

ALEXANDER ZINOVIEV

**THE YAWNING  
HEIGHTS**

*Translated from the Russian by Gordon Clough*

## Translator's Preface

To render a pun from one language to another in such a way that both the meaning and the joke are conveyed is one of the hardest tasks an author can set his translator. Yet Alexander Zinoviev, a man for whom I have conceived a considerable admiration and respect as I have grappled with this book, has set me that problem constantly, right from the title page. 'The Yawning Heights' is an accurate, but wholly inadequate rendering of two Russian words—'Ziyayushchie Vysoty'. The verb 'ziyat' means to gape or to yawn, as an abyss. But in the jargon of Soviet speechmakers and leader-writers the word which often prefaces 'vysoty' (heights) is 'siyayushchie' (with an s, not a z): 'gleaming' or 'radiant', as in phrases like 'the gleaming heights of socialism'—the radiant future towards which the Communist Party of the Soviet Union claims to be leading the progressive forces of mankind. So the title *The Yawning Heights* both encapsulates the paradox and snipes accurately at the jargon of the Soviet gospel.

And where are these 'yawning heights' to be observed? Zinoviev has placed them in the invented city or country of Ibansk. This too is a double pun, deriving partly from the commonest Russian forename Ivan, and partly from the coarse verb 'yebat'—to fuck. So Ibansk means, broadly speaking, a fucktown or fuckland for the Ivans.

These two examples give a taste of the translation problems which Zinoviev sets, and also, incidentally, of his attitude to the society which he is savaging. And his targets are very specific. So are some of his characters. In Ibansk all the inhabitants are called Ibanov. (The Russian man in the street, the John Doe, is Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov.) They are identified by descriptive names which have a touch of *The Pilgrim's Progress* about them—Leader, Teacher, Sociologist, Journalist, Artist, Writer. There are scores of characters in the book whom it is possible to identify fairly accurately with real figures from the Soviet intellectual and political scene. Truth-teller, for

instance, clearly represents Solzhenitsyn, and Dauber the sculptor Neizvestniy, who at one time was a close associate of Zinoviev. The Boss is just as clearly Stalin, and Hog is Khrushchev. Which of the characters is Zinoviev himself? I think there are parts of him in a large number, but if I had to go for one, it would be Bawler. There are too many similarities between Bawler's biography and Zinoviev's own life for it to be purely coincidental. And I have no doubt that other characters would be clearly identifiable by anyone who had lived in the Soviet intellectual milieu which Zinoviev is writing about. But many of them are plainly archetypes as well, and I doubt whether the Western reader is losing very much by the lack of positive identification.

Alexander Zinoviev, his wife and daughter, are now in the West. The fact that they at least are no longer prisoners of the Ibanskian regime does not in any way invalidate his attacks on it. This year's trials of dissenters like Orlov, Shcharansky, Podrabinek and the rest show that Ibansk—the centre of population inhabited by no-one—is still very much a reality.

In an autobiographical note, which reached the West in the spring of 1978, Alexander Zinoviev says he wrote this enormous book in a period of six months. Unfortunately, it took far longer than that to translate, and it would have taken longer still had I not had the help of a band of long-suffering typists—Juliet Aylward, Lois Hill, Carole Lacey and, above all, Lalage Waldman, to all of whom my thanks.

G.C.  
London, 1978

## Author's Note

This book is made up of fragments of a manuscript which were found accidentally—i.e. without the leadership's knowledge—on a newly opened rubbish dump which was soon abandoned thereafter. The ceremonial opening of the dump took place in the presence of the Leader and his Deputies arranged in alphabetical order. The Leader delivered an historic speech in which he said that the age-old dream of mankind would soon be realised, as on the horizon we could already see the yawning heights of soc-ism. Soc-ism is an imaginary social order which would come into being if individuals were to behave to one another within society in complete accord with the social laws. It can in fact never be attained because of the falsity of the premises on which it is based. Like every extra-historical absurdity, soc-ism has its own erroneous theory and incorrect practice, but it is almost impossible to establish either in theory or in practice what the theory and practice of soc-ism actually are, and to distinguish between them. Ibansk is a populated area inhabited by no-one, and which has no existence in reality. And if by sheer chance it did exist, it would be a pure figment of the imagination. At all events, if its existence were possible anywhere, it is anywhere but here, in Ibansk. Although the events and ideas described in the manuscript are, all things considered, imaginary, they have a certain interest as evidence of the erroneous ideas of mankind and human society held by the remote ancestors of the people of Ibansk.

