



ILYA EHRENBURG

Revolutionary, Novelist, Poet,
War Correspondent, Propagandist:
The Extraordinary Epic of a
Russian Survivor

Anatol Goldberg

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With an Introduction, Postscript,
and Additional Material by
Erik de Mauny

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Picasso's portrait of Ilya Ehrenburg

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The six parts of Ehrenburg's memoirs, *People, Years, Life*, are the primary source for the principal events in his life, but they are not consecutive – the narrative jumps from one decade to another as memory dictates – and they are not conclusive, since the author remains silent, either for private reasons or because of official censorship, on a number of matters. To fill these gaps, Anatol Goldberg had access to various sources, but in the case of certain people who are still alive and living in the Soviet Union, I have followed his example and refrained from naming them.

For my own part, I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to a number of people who helped me in various ways in the task of revising and completing the original draft. First and foremost, my thanks go to Mrs Elsa Goldberg, for making available to me all her late husband's archives. For additional help in research, and for a number of valuable suggestions, I would like to thank Mr Barry Holland, Mr Alexander Lieven, Miss Mary Roberts, and Mr Hartmut Schneider.

ERIK DE MAUNY

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INTRODUCTION

There are many ways of approaching the life and career of Ilya Ehrenburg. It was, after all, an exceptionally long and varied career, in which he was by turns youthful revolutionary, bohemian expatriate, poet, novelist, literary journalist, war correspondent, propagandist, memorialist, and unofficial ambassador for a regime which he intellectually accepted yet often emotionally despised: so that to arrive at a balanced assessment of the man and his achievements, as this biography sets out to do, would seem at first sight an almost impossible task. Yet no one was better qualified to undertake it than Anatol Goldberg, and in following Ehrenburg's improbable trajectory through the major convulsions of his time, through two world wars, the civil war in Spain, the rise and fall of the Fascist dictatorships, and the darkest hours of Stalin's Great Terror, he has also thrown much incidental light on the nature of Russian society, both before and after the Revolution.

If one says of Ehrenburg that he was by turns a Westerner and a Slavophile, and sometimes both simultaneously, this is undoubtedly true, but it by no means explains all the complexities of his character. He was also a Jew, and as he once put it, 'As long as there is a single anti-Semite left in the world, I shall proudly call myself a Jew.' He was born into a well-to-do Jewish family in Kiev in 1891 (his father was manager of a local brewery), but fairly soon afterwards the family moved to Moscow. Years later, he was to say that there were only two cities in which he really felt at home: Moscow and Paris. In Moscow, he became friends with one of the future leaders of the October Revolution, Nikolai Bukharin, and it was Bukharin who introduced him, while he was still a schoolboy, into a Bolshevik underground organization. His activities there led to his arrest and to some months of detention in Tsarist prisons. After his release, his father managed to get him a passport, and on the grounds of pursuing further studies, he was able to leave for the West.

Arriving in Paris, he immediately fell in love with it, plunged into the life of Bohemian cafés, began to write poetry, met other poets and

artists such as Picasso, Soutine, Modigliani and Cocteau, and largely forgot his earlier revolutionary sentiments. They were revived, however, by what he saw of the First World War (he was particularly incensed by the condescending attitude adopted towards Russian troops in the West), and in 1917, following the abdication of the Tsar, he returned by a roundabout route to Russia, where he witnessed many of the horrors of the civil war. This was the start of a regular see-saw movement between East and West, including periods when he lived in Belgium, and later in Berlin. But he continued to regard Paris as his second home, and it was there that he became a regular foreign correspondent for Soviet newspapers. In 1932 – ironically just as Stalin was consolidating his personal dictatorship – he finally committed himself to the Soviet regime, and travelled extensively around the Soviet Union to observe the first Five-Year Plan in action. He was soon back in the West, however, and in 1936 he began to report on the civil war in Spain, where he remained for the next two and a half years. This kept him out of the Soviet Union for most of the period of the great purge trials (the war in Spain began on 18 July 1936, and the purge trials just a month later, on 18 August); although when he did return to Moscow briefly in 1937, he was deeply shaken by what was going on.

