

William Mandel, *Saying No to Power. Autobiography of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Activist and Thinker*. Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1999, xi + 651 pp., index, ill., ISBN: 0-88739-286-5; \$18.50 paper.

William Mandel is not known to Europeans. Likewise, outside Left-wing intellectual circles in New York and California, he is not well known in the United States. His autobiography, however, is an engaging history of the American Left in the twentieth century and worth reading if Europeans, especially Scandinavians, want to understand the forces that make America what she is today. In his introduction, historian

Howard Zinn suggests that Mandel is an ordinary man and uses him as an example of how we need more biographies of ordinary people who are not the powerful and 'important' personages of history who reinforce the values of the status quo and perpetuate the existing hierarchies of society.

William Mandel was and remains a virulent opponent of the status quo and serves as a role model for Americans who love their country but hate her politics yet give up the good fight because they run out of energy. Mandel never ran out of energy and he has never stopped fighting. His principles cost him his college education (1933); his highly esteemed journalist position as UPI's expert on Russia (1945); his contract with the country's leading lecture agency (1947); and his position at Stanford University (1948). In 1952 he was called before the US Senate Internal Security ('McCarren') Subcommittee; in 1953, before Senator Joseph McCarthy; and in 1960, the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Between 1949 and 1959 he was denied a passport. By the 1970s, he was too Right for America's Communists and too Left for America's mainstream. His radio program was cancelled several times and no academic publisher would touch him. He lived his life on a tightrope yet whenever he was pushed off, he got back up again.

Mandel was sixteen years old when fear of Japan and Hitler's Germany led the United States finally to recognize the Soviet Union. Isolationism in prior decades left America's academics unprepared for this and very few Americans knew anything about Russia or the Soviet Union. Mandel had lived with his parents in Moscow and could read Russian. At the age of twenty-three, without a college degree, he started his lifelong career as a specialist in Soviet affairs. By 1943, when he was only twenty-six years old, he had written fifteen scholarly articles while employed by the American Russian Institute. In the same year he was interviewed by Cornell University to be a teacher in their first intensive course on the USSR, a job he didn't get because of his young age. He continued to work for the Institute and was used by both the American government and United Press International as a credible expert and source of information throughout the war. In the face of America's post war anti-Soviet hysteria, however, Mandel lost his legitimacy with academics and for the better part of his life was marginalized and virtually unemployable as a scholar, journalist and mainstream public speaker. It wasn't until 1964 that he was published again with *Russia Re-Examined* and in the intervening years he became a professional translator of technical and scientific documents, a job he did for thirty-two years while producing his radio program as a volunteer. Pacifica (listener-sponsored) radio stations KPFA (Berkeley), KPFK (Los Angeles) and WBAI (New York City) gave him a forum and intellectually supported him intermittently for thirty-eight years. Those who hated him wrote ugly letters. Those who liked him knew they were listening to a professional revolutionary who loved America and wanted to see social justice through the institutional implementation of the First, Fifth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution.

Mandel was always controversial and his 'transgressions' were many. The first was his admiration of the Soviet Union and his passionate belief in the possibility of peaceful co-existence with the Russian Communists. His second was his membership in the American Communist Party, a formal affiliation he held until he quit in 1957

after opposing the Soviet invasion of Hungary. His other 'sins' include his New York Jewish-intellectual heritage and a creative use of the English language that consistently produced successful histrionics. In the 1970s his 'bad behaviour' included Jewish opposition to Israeli foreign policy but support for Castro's Cuba; opposition to Solzhenitsyn, who had become the poster boy for America's ideological anti-communism, but support for the Berkeley Student Movement. Mandel also became a feminist and the publication of his book *Soviet Women* in 1975 put him solidly within the ranks of women's studies. In the 1980s he divided his social activism between incarcerated prisoners and campaigning for the end to the US-USSR arms race.