*Ibansk 1974*

## STACMLFTC

All our scientists claim, and many foreign scientists accept, that the inhabitants of Ibansk are a whole head taller than everybody else, with the exception of those who have followed their example. They are taller, not by reason of any reactionary biological superiority (from that point of view they are identical to everyone else), but because of the progressive historic conditions in which they live and the correctness of the theory for which they have been the guinea pigs; and thanks too to the wisdom of the leadership which has guided them so brilliantly. For this reason the people of Ibansk do not live in the old-fashioned and commonplace sense of the word as it is applied to other people in other places. The Ibanskians do not live, but carry out epoch-making experiments. They carry out these experiments even when they know nothing about them and take no part in them, and even when the experiments are not taking place at all. This book is devoted to the examination of one such experiment.

The experiment under consideration is called STACMLFTC, from the initial letters of the names of its principal participants. The name was composed by Colleague and was first used in the scientific literature by Thinker, who took this opportunity to publish a series of articles on another and more compelling theme. The articles were written on a high dialectical level, with the result that no-one read them, but everyone applauded them. After this, the term STACMLFTC became generally accepted and no longer used.

The experiment was dreamt up by the Institute for the Prophylaxis of Stupid Intentions, and carried out under the supervision of the Brainwashing Laboratory, written up in the Fundamental Journal and was supported by an initiative from below. The experiment was approved by the Leader, his Deputies, his Assistants and by everybody else—except for a

few holding mistaken opinions. The aim of the experiment was to detect those who did not approve of its being carried out and to take appropriate steps.

### Methodological principles

Two groups of people took part in the experiment; the experimenter group and the guinea-pig group. These groups were composed of one and the same people. The guinea-pigs knew that they were guinea-pigs. The experimenters knew that the guinea-pigs knew this. The guinea-pigs knew that the experimenters knew that they knew. And so on. Moreover, the experimenter group and the guinea-pig group were autonomous and had no influence on one another. There were no informational links between them, and as a result complete mutual understanding was achieved. The guinea-pigs were guided by the following principles: (1) well, what can you do about it? (2) what would change if . . . ? (3) the hell with it! Colleague proved that from these basic principles there logically followed a string of derivative principles: (4) whatever you do there's no avoiding it; (5) there's got to be a limit; (6) why don't they just fuck off? The experimenters, on the other hand, were guided by the following principles: (1) whatever happens they won't get anywhere; (2) all will be revealed; (3) it'll all sort itself out. The aforementioned Colleague extrapolated from these bases the derivative principle (4) they will all plead guilty to everything.

The question as to whether or not this system proves the principle 'they will think up everything for themselves' has so far remained unresolved. But that in principle is not of principal concern, since everything thinks itself up, as there is nothing to be invented, since everything already exists. Thanks to the principles which have been set out there was an increase in the flow of useless information and a reduction in man-hours. The experiment became the reverse of autonomous and, like every well thought out and logically conducted experiment, it ended in nothing. The achievements of Science and Technology had their parts to play in the experiment. In particular, Instructor used a synchrophasocyclobetatron laser beam to sweep the area of Schizophrenic's lavatory and to register his intention of writing a quasi-scientific sociological thesis, an idea

which came into his mind at the very moment when, after severe constipation, he achieved the desired result and submitted the existing structure to severe criticism. This outstanding discovery was completely passed over in the Journal, and so we have no need to dwell on it here.