He was equally shaken to learn, in August 1939, of the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. By then, he was back in Paris. In the following June, he had to witness the triumphal entry of German troops into his beloved adopted city; and shortly thereafter, he had the ignominious experience of travelling back to Moscow under German safe conduct. When Hitler launched his attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, Ehrenburg therefore greeted it with relief. He had never much liked the Germans anyway, and he now embarked upon a sustained campaign of virulent anti-Nazi propaganda, visiting the various battle zones, pouring out a stream of daily articles (in which the recurring theme was 'Kill the Germans!'), earning the gratitude of Soviet soldiers at the front, and gaining a world-wide reputation as the foremost spokesman of Russia at war. This activity also earned Stalin's approval, and may partly account for Ehrenburg's survival several years later, when so many other members of the Soviet-Jewish intelligentsia perished in Stalin's postwar anti-cosmopolitan campaign.

In the early 1950s, Ehrenburg went through a period of almost complete subservience to the *Vozhd*, the Supreme Leader; and Stalin

made full use of him as an eloquent advocate of the Soviet-inspired World Peace Movement. In that role, he continued to travel frequently abroad, and if he had misgivings, he kept them to himself. But when Stalin died in 1953, Ehrenburg not only realized that a radical change was at hand, but welcomed it; and in his novel *The Thaw*, he gave voice to some of the aspirations of the Soviet people as they gradually emerged from the shadow of the Stalin era. He continued his foreign travels throughout the fifties and sixties, but still found time to write his lengthy and immensely detailed memoirs under the title of *People, Years, Life*, and from the mid-fifties until his death in August 1967, he spoke out more and more openly in favour of a fundamental liberalization of Soviet society.

I have given here only the barest outline of a career which chronologically spanned both sides of the Russian Revolution, and topographically both sides of the Iron Curtain, but it seemed to me a necessary preamble to even a brief assessment of Ehrenburg's achievements. His life was one of constant movement, and often fraught with danger: apart from his early experience of Tsarist gaols, he was at various times expelled from France, and detained during his travels as a suspected foreign agent; and in 1947, at the height of Stalin's anti-Jewish campaign, he expected at any moment the fateful knock on the door that would signal his arrest. Indeed, it is difficult now to grasp the all-pervading atmosphere of fear and foreboding which gripped virtually every section of the Soviet intelligentsia at that time. Yet in spite of all these external pressures, Ehrenburg managed to pour out a flood of books, some sixty in all, including poetry, novels, plays, short stories, translations, and some thirty volumes of collected essays and newspaper articles, to say nothing of the six-part memoirs.

Inevitably, such a huge output was bound to be uneven in quality, and this is especially noticeable in the novels. At their best, they recall some of those brilliant polychrome posters produced during and just after the Revolution. At their worst, they are either woodenly propagandist or saccharinely sentimental. Among his contemporaries, there were certainly better novelists and poets.

On the other hand, Ehrenburg knew and understood the West far better than any of his contemporaries, and he was incomparably the most brilliant journalist of his time in the Soviet Union, with the born reporter's sharp eye for tell-tale detail. Let me cite just one example. In early 1935, *Izvestia* sent him to cover the Saar Plebiscite:

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I arrived in Saarbrücken in the evening. Coloured lights glimmered through the fog. In the main street, the window of a big delicatessen was adorned with a swastika made of sausages; passers-by paused to look and exchanged enraptured smiles. At my hotel, the proprietress, a stout, apoplectic woman, shouted down the corridor: 'Don't forget - I am German!' Out in the street, loudspeakers were broadcasting martial music . . . I slept badly. During the night, shots rang out. I half-opened my door. The hotel boots was collecting shoes to be cleaned. 'They probably caught another traitor . . .' he said by way of explanation.