As Soviet Communism evolved Mandel's own thinking changed and 'saying no to power' was eventually extended to the American Communist Party itself. In 1956, the *Daily Worker* published a long article by Mandel critical of Stalinism. For the first time in any Communist publication in the world one read that Stalinism – one man rule in a socialist country – was bad. 'It must be bad,' Mandel wrote, 'because it violates the dignity of man, holds back his powers of creation and contradicts the very nature of socialism.' Mandel wanted socialism but not imposed on the end of bayonets. He remained a socialist, however, and continued to admire the Soviet Union for the positive changes: universal literacy, the first man in space, free education including one of the best technological-education systems of the world; free health care; security in old age.

Eventually, Mandel was too Right for some on the Left and too Left for the majority on the Right. Maoists and Trotskyists hated him along with members of the John Birch Society. In the face of this dual opposition, however, Mandel was always his own man, refusing to bow to any doctrine that could not be questioned. 'I realize today' he writes, 'that communism was essentially a religion. It claimed to be founded on logic, but like all religions, it actually rested on articles of faith: that the working class would want to lead society and would act accordingly; that it would show greater solidarity with workers abroad than with employers at home; that if a party claiming to represent it came to power in some country, its leaders would not be motivated by the hunger for power and other personal interests that motivate other political leaders. As with all religions, faith produced both good and evil.' In describing the New Left in 1969, Mandel writes, '[b]y the close of the 60s, would-be world-changers were divided into at least half-a-dozen warring sects: Maoist, Trotskyist of several varieties, pro-Soviet Communist. After the fashion of religious sectarians from time immemorial, they would not even speak to each other and there had been a couple of violent incidents.'

Mandel's autobiography describes the political climate of the 1950s when some Americans experienced systematic violations of their civil rights and when honest men and women were ruined by a totalitarian Right. In twentieth century America, innocent citizens were removed from society and sent to prison for having the wrong opinions. The scholar and civil rights leader W.E.B Du Bois was indicted by the federal government for failure to register as a foreign agent when he headed the US campaign for signatures to the Stockholm Pledge, a document that claimed the use of atomic weapons a crime against humanity. 'The atmosphere of McCarthyism,' Mandel writes, 'created fear in the land that readers today cannot imagine.' A worker

was thrown out of a factory window by his colleagues for collecting signatures for Du Bois' anti-nuclear petition. Twenty-six tenured professors at the University of California at Berkeley were fired for refusing to sign a loyalty oath although none of them was found to be a Communist. Two hundred and seventy-five foreign-born persons, many who came to America as children, were arrested for deportation for belonging to subversive organizations. Thousands of individuals were driven out of their jobs for having suspicious affiliations or the wrong friends.

Revisionist and post-revisionist historical scholarship has legitimized many of Mandel's opinions. Maybe peaceful co-existence with the USSR had been possible. Some of these historians would agree with Mandel that America's ideology of anti-communism and the creation of the Cold War strengthened the Kremlin hard-liners and legitimized totalitarian control. Some historians now believe that the role of ideology had a greater influence on American than on Soviet foreign policy, particularly the ideology of anti-communism, which tended to globalize the Cold War when linked to the 1970s strategy of containment in the Third World. In 1996, George Kennan regretted how his concept of political containment had resulted in Washington's policy of military confrontation. Likewise, the legacy of the communists' social legislation must give Mandel no small sense of satisfaction. Labor reform in the West came about under the threat of a radicalized international labor movement protected and supported by the USSR. FDR's New Deal co-opted the zeal of radicals who looked to Moscow for models of social justice. Social goals that are commonplace today, including women's rights and racial integration, were planks of the Communist Party platform long before the mainstream took them seriously. It was Left-wing Americans who first went to the American South to help organize African-Americans and poor whites around issues of social justice.

