and poverty, politics and witchcraft, peace and war, India and Pakistan, fact and dream, often plunging him headlong into national events: the linguistic feud that resulted in the creation of Maharashtra and the Bangladesh War in 1971. In the end, still young, Saleem waits mysteriously for death in a pickle fac-