In any survey of Ehrenburg's voluminous output, certain works stand out as landmarks. The first among these is the satirical novel which he wrote in Belgium in 1921, entitled *Julio Jurenito*. The full title takes up a further six or seven lines, but that need not detain us here: a detailed analysis of the novel will be found in the following pages. The point I want to make is that it is a fireworks display of wild inventiveness, a ferocious orgy of wit and black humour, which has lost none of its corrosive bite over the years: and although Ehrenburg subsequently directed his satiric barbs at various aspects of modern civilization, he never quite rivalled it in any of his later works.

But the sheer destructive zest that animates *Julio Jurenito* raises an interesting question. Even while still in his adolescence, Ehrenburg made an existential choice: he was to be a European first and foremost, and so he would remain to the end of his life. This did not contradict his Russianness, since he felt that Russia's rightful place was firmly within the orbit of European culture. Nor did it spring solely from his early infatuation with the life of the Paris boulevards and cafés, although that obviously counted. At a deeper level, he was drawn to the whole European cultural tradition, and as a young man he assiduously made pilgrimage to a number of its venerable sites, monuments and holy places. Indeed, the extent to which he immersed himself in that tradition may be shown by the fact that at one point, under the influence of the French Catholic poet, Francis Jammes, he even toyed with the idea of joining the Benedictine Order! That impulse turned out to be short-lived, but his interest in religion persisted for some time afterwards, and a curious streak of what one can only call religiosity crops up unexpectedly in some of his later writings.

There was, however, another side to the coin. In the First World War, visiting various sectors of the Western Front as a corres-

pendent, he watched with revulsion the spectacle of Europe tearing itself apart in the slaughter of the trenches. But what shocked him even more, on his return to France after the war, was to witness what seemed to him a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, in which former war profiteers revelled, and in which everyone was bent only on forgetting the lessons of 1914-18. In short, wherever he looked, he seemed to detect signs of the apparently irreversible decadence of the West; and this must go some way to explaining his decision, from the early thirties onwards, to throw his weight behind the Soviet regime.

It is at this point that one should perhaps briefly examine his attitude towards Stalin. Like much else in Ehrenburg's life, this did not follow a consistent pattern, but was shot through with ambiguities. He first saw Stalin during one of his visits to Moscow in the mid-thirties. The occasion was a ceremonial meeting of Stakhanovite shock workers in the Great Hall of the Kremlin.

Suddenly, everyone stood up and began fiercely applauding; and out of a side door which I had not noticed came Stalin, followed by the members of the Politburo . . . The applause went on for a long time, perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. Stalin was also clapping. When the applause began to die down, someone shouted, 'Hurrah for the great Stalin!' and it all burst out once more. Finally, everyone sat down, and then a woman's voice, desperately shrill, rang out: 'Glory to Stalin!' So we all sprang to our feet and started clapping all over again.

By the time it ended my hands were sore. It was the first time I had seen Stalin and I could not take my eyes off him. I had seen hundreds of portraits of him, and I recognized his double-breasted tunic and moustache, but he was less tall than I had imagined. His hair was very black, and he had a low forehead, but his eyes were lively and expressive. At times, inclining his head slightly to right or left, he laughed softly; at others, he sat motionless, surveying the hall, but still with the same animated gleam in his eyes . . .

Returning home, I had a sense of uneasiness. Of course, I thought, Stalin is a great man, but he is a Communist and a Marxist: we talk of our new culture, but we resemble worshippers bowing down before some shaman . . . Then I caught myself up: I was probably reasoning like an intellectual. How many times had I heard that we intellectuals had got things wrong, that we did not understand the demands of our age! 'highbrow', 'fellow-traveller', 'rotten liberal' . . . But what of those incomprehensible epithets: 'All-wise Leader', 'Genius of the Peoples', 'Beloved Father', 'Mighty Helmsman', 'World Transfigurer', 'Artificer of Happiness', 'Our Sun' . . . Yet still I managed to persuade myself that I did

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not understand the psychology of the masses, that I judged everything merely from an intellectual standpoint . . .