### Time and place

After historic experiments the village of Ibansk was transformed. The former school building was redesignated The Associate Department of the Institute. The lavatory was rebuilt and clad in steel and glass. Now, from an observation platform, the tourists who flow into Ibansk in a never-ending stream can convince themselves with their own eyes that the false rumours that have reached them are the purest slander. A new Leader was appointed, and the old one was hidden somewhere because he was no longer of use. The new one was just as old as the old one, but no less progressive and erudite. Next door to the lavatory was built a new hotel in which the Laboratory was housed. So the tourists should have something to look at during the time they had free from visits to model factories, around the hotel ten new picturesque churches of the 10th century and earlier were built. Their walls were adorned with ancient frescoes by Artist himself, who painted a portrait of the Leader in the foreground. He was awarded prizes, decorations and titles for his work. Artist depicted the industrious heroism and the military prowess of our freedom-loving ancestors, and outstanding cult figures of that far-off but not wholly forgotten age. In the main fresco Artist painted the Leader and his Deputies, who for this were awarded prizes, while the Leader himself got two: one for the one thing, the other for the other. As a result food prices were lowered, which meant that they merely doubled, instead of rising by five per cent as they did outside Ibansk. The Ibanuchka River was dammed. It overflowed, flooded a potato field (the former pride of the Ibanskians) and swelled into a lake (the present pride of the Ibanskians). And for this all the inhabitants, with one or two exceptions, were decorated. The Leader made a long speech about it in which he analysed everything and outlined everything. In conclusion he said with confidence: 'Just you wait and see—we've hardly started.' The speech was prepared by

Claimant with a large group of helpers. This fact was kept somewhat secret, in the sense that everyone knew about it except the Leader, who was decorated for it and was then given a further decoration because he had been decorated.

On the far bank of the river there was a new development of apartment blocks all identical outside, but indistinguishable inside. Chatterer, who by chance had obtained a self-contained unself-contained room in an apartment in this area, used to say that everything there was so much alike that he was never wholly confident that he was in his home or that in fact he was himself and not somebody else. Member took him up on this and argued that this was a sign of progress, challenged only by madmen and enemies, since variety inevitably produces inequality. 'Just you wait,' he said, 'when they've built the food stores and other cultural and educational establishments, you'll like it so much that wild horses won't drag you away.'

In the centre of the new development there was a vacant lot which remained vacant for a long time. Initially the intention was to build a Pantheon there, then that was changed to the idea of an artificial lake stocked with pressed caviare. In the end they built a Bar—known as the Milk Bar. The Bar became enormously popular. There was always a great crowd around it whether the Bar was selling beer (which rarely happened) or not (which also rarely happened). People brought their own drinks with them. They sat around in groups on barrels, boxes and rubbish heaps. Groups formed for greater or shorter intervals. Some kept going for months and even years. Fairly recently one of them celebrated its 50th anniversary. To mark this occasion, all the customers were given decorations, while the Leader himself got two: one of them for not taking part, the other for taking part. A long-standing group seldom assembled its full complement. Normally two or three or four members of the group would meet in various combinations. But the meeting place of the group always remained the same.

### The beginning

Once, Colleague, who had set himself the task of exposing and eliminating obstacles, turned up at the Bar. Although he had a complete right to jump any queue to get everything that there was to be had and even what was not to be had, to the surprise of



the assembled company he took his place in a long queue and listened. The people who were talking had every appearance of being intellectuals, but for some reason or other, they addressed each other formally and did not use unprintable (in the old sense) words when they were talking about an unprintable (in the new sense) subject. Member said that it was senseless to deny the existence of queues, food shortages, fiddling, and boorishness. They were all facts. But they were also nothing more than the small change of life which did not derive from the essence of our 'Ism'. When the 'Ism' came to its full flower, they would no longer exist. Indeed, had not the 'Ism' been created by our best people to ensure that nothing like that *could* exist? 'You're right,' said Chatterer. But the 'Ism' means more than ceremonial meetings and processions. It is a specific form of organisation and production. Everything else is just talking points for blind deaf-mute idiots. Colleague said that he agreed with both of them, and produced the familiar saying that the full 'Ism' could be built in one town but it would be better to live in another. Member said that in his day you didn't exactly get a pat on the head for telling stories like that. Colleague told Member that it wasn't his day now, but ours. Chatterer said that he could see no difference in principle.

