

BOOK REVIEWS

NOMENKLATURA: THE SOVIET RULING CLASS

Michael Voslensky/Doubleday/\$18.95

Joseph Shattan

Everyone is familiar with Winston Churchill's characterization of the Soviet Union as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Ever since the Soviet regime was established, understanding this riddle *cum* mystery *cum* enigma has been a major preoccupation of Western foreign policy. Some Western students have found the answer to the Soviet riddle in the obscure formulations of Marxist-Leninist ideology; others have tried to solve the mystery of Soviet intentions by placing them within the context of Russian history; still others have sought to penetrate the enigma of the Soviet policy-making process by differentiating between moderates and hardliners, hawks and doves. And not a few analysts of Soviet affairs have declared that the whole problem is really no problem at all, that the Soviets are essentially no different from us.

Michael Voslensky, a prominent Soviet historian who was expatriated by the regime in 1977 and now directs the Institute of Contemporary Soviet Research in Munich, has developed a different line of argument. Soviet policy, he asserts, is best understood as reflecting the interests of the Soviet ruling class, the *nomenklatura*. The *nomenklatura*, Voslensky writes, "is a class of privileged exploiters. It acquired wealth from power, not power from wealth. The domestic policy of the *nomenklatura* class is to consolidate its dictatorial power, and its foreign policy is to extend it to the whole world."

Of course, Voslensky is not the first writer to draw attention to the *nomenklatura*, or to describe its essential characteristics. Back in 1969, the *Program of the Democratic Movement of the Soviet Union* declared, "In the course of the past half century it is neither workers nor peasants nor intellectuals who have become the ruling class, but a fourth group: the new exploiting class that reigns autocratically and holds all the threads of power in its hands, their majesties the bureaucratic elite." And in 1976, Andrei Sakharov wrote, "Although the appropriate sociological studies either have not been carried out in our country, or have been classified as secret, it may be affirmed that as early as the 1920s and 30s—and definitely in the post-war years—a special Party-bureaucratic stratum was formed and

could be discerned. This is the *nomenklatura*, as its members call themselves; or the 'new class,' as Milovan Djilas has named them."

But if Voslensky is not the first writer to analyze the class structure of the Soviet Union, his is certainly the most comprehensive account of the *nomenklatura* to date: of its origins, its way of life, its outlook, and its ambitions. If, after Voslensky's masterful survey, the term *nomenklatura* does not enter our language, and if the notion of a Soviet ruling class fails to inform our perception of Soviet policy, the fault will be ours, not his.

According to Voslensky, the *nomenklatura* consolidated its power in three stages. In the first historical stage, Lenin created a "party of a new type," an organization of professional revolutionaries which became the embryo of the new class. In the second stage, this party managed to seize power in Russia in 1917, and undertook to reorganize the whole of society, thereby becoming a ruling class. But the sheer magnitude of its self-appointed task made it impossible for the small group of profes-

sional revolutionaries to administer an entire country alone. They were forced to admit a new group into their ranks, careerists attracted solely by the prospect of rapid advancement, and soon the "Old Bolsheviks" found themselves "up against new forces, devoid of idealism, whose only clear aim was to creep into the bed of power." This new group found its champion in Stalin, whose interests he carefully and methodically advanced. As Voslensky observes:

Stalin was well aware of the envious glances the *nomenklaturists* cast at the Leninists. Those old men who preserved some loyalty to the revolution in spite of their good jobs, their prestige, and the good life they led were alien and antipathetic to the newcomers. The latter needed only a signal to fling themselves like a pack of wolves on the enfeebled old fogies who were keeping them out of good positions.

That signal was provided in 1934 by Stalin's murder of Sergei Kirov, First Secretary of the Party in Leningrad, and a Politburo member. His assassination was the opening move in a massive purge of the Bolshevik old guard, which the late Bertram Wolfe called "a

coup d'état in the Party," and which Voslensky calls "a bloodthirsty change of direction inside the new ruling class." The destruction of the old guard and the replacement of convinced Communists by a new group of cynics interested only in their own welfare was the third and final stage in the *nomenklatura's* sanguinary ascent to power.

Once in power, the *nomenklatura* has made the most of a good thing. So different is its way of life from that of the average Soviet citizen that the 750,000 officials who belong to the *nomenklatura* (counting their family members, the figure comes to about 3 million) might well be said to inhabit a special country of their own, *Nomenklaturia*, where life is sweet indeed. According to Voslensky, *Nomenklaturia* is

the country of the special, with special accommodations built by special builders, special country houses and vacation homes, special hospitals, out-patients' departments, and convalescent homes, special products sold in special shops, special buffets and canteens, special hairdressers, garages, gas stations, and license plates, a special information network, special kindergartens, schools, and institutions of higher education, special waiting rooms at stations and airports, and even a special cemetery.

Voslensky observes that the material privileges of what he calls—wrongly, in my view—"the ruling classes in the West" are far smaller than those of the *nomenklatura*. But he is astute enough to recognize that all comparisons between the "privileged classes in the bourgeois West" and the *nomenklatura* are fundamentally misleading. "The essential feature of capitalist society," he writes, "is not privilege, but money; in real socialist society it is not money, but privilege." In thinking about the status of the *nomenklatura*, it might be helpful to recall that in classical Roman law, slavery was defined as an institution, "whereby someone is subject to the *dominium* of another, contