

The Passing of a Communist Cultural Hero

By Bruce Bawer

Pretty much every Western European country, it seems, has its own beloved Communist writer. (If not several.) Dag Solstad, who shuffled off this mortal coil on Friday night at the age



of 83, was Norway's. "It's impossible to imagine Norwegian literature without Dag Solstad," Ingeri Engelstad, head of the publishing house Oktober, [told](#) the national newspaper VG. Mads Nygaard, head of the publishing house

Aschehoug, [told](#) another national newspaper, *Dagbladet*, that "Solstad was, in the view of many, Norway's foremost author." Jan Øyvind Helgesen, a literary critic, [called](#) it the end of an era.

Even the Prime Minister served up a gushing tribute. And how could he not? As a token of its admiration, the Norwegian government has been [paying](#) Solstad an annual tax-free stipend of 200,000 kroner ever since 2011, when that sum was worth \$35,000. (Alas for Solstad, the kroner has long since dived against the dollar.)

As I write this, I'm watching a TV [interview](#) with Solstad from 2007. Instantly recognizable because of his wild head of wavy white hair, he's holding forth, the very picture of an eminent Norwegian author wholeheartedly secure in his eminence. One thinks of Ibsen, that proud, pompous priest of progressivism. And Solstad's audience is responding to his anecdotes and opinions – including his repeated declarations of his devout Maoism – with laughter and occasional applause, obviously

finding him witty, charming, and sympathetic.

Yes, he was a Maoist. He began, in the late 1960s, as a literary modernist, a disciple of Joyce, Proust, and Beckett. Then, in the spirit of the era, he joined a now-defunct party – it lasted from 1973 to 2007 – that is known in the annals of Norwegian political history as AKP-ml. That's short for Arbeidernes Kommunistparti (marxist-leninistiske) – in English, the Workers' Communist Party. During his years in AKP-ml – he drifted away sometime around 1980 – Solstad was a perfectly obedient soldier, writing his novels in perfect conformity with party directives.

In 1982 came what is perhaps his best-known novel, *Gymnaslærer Pedersens beretning om den store politiske veknelsen som har hjemsøkt vårt land*, which translates literally into *High-School Teacher Pedersen's Account of the Great Political Revival that Has Haunted our Country*. In 2006 it was made into a [movie](#), *Gymnaslærer Pedersen (Comrade Pederson)*. In both the novel and the film, the protagonist, Knut Pedersen, looks back on his years as an active AKP member in the southern city of Larvik and as a diffident young teacher whose classroom becomes something of a Maoist cell where he and his students sing Soviet songs and read Mao's *Little Red Book* and call one another "comrade" and thrill to the idea of being the vanguard of worldwide revolution. When he's not teaching, he's attending AKP meetings – or bedding the girls he meets at them.

It's all supposed to be cute. One thing I learned soon after moving to Norway was that while Nazism is never cute, Communism can be quite cute, even adorable, especially if it's presented as part of a starry-eyed, idealistic youth. Many if not most of the members of today's Norwegian cultural establishment started out, like Solstad, as young Communists, and whether their politics has changed or not, they'll always feel a nostalgia for those halcyon days when they dreamed of crushing the bourgeoisie, a category that in virtually all

cases included their parents. (After writing the above, I looked up NRK's [review](#) of the movie: "The film is a nice, nostalgic experience," portraying a milieu "that seduced some of the best among us.")

In Norway, *Gymnaslærer Pedersen* is widely considered one of the country's best novels of the last few decades, although, unlike some of Solstad's other works, it's never been published in English. Indeed, while he's won pretty much every one of Norway's major literary prizes (and there are a lot more of them than a nation of only six million people has any business giving out), Solstad has never become a familiar name to Americans who've at least heard of Karl Ove Knausgård or the 2023 Nobel Prize laureate, Jon Fosse. He didn't even get an obituary in the *New York Times*.

Still, he has at least one influential American enthusiast. James Wood, the longtime literary critic for the *New Yorker*, has [called](#) him "brilliant." In a staggeringly long 2018 article about Solstad, Wood celebrated his novel *Shyness and Dignity* (1996) for its avoidance of novelistic "conventionalities." Solstad, Wood explained, spends the entirety of this short novel inside the mind of his protagonist, who, while standing at a traffic circle in Oslo (down the block, as it happens, from where I used to live) frets about his future and meanders through his past.

Wood finds it all marvelously original, crowning Solstad as "Norway's most distinguished contemporary novelist." But has he ever actually read a contemporary Norwegian novel by anyone other than Solstad? For Wood's account of *Shyness and Dignity* could, with very few if any changes, apply to any number of them. I've never read this book, but the protagonist's intense and unvarying "anguish" and the bullet points of his life story – an academic career, an unhappy marriage, crushing political disappointment, irreparable estrangement from friends and colleagues, and almost incessant boredom – make *Shyness and Dignity* sound like at least half of

the Norwegian literary novels I've read in the last quarter century.

One Solstad novel that I have read is *T. Singer*, about a "reserved" and "self-effacing" young man named Singer who, seeking to live an "anonymous" life, moves to Notodden, a sleepy little town in Telemark (where I happen to live now), to take a job at the library. On his first day in town he meets an eccentric millionaire who believes that Notodden can become "the center of everything modern. For the twenty-first century...The Paris of the north. The fashion center of the north." Soon after this strange encounter, Singer meets a woman, marries her, and adopts her small daughter – all of which is depicted in such a way as to leave one entirely unmoved. His life continues to be humdrum: he and his wife grow distant; while they are planning a divorce, he loses her in a traffic accident; and in time he moves back to Oslo, taking the girl with him.