This dichotomy in Ehrenburg's view of Stalin persisted for the next two decades. Having been shocked by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he was equally dismayed by Stalin's manifest unpreparedness when the German Armies launched their assault on the Soviet Union. But then, as the Soviet Armies regained control of the situation and the tide of battle gradually turned, he seems, like so many others, to have seen Stalin in an increasingly heroic light as the chief architect of victory; and this clearly paved the way towards that period I have already mentioned in the early fifties, when for a time he showed almost complete subservience to the all-powerful ruler in the Kremlin. He could hardly disregard the brutal repressions of the postwar years, however, and he did not profess to fathom the tortuous workings of Stalin's mind.

Why did Stalin spare Pasternak, who held himself aloof, and destroy Koltsov, who had faithfully carried out every task entrusted to him? Why did he wipe out Vavilov and spare Kapitsa? Why, having eliminated almost all of Litvinov's associates, did he not eliminate the obdurate Litvinov himself? For me, all this is a great enigma . . .

Nor could Ehrenburg turn a blind eye to the fate of his fellow Jews, so many of whom perished in Stalin's postwar anti-cosmopolitan campaign, although on his visits abroad, he – the arch-cosmopolitan – pretended to be in ignorance of what was happening. This was certainly the most dubious episode in his entire career, and one which is explored in some detail in the following chapters. On the other hand, despite an allegation published in an Israeli newspaper, there is no evidence to suggest that he personally played any part in the betrayal of other Jewish intellectuals. He could, of course, have spoken out against the wave of arrests and executions, in which case he would almost certainly have joined the victims: as it was, he chose to remain silent. As he put it much later in his memoirs: 'Yes, I knew about many crimes, but it was not in my power to stop them . . . Far more influential and better informed people than I were unable to stop them . . . Silence for me was not a cult but a curse . . .' In any case, on other occasions he showed no lack of courage, notably during the period of the so-called 'Doctors' Plot', when some twenty prominent Jewish intellectuals, including Ehrenburg, were asked to sign a document acknowledging the common guilt of all Soviet Jews

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for the 'Plot', and agreeing to make reparation by accepting voluntary exile in Kazakhstan. Ehrenburg alone refused to sign. Instead, he wrote a letter to Stalin, suggesting that such an action would damage Soviet prestige among Communist Parties abroad.¹ In the circumstances, it was an extraordinarily bold gesture, but it produced the desired result: the document was not published, and the mad scheme for the deportation of Jews to Kazakhstan was dropped. Stalin died a month later.

It was not the only occasion on which Ehrenburg showed cool audacity. In his last years, he frequently showed himself prepared to take issue with the official line. In 1966 he joined other Moscow intellectuals in signing a protest against the trial of the writers Sinyavsky and Daniel. On various occasions, he came to the defence of people in trouble, as in his letter to Alexei Adzhubei requesting the reinstatement of a girl student expelled from the Komsomol.² And if, at the end, his reputation was still not entirely free from the lurking wisps of earlier suspicion, this was no doubt due to the very fact that he had survived when so many others had perished. His own explanation of his survival hinged on the element of pure chance. As he put it: 'I lived in an epoch when man's fate resembled not a game of chess but a lottery.'