They found a place to drink at the edge of the vacant lot in a cosy garbage pit. Member delivered a diatribe and began to tidy up. Colleague rolled a barrel over from the Bar after he'd chatted-up the sales girl and made a date with her. Chatterer nicked a crate from someone. Careerist said that it was his crate and he'd only left it to get a fifth glass of beer, but Colleague just laughed at him and so he joined the group. Member took a hip flask from his pocket. Chatterer dashed a tear from his eye and said that he had never lost his faith in man. After the third round they reached that state of euphoria which makes men prepared to risk the hazards of the drunk-tank. Chatterer poured out all the criticisms he felt about his work. 'Your complaints are childish,' Colleague replied. 'You say you've got ten parasites, five trouble-makers, three informers and two paranoiacs. I think you're bloody lucky. There are two hundred people in my department. Two of them work half-way decently—one from stupidity, the other from habit. For the rest—well, great parasites have little parasites upon their backs

to bite 'em; little parasites have lesser parasites, and so ad infinitum. They're scandalously untalented. They moan all the time and tell tales. They're always scheming. All they can think about is how best to waste more time. Look, do you see that stupid-looking sod over there knocking it back? He's one of ours. He's an Instructor, and I can tell you he's a first-class bastard and distinguished cretin. Even in the simplest situations he can't tell who's for us and who's against us.' Chatterer said that it wasn't altogether bad if people worked badly in his outfit, because if they worked well there, then it really would be bad for the rest of us. Careerist said that it couldn't be any worse. This prompted Colleague to recall the well-worn old story about optimists and pessimists, (Pessimist: 'Things are as bad as they could be.' Optimist: 'Oh, no. Don't worry, they'll get worse.') and he accused Careerist of being a pessimist. 'You might think,' Careerist said, 'that you spend all your time collecting anecdotes.'

After a few more pints Chatterer said that there was a sense in which it wasn't good that people worked badly, and it would be better if things improved. 'But generally speaking'—he completed his thought a few pints later—that's of no consequence. No-one knows what is good and what is bad. Except perhaps for Writer.' Careerist said it was the same everywhere. 'Say that a vital part of a machine is broken, and we've got a very urgent, very important job to do, and we've got the go-ahead. So I ring the boss and tell him. He says, "Not to worry, I'll just ring the right department and they'll fix it for you." That evening I ring the department. They say it's the first they've heard about it. Next morning I ring the boss again. He's in a meeting and that's that. Next day I go and see him. Wait two hours. He says not to worry. Since it's so important and urgent we'll get it sorted out straightaway. He calls in the department head and tells him in my presence to get it done straightaway. Two days go by. Still nothing. A week after they've had a written order, they've got the drawings out, studied the technicalities and done the costing. Two weeks later they have it ready. Only it's the wrong part and not properly made. So I go back to the boss. "Nothing I can do about it," he says, "you can see for yourself." And he shrugs his shoulders. "Sort it out for yourself." So I buy a bottle of vodka and I go and see the fitters and I say, "Look lads, there's

another one like this once I get the part." Half an hour later there it is and a few spares as well. And the boss of the department gets a bonus.' Chatterer asked how they managed to get anything done at all with such a marvellous organisation. Careerist just shrugged. Colleague said it was all trivial. Unlimited resources. Unlimited powers. Concern for the job. Business-like people. Altogether a non-standard situation. Thereafter it became the normal kind of business where parasites and rogues flourish. Member said that in his time nothing like that ever happened. Chatterer said that in those days there simply wasn't anything comparable so the question didn't arise. Colleague said that it was always the same. Things only work out well when we aren't around. Chatterer agreed, things are always better without people like you. Colleague said he had to go, spat into an unfinished glass of beer, said he didn't understand how people could drink such filthy muck, and went his way. He's a great man, thought Member, and decided to start passing on via Colleague certain denunciatory documents and his proposals for setting things right.