*Saying No to Power* is also an excellent description of America's student movement in the 1960s. Communists always rejected reform in favor of revolution. By the 1960s, however, Mandel saw that a socialist revolution would never happen in the United States but that something else was in the wind. Students – instead of workers – would lead the way to major social and political reforms. The San Francisco Bay Area was one of the few places in the United States where the New Deal coalition of labor and intellectuals had never been crushed. Berkeley was the eye of the storm and a magnet for people who wanted to improve life in the country, and it was to Berkeley that Mandel moved with his family in 1957. In 1962, at age forty-five, he was a founding member of Berkeley's youth movement, the only political activist over the age of thirty who was elected to the Executive Committee of the Free Speech Movement. This student movement spearheaded a progressive democratic revival in American life. The years 1960-1965 saw a dramatic reversal in the deeply rooted passivity of Americans to defend civil liberties. Before that, Truman's Loyalty Oath and McCarthy's witch-hunt had set the tone. Dissenting voices in policy and politics were permitted in neither the media nor educational institutions and yet – or perhaps therefore – passivity prevailed. The student movement woke the country up.

Beginning in 1964, the Free Speech Movement was, as Mandel says, not a campaign to make speeches or say certain words. It was a mass movement to *organize*. What started the FSM was the students' revolt against the university's decision to pro-

hibit cardtables on campus to distribute literature. What was mobilized was human energy to oppose a long list of injustices: poverty (the South and Appalachia); violations of Constitutional rights (McCarthyism and the House Committee on Un-American Activities); systematic racism (everywhere); elitist educational curricula (at most universities) and eventually the war in Viet Nam. Mandel describes the 1969 People's Park riots, when Berkeley was under martial law enforced by the National Guard. The issue was a small patch of land that had become a park instead of a parking lot; when the demonstrators at an 'illegal' rally refused to move, National Guardsmen fired on the crowds. One hundred and ten people were shot in one day by police and sheriff's deputies. Of the victims, one was killed and another blinded for life. I was there, and Mandel's account corresponds with my own memory of the events when even the most conservative citizens were outraged.

Mandel's description of the 1980s and 1990s stands out as one of his best contributions to contemporary history. Reagan's extreme expenditure on arms development in the 1980s was unquestioned by most Americans, who assumed that it was necessary, and the mainstream media supported this belief. 'The anti-Soviet panic promoted by government, supposedly impartial organizations, and media during Reagan's second term reached such peak that it is forgotten by most in a form of denial,' he writes. Mandel's radio program was aggressively critical of Soviet civil liberties practices in periods when the war danger receded, but when the danger of war was high, he focused on relieving tensions, not worsening them.' While I fought with outrage the denigration of real social progress in the USSR, I was equally outspoken in assailing its shortcomings to audiences of its defenders.' Acting as a self-appointed Super League Umpire, Mandel placed himself on the firing line, vulnerable to shots from both sides and it was during this period that he was the most controversial. The 1990s was the decade when he was forced into 'parting with illusions,' and he lost faith in Marxist socialism. Ironically, his expertise on the USSR was then offered as advice to the Russian Academy of Sciences on how one could 'fix' the Soviet Union. These two chapters are a love letter to the citizens of Russia and the various constituent republics.

*Saying No to Power* is a long book for an autobiography: 617 pages in paperback, highly tangential in parts that will certainly try the patience of some readers. Mandel documents his writing with personal conversations he has reconstructed from notes that he meticulously kept. He explains: 'I confess that I would write such things down immediately afterward because I had to be able to look at them to convince myself when things got bad that I really belonged in there against an army of opponents.' The autobiography is a scrapbook of Mandel's personal memories of the people and incidents that influenced his life: Sacco and Vanzetti, Paul Robeson, Peekskill, the Martinsville Seven, Anna Louise Strong, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Emmy Lou Packard, Malvina Reynolds, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, the film *Salt of the Earth*, Harry Bridges, the Scottsboro Case, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, Laura X and Cesar Chavez, just to name a few.