Ehrenburg spent some five years writing his last major work, *People, Years, Life*, which can perhaps best be described as a sustained effort to set the record straight. It is true that on some matters, he shows a certain reticence. He says, for example, that he is not going to talk about 'affairs of the heart' (although he does sometimes refer to them obliquely, as to his relationship with Liselotte Mehr in Stockholm in the last two decades of his life); and in the case of certain political relationships and encounters (as with Bukharin, or with Trotsky in Vienna), official censorship, even after all these years, compels him either to remain silent, or to restrict himself to the merest veiled allusion. Nevertheless, he does manage to say a great deal on a multitude of themes, including many I have not had time to touch on here — such as his vigorous defence of modern art, as opposed to so many drab products of socialist realism ('like fifth-rate coloured photographs in splendid frames'). Above all, for the younger generation of Soviet readers, he opened up undreamt-of horizons: and for that reason alone, *People, Years, Life*.

¹See Appendix 2.

²See Appendix 3.

remains a uniquely valuable document.

* * *

At the time of his death in March 1982, Anatol Goldberg had completed the first draft of this biography, on which he had been working for several years. In Moscow, where I spent two periods as the BBC's resident correspondent in the sixties and seventies, I was able to help him with one or two useful contacts, and I therefore had some idea of the broad plan of the work. I could also well understand why he was particularly drawn to Ehrenburg as a subject. After all, they both came from much the same background: the cultivated world of the Russian Jewish professional class. Both were brilliant journalists, and shared a lifelong preoccupation with the problems of East-West relations. Both, although from very different standpoints, had devoted a great deal of thought and study to the operation of the Soviet Communist system in all its manifestations. And there is one further point of resemblance that is perhaps worth mentioning: at various points in their careers, both were the targets for sharp criticism. It must be pointed out, however, that the present study is unfinished, since Goldberg makes only the most sketchy references to the last few years of Ehrenburg's life. These were marked chiefly by acrimonious disputes with various Soviet publishers and editors over the publication of the last two sections of the six-part memoirs, and the final nine-volume edition of his collected works; and there is perhaps not much else to say. For most of those last years, Ehrenburg lived in comparative seclusion in a small village outside Moscow.

Anatol Maximovich Goldberg was born in St Petersburg in 1910. Shortly after the Revolution, in 1918, his family left Petrograd, as it had by then become, and moved to Berlin, where Goldberg was educated, and where he acquired his remarkable command of modern languages, which included German, French, English and Spanish as well as Russian. He also studied architecture for a time, and through this combination of talents, he was able to make a first visit to Moscow in the early thirties, where he was employed as interpreter while the town mansion of a former wealthy sugar merchant was being reconstructed to house the British Embassy. In later years, he talked of this episode in his life with considerable nostalgia.

In the mid-thirties, following the advent of Hitler, Goldberg left

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Germany and emigrated to Britain, and in 1939, a week before the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the BBC. It was an association that was to last until his death, and one in which, following the setting up of the BBC Russian Service in 1946, he was to win great renown for his regular broadcasts to the Soviet Union, where he gained a vast audience. I can testify to that from my own experience. I remember once standing with him in the main Leningrad railway station when the station-master, a burly figure wearing much gold braid, marched up, pumped him vigorously by the hand, and exclaimed, 'Can this really be Anatol Maximovich Goldberg? I have listened to your broadcasts for many years past. It is an honour to meet you. I do not always agree with what you say, but I have always admired your way of saying it.'

The qualities that won Anatol Goldberg his reputation as a broadcaster – those of a humane and civilized man speaking with the voice of reason spiced with a gentle irony – are those which shine through this detailed study of one of the most remarkable figures to cross our troubled and ideologically divided age. I must, however, at this point enter a double *caveat*. I do not necessarily agree with all of Goldberg's conclusions, since it seems to me that, in retracing some of the more obscure phases in Ehrenburg's career, he is sometimes too ready to give him the benefit of the doubt. Secondly, although this biography is very fully documented, it cannot be regarded as a definitive work, since there are doubtless materials still locked away in the archives in Moscow which remain inaccessible to a Western researcher. For the rest, in revising Goldberg's draft, I have made stylistic changes where these seemed necessary. I have also filled in a few obvious gaps with additional material and provided a number of footnotes and appendices; but in every other respect, this portrait of Ehrenburg, warts and all, is entirely his.