### Schizophrenic

In the time he had free from enforced idleness Schizophrenic was writing a sociological thesis. He was doing this work with all its predictable consequences at the request of his old friend Dauber. He didn't like writing and didn't want to write. He had to go to incredible and exhausting lengths to grab hold of his thoughts as they disappeared at lightning speed, and pin them to the paper. Apart from that, he was convinced that sooner or later everybody would find out what he was doing and he would be sent back to the Laboratory. And that made him feel gloomy. But he couldn't not write. He had a vague feeling of awareness of a secret known only to him or at all events to a very few, and he could not face ending his useless life without having made every effort to communicate that secret to the world. He knew that the world was deeply uninterested in this secret, but that was of no consequence. He felt a moral duty not to other people—for he owed absolutely nothing to other people—but to himself. Mankind consisted of himself alone. And it was before the eyes of this mankind that his primitively transparent life flowed by. It was before this mankind that he would have to

answer at his last hour. But as far as Schizophrenic was concerned the most unpleasant aspect of the work of writing was the lack of a table and a decent fountain pen. Once Sociologist had brought him a beautiful pen back from abroad but it had got lost somewhere.

The idea of writing this thesis came from a conversation he'd had with Dauber. Dauber had said: 'Your forecasts and appraisals are coming quite strikingly true. How do you do it?' 'It's very simple,' replied Schizophrenic. 'All you have to do is to forecast what is forecastable, and to evaluate things which there is some sense in evaluating.' 'But how do you distinguish the predictable from the unpredictable and the assessable from the unassessable?' asked Dauber. 'I have my own theory for that,' said Schizophrenic. 'Tell me,' Dauber said. 'I'll try,' said Schizophrenic, 'but I warn you that it's a long way from being scientific theory.' 'Not to worry,' said Dauber, 'as long as it's true.' 'The other thing,' Schizophrenic continued, 'is that to use my theory you need patience more than thinking power. Let's say for instance, that you've been commissioned to do a painting and there's a hint of more work to come, and there've been a couple of lines in the press about your work without your name being mentioned. It might look as if there's a good wind blowing your way. But according to my theory there can't be any new winds for you. Just wait a bit longer and you'll see for yourself.' 'I've seen that for myself many times,' said Dauber. 'That's true enough,' said Schizophrenic. 'But every time it happens, you regard it as a chance fact, and not as something that is inevitable and theoretically predictable. Finally, my theory, like any other theory, is simple to the point of triviality, but learning how to use it is extremely complicated. It's rather like trying to teach an Ibansian to eat rice with chopsticks— and you know how hard that is.' Dauber said, 'Your theory interests me as a purely intellectual manifestation, and not as an aid to the formulation of a code of sensible conduct. I rely on intuition to guide me in that. When I was in the Army I used to play dice, and I played rather well. Once I won the wages of nearly all the flying crew of my squadron. I had a whole heap of cash. Then we all went on the piss for three days. My method was very simple. First I'd stake ten roubles which I could afford to lose. If I lost I jacked it in. If I won I'd put twenty

in the pot. If I lost I stopped, if I won, the stake went up to forty. As long as I kept on winning I went on doubling up. When the win was big enough I went for the jackpot. Sometimes the game went on long enough and I won.' 'Great,' said Schizophrenic. 'You've got the mind of a true scientist, not of an artist. Your method, like my theory, only works on one condition: you have to find people prepared to gamble regularly for a long enough time. And we haven't got very much time left.'

And Schizophrenic began to write. He wrote everything straight on to the paper without corrections. When he'd written a passage he handed it to Dauber, and never gave it a further thought. Dauber handed it on to somebody else to be typed, and the thesis spread all over Ibansk by unfathomable routes, getting into every institution and especially into those where, it wasn't intended it should go. Finally it reached the Institute where Colleague discovered it by chance in the desk of a careless instructor. Schizophrenic called his thesis *Socio-Mechanics*, for reasons which he set out in the text.