It drags on a bit more after that. But as with *Shyness and Dignity*, it doesn't add up to anything more than a random-feeling chronicle of one more sad sack slogging through life, all the while feeling (as Solstad puts it) "trapped in his own self." Reading it, I was reminded of Flaubert's great story "A Simple Heart," which, like *T. Singer*, recounts the unremarkable life of an inconspicuous person; but whereas "A Simple Heart" is profoundly moving – a beautiful reminder that every soul is precious – *T. Singer*, like many another Norwegian novel, arouses no such feeling. And that seems to be the idea: to leave you with the lesson that life is pretty meaningless. Reading *T. Singer*, I reflected that Singer is not unlike Pedersen without the politics. Could that be Solstad's point? That Singer's life is meaningless precisely because he lacks an ideology?

But enough about Solstad's fiction. Let's get back to his politics. Yes, he quit AKP, but he never abandoned Communism. In later years he repeatedly [identified](#) as a Maoist. In 2008

he published an essay in the magazine *Samtiden* in which he blithely dismissed the value of freedom of speech, and [speaking](#) in Oslo shortly afterwards he affirmed that he was “indifferent” to that particular freedom. He asserted, in fact, that instead of being fiercely defended, freedom of speech should be fiercely attacked. And he drew a sharp distinction between freedom of the press and freedom of speech: whereas he supported the former, which was enjoyed by people such as himself who were credentialed in some way, he eschewed the latter, which enabled the foolish rabble to speak their minds, and hence cloud the air with ignorant rot.

Of course Solstad hated America. In the above-cited 2007 TV interview he doesn't go for two minutes without bringing up America. New York, he once said, was the only American city he could stand. In a 2018 interview he [volunteered](#) that he'd rooted for Bernie Sanders – who else? – in the 2016 primaries. During a 2015 visit to the Big Apple he [told](#) the national newspaper *Dagsavisen* that he liked Obama and Hillary, but America itself? He despised its “Disney culture” and said that if you want to see the worst of America, go to Orlando. Yes, why build a theme park when you can build a gulag? In other words, his take on America was exactly the same as that of every other far-left European literary intellectual of our time.

By the way, I was surprised to discover, in that same 2018 interview, that Solstad wasn't fluent in any language other than Norwegian. Hell, *everybody* in Norway is fluent in English. But I really shouldn't have been surprised. Solstad was a provincial of the first order. He was Norway's own village Commie. His unabashed Maoism might've blunted his literary success in the U.S. (and perhaps helps explain why *Gymnaslærer Pedersen* hasn't made it into English), but in Norway that Maoism probably helps explain why he won so many prizes – and why the government decided to award him an annual stipend that helped pay for his lavish capitalist lifestyle.

(Like Bernie Sanders, Solstad had three residences – one of them in exclusive west Oslo, another in Berlin.)

This will sound like a detour, but it isn't. On January 29 I [wrote](#) for *FrontPage* about a Norwegian professor of literature who'd recently written an article for the national newspaper *Aftenposten* comparing Donald Trump to Hitler. It was, I maintained, "the quintessential example of everything stupid and dishonest that has been said and written about the president." Well, Norway's literary and academic community is a very small one, and it turns out that four years ago, on the occasion of Solstad's 80th birthday, the author of this inane anti-Trump screed, Bernt Hagtvet, took Solstad [down](#) (also in *Aftenposten*) in a way that no one in Norway had ever dared to do before. And for this service I have to tip my hat to him.

"Solstad," observed Hagtvet, "has flirted with the idea that he is a Communist all his life...It is as a Communist that he will be remembered, he says. Again and again. Dag Solstad is preparing his legacy." I've mentioned Hagtvet's hostility to Trump, whom he sees as a worrying sign of an "authoritarian wave...sweeping the world." He's wrong about that, of course. But Hagtvet sees Solstad, too, as part of that "wave." And he's unquestionably right on the money about Solstad's love of authoritarianism (although totalitarianism, a stronger word, is patently more apropos).

"There is something unbearably easy about Solstad's proclamations" of devotion to Communism," declared Hagtvet. Solstad, he noted, had recently told the national newspaper *Klassekampen* (there is no end of national newspapers in tiny Norway) that it was "a shame" that "Mao lost." And how did Solstad reply to Hagtvet's criticisms – and, in particular, to Hagtvet's reference to the uncomfortable little fact that Mao was responsible for more deaths than either Hitler or Stalin? Quite cheerfully, Solstad said that he didn't care what anyone else thought of his personal political

passions: Mao's ability to inspire a billion people to turn against "capitalism and imperialism," he pronounced, had given him "hope."

Before I wrap up, one more quote from that fatuous literary critic whom I cited up front. "If we had lived in Trump's America," Jan Øyvind Helgesen told *Nettavisen* on the occasion of Solstad's death, Solstad "would have been cancelled long ago." Yeah, right: Solstad, a drooling, superannuated fanboy of Mao – the most bloodthirsty dictator of all time, who didn't just silence his critics but tortured and executed them without mercy – would have been silenced by Donald J. Trump, a president who's giving Americans back their freedom of speech.

The utter upside-downness of it all is vomit-inducing. But such is the nature of the gushing tributes that have been pouring in since the news came out that Norway's most celebrated unrepentant Maoist had breathed his last. I only have my own tribute to add: good riddance, monster.

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