Erik de Mauny
Val Gosse
Calvados
September 1983

CHAPTER I

In the late 1920s, a small group of Soviet writers paid a visit to Berlin. They were invited to appear on a public platform with several German writers, and to read excerpts from their works. As it happened, Ilya Ehrenburg was also in Berlin at that time, and he, too, was invited to take part.

The meeting had been organized by the Association of Foreign Students, and was nominally non-political. Of the Soviet group, I remember only the poetess Vera Inber, who recited some of her poems and read a few of her children's stories. Half the audience consisted of German intellectuals, Russian *émigrés*, and foreign students like myself. The other half were Soviet Embassy staff and Soviet Trade Mission officials, who were present in large numbers in Berlin at that period.

Ehrenburg was the last to come to the rostrum, and he began by making a short speech in French. A few people got up and headed for the exit doors. I thought they were leaving because of the late hour, but the exodus continued, and by the time Ehrenburg had finished his brief address, and had started reading, in Russian, a chapter from his new novel — on the French revolutionary Gracchus Babeuf — half the audience had walked out. It was the Soviet half.

I had read all his books, and was fascinated by the man, by his voice and his masterly delivery. I was too young and too diffident to approach him, but hoped that I would see him again before too long. As it turned out, I had to wait for more than twenty years. He came to London in 1950, at the time of the Korean War, as a propagandist for the World Peace Movement, a movement which was supposed to embrace all peace-loving people (even Prime Minister Attlee was welcome, as one of its public relations officials magnanimously remarked, although that magnanimity did not extend to the Yugoslavs, whom Stalin regarded as arch-enemies, and who therefore did not qualify as peace-lovers). By that time, Ehrenburg had become a prominent figure in the Movement, and no Soviet official would have dreamt of walking out while he was making a speech. I

watched him at an indoor meeting, as he stood on the platform clutching a huge bouquet of flowers with which he had been presented, looking faintly ridiculous. On that occasion, he spoke in Russian, but all that emerged was a succession of clichés. After this had gone on for a few minutes, he stopped, and the remainder of his speech was read for him in an English translation, so that one no longer had even the pleasure of listening to his voice, powerful yet soft, and beautifully modulated.

A day or so later, the same thing happened at a rally in Trafalgar Square, except that the proceedings were enlivened by a dramatic thunderstorm, and by distant shouts from some hostile faction who were holding a rival meeting somewhere in the vicinity. As far as I was concerned, however, it was not Ehrenburg who stole the show, but that eccentric warrior, Colonel Vladimir Peniakov, alias 'Colonel Popski'. Formerly commander of the small mobile force known as 'Popski's Private Army' during the Second World War, he claimed that he still liked fighting, and had associated himself with the Peace Movement only because the advent of the atom bomb had spoiled the fun. As for Ehrenburg, a writer I had long admired and whose books I had read and reread, it saddened me to find that he had now become merely a bore.

Indeed, on that day I came to the conclusion that Ehrenburg was no longer Ehrenburg: but I was wrong. Before he left London, he gave a press conference. Speaking in French, he began by saying that, not being a government minister, he would not waste time by making a formal statement; but since many Western colleagues had expressed a desire to meet and talk with him, and since he could not see each of them separately, he had decided to hold a conference instead, and was ready to answer questions. It struck me then and there that there was probably no other Soviet writer who would have dared to address a gathering of non-Communist journalists as *confrères* at such a time. The Korean War had broken out only a short time before, and the Western journalists attending the conference were mainly in a pugnacious mood, so that it undeniably demanded a good deal of courage on Ehrenburg's part to face them. For two hours, he fought a valiant rearguard action, dodging some questions and parrying others with counter-questions, seeking refuge in half-truths and veiled ambiguities, but plainly trying not to tell outright lies. In the end, however, I suppose the pressure became too much for him, since he did, finally, commit himself to several statements that