### Socio-mechanics

Scientific sociology has been in existence for more than a century. The number of professional sociologists in the world has swollen to an improbably colossal horde. Even here in Ibansk, where sociology has been permitted for only a comparatively short time, where it's been practised only temporarily and only on a scale and in directions which are acceptable to the leadership, even here, in a very few years, the number of sociologists has risen beyond the thousand mark and their researches have begun to take on a menacingly scientific character. Suffice it to say by way of example, that one of our best sociologists worked out a method permitting him to demonstrate a fact which struck the imagination of the Ibansk intelligentsia like a bolt from the blue. He showed that only 99.999999999 per cent of the leaders of Ibansk are loyal to the other leaders of Ibansk, a statement which came into violent conflict with the official point of view, according to which 105.371 per cent of the total number of leaders are loyal. As a result of this it became necessary somewhat to restrict the development of sociological research in Ibansk and the above mentioned lately-eminent

sociologist, despite his grandiose field studies on behalf of the Laboratory, found himself unable to establish how important a role in Ibansk and its surroundings was played by non-existent public opinion. For this reason instead of producing the three-volume work of scientific generalisations which he had intended, he was obliged to produce five volumes and to publish in the Journal a series of articles about the importance of the role of public opinion.

Bearing in mind the situation which has developed, I have decided not to hazard an entry into the disciplines of scientific sociology, but to set down my thoughts instead in the form of a new and particular discipline—Socio-Mechanics. The choice of title was dictated by the fact that I intend to take a non-historical view of the social qualities and relationships of people. According to this view, where there exist agglomerations of individuals sufficiently large for us to be able to speak about a society, social laws are always the same. These laws are simple and in a certain sense well known. Their recognition as laws which govern people's social life is hindered by the social law according to which the harder they strive to be officially recognised as better, the worse they in practice become.

From the very beginning I have been prepared to accept that my concept may be mistaken, but I still retain some little hope, since, as is well known, he errs well, who errs first. But if even this hope should turn out to be illusory, I will be glad of the fact that I was not as solitary in this world as has seemed to me hitherto.

#### Sociologist's observation

Later Sociologist, who was carrying out an analysis of Schizophrenic's thesis at the request of Doctor, underlined the last paragraph in red and wrote in the margin: Yes, he is mistaken; no, he's not the first.

#### Instructor

When the Institute learned that Schizophrenic was getting up to his tricks again, his old thesis was brought out of the archives and given to Instructor for closer study. The thesis had the strange title CORFTUO. The meaning of the title is explained in the text. But Doctor didn't bother to read the text and

reached a faultless diagnosis on the basis of the title alone. Instructor studied the author's explanation, but decided to dig down to the concealed essence. The thesis began with a dedication.

### Dedication

When he is explaining the meaning of his work to visitors to his studio, Dauber usually speaks about the problems of the interrelation between the Spiritual and the Corporeal, the Human and the Animal, the Natural and the Urban, the Terrestrial and the Cosmic, the Great and the Small, and so on. When they hear these phrases which are clearly intended to be an indication of a high intellectual level, the visitors begin to nod their heads and to say 'da', 'ja', 'oui', 'y<sup>est</sup>'» and so on according to which language they hope will provide them with a verbal equivalent for this unfamiliar material. Of course the use of such high flown language is in every way justified by Dauber's work, and of themselves, the words do not diminish the sensation of excellence which the works inspire. But there is in them another and less apparent level of content, to describe which demands the use of other linguistic resources. I have tried to formulate them. As a result I have produced a thesis which was just as much a surprise for me as for anybody else. It could perhaps be presented as an illustration to the works of Dauber, but as an out-of-the-ordinary illustration. It is an illustration of thoughts. And an illustration of thoughts should be very different from the generally familiar illustration of images. The illustration of an image is itself an image. The illustration of a thought should be a thought set out by those means which are available to the illustrator. I wrote this thesis at the request of Dauber himself, for he wanted to know one of the possible direct reactions of an interested observer of his work. I therefore wrote it straight down and made only the most trifling corrections to the text. So if you take what I have said about an illustration as a joke, then this thesis can be regarded simply as an experimental fact relating to the problem of the perception of works of art by their contemporaries.