FOREWORD

by Sidney Monas

One of the reasons, I suspect, that Americans show little interest in history (except as a diversion or as a picture of alternative glamor) is that they have almost no sense of the past as something compulsive and limiting. For Americans, at least until the last few years, the future has seemed unlimited in its possibilities—all horizons “wide open.” For Russians, on the other hand, the past has always held a compelling power over the future, exerting a force so constraining that it might foster the illusion, in an extreme instance, that if one changed the *accounts* in which the past is recorded and interpreted, one might well lay a magical hold upon the future.

Alexander Yanov's attitude to the past is quite different from the one and from the other. A well-known and iconoclastic Soviet journalist before he came to the United States in 1974, a victim of the regime's all-too-limited tolerance for iconoclasm, he also possesses an advanced degree in history. His journalistic assignments took him all over the USSR and into all sectors of Soviet life; his historical training provoked him to place the problems he confronted in a long-term perspective, to approach the problem of the contemporary nationalist revival in the USSR, for instance, by way of telling the long-term story of slavophilism in Russia.

His monumental *History of Political Opposition in Russia*, a multi-volume work resulting from many years of experience, thought, and reading, could never be published in the USSR, and it was largely on this account that he left. The present work is a product of that much vaster effort. In it he sees Russia's past as forming not a single, utterly compelling pattern, but a pattern that, while exercising certain limitations on the shape of the future, also offers a range of choices as to that shape—choices not predetermined, but informed and emancipated to the degree that they take cognizance of the shaping of the past. He also writes—and it is the subject of some of his best-written and most ironic pages—of those who, in examining the past, fell victim to it.

His work does not fit well into the tradition of empirical histo-

riography that has dominated the American historical profession in the recent past. He has done no work in the archives, and he is extremely fond of typologies that, while they are arrived at by a method not altogether foreign to contemporary political science and sociology, have different names and are not easily traceable to the main currents of our academic thought. Some of our historians of Russia think his work is old hat, a "rediscovering of America," but I think they are much mistaken. Many emigré writers, on the other hand, are unhappy with Yanov's critical attitude to nationalism, his relative indifference to religion, his gradualist constitutionalism, and (not so much in the present work as in his controversial *Detente after Brezhnev*) on his seeing possibilities within the Soviet establishment for America to influence and advance liberalization.

Yanov has polemics in his bloodstream, and much of what he says needs to be and should be argued about, not simply accepted as pronouncement. He is *essentially* provocative and controversial. But he is serious, erudite, thoughtful, well informed, witty, and intelligent, and he has something of his own to say that we cannot afford not to hear. Not only historians and political scientists will find this book interesting, but all those who have a sense of the importance of the Soviet Union in our lives, a growing number among whom, I hope, are those who have some inkling that the Soviet Union cannot be understood merely by the face with which it immediately presents itself.