Mandel's documentation is impressive, however, including hundreds of personal letters he wrote and received throughout his life: so many letters and personal documents that the reader can't help wondering if he ever threw anything away! A com-

pulsive man, most certainly. Relevant to this is the suggestion that being a professional revolutionary took a toll on his family life, and one can only speculate about what kind of marriage his beloved Tanya experienced during the roughest years. Mandel's adult children tell him that he has 'mellowed' in his advanced age and we have to admire the author for considering the possibility that much of his zeal for changing society was, perhaps, self-centered and motivated by a compulsion to be heroic.

Indeed, it is Mandel's egotism that will offend Scandinavians who read his autobiography. Perhaps people in their ninth decade have a right to brag and, if so, readers might forgive Mandel for his immodesty. Nevertheless, *Saying No to Power* is replete with descriptions about how clever Mandel is. 'I have on several occasions recognized major shifts in the political atmosphere and significant new movements earlier than anyone else, as far as I can determine,' he says. While describing his expertise in the very small club of Soviet specialists in the 1940s, he never even mentions George Kennan, yet he says that if the country had listened to him (Mandel) instead of others, the Korean War could have been avoided. Mandel also says he anticipated Khrushchev's exposé of Stalin in 1956 long before it happened. Eventually, he says, many of the reforms of the Primakov government were based on ideas that Mandel had suggested long before. As Mandel explains it, if this is true, perhaps it is because his travels and experience gave him greater 'first-hand knowledge of Russia than any foreigner in recorded history.'

Aside from that, Mandel claims to be the inventor of the talk show and says he was the first to write about the fact that 99.9 percent of UC, Berkeley's faculty was white. Mandel calls himself an icon of the 1960s, mainly because of his performance before HUAC, at which he said: 'If you think I will cooperate in any way with this collection of Judases, of men who sit in violation of the United States Constitution, if you think I will cooperate with any of you in any manner whatsoever, you are insane!' This sentence, according to Mandel, has appeared in five documentaries and numerous TV specials, one of which inspired a kid named Zimmerman to become Bob Dylan after seeing the film, *Operation Abolition*. During the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Mandel's behavior was true to form: 'I dropped everything for a week, even my inhibition from the depression years against lengthy long-distance phone calls. I did whatever I could think of to save the world. I use that phrase with no embarrassment or sense of cliché. It was not that I had illusions about my influence, but simply that I had to try.'

Keeping in mind that the author is an old man, however, some of his braggadocio is charming. Among other things, Mandel tells us that he is an excellent skier, dancer and singer and also skilled at driving fast in automobiles. He also hints more than once about his physical bearing and how good looking he is, including more than one account of how gay men were attracted to him in his youth. Otherwise, for ex-pat Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area, readers will love Mandel's description of pre-1990s Berkeley, including Cragmont rock, the 'co-ops' supermarkets, Donald Pippin's Pocket Opera, the *Berkeley Barb* newspaper, Telegraph Avenue, the Pot Luck restaurant, Steppenwolf and Lake Anza.

In the final analysis, Willam Mandel's life is worth reading not because he is, as

Zinn suggested, an ordinary man but because he is an ordinary human being with vision. He represents Americans who lost their fascination for classic bourgeois liberalism, preferring social equality and community over the isolation of the individual. His entire life has been motivated by a scorching bum to see America, not as utopia but as a just society. His autobiography reminds us that socialism in America wasn't always a dirty word and that windows of time existed in our history during which honorable men and women constituted a true political Left: advocates of social democracy and other alternatives to Social Darwinism and unrestricted free market capitalism, Left-wing attitudes that were systematically snuffed out by the politics of the Cold War and Reaganomics. In his book, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, historian Howard Zinn says: 'I ... understand ... how so much of what is called history omits the reality of ordinary people – their struggles, their hidden power.' Mandel is a perfect example and in the end, he can say: my life has mattered. We have only to look at his scars to see the depth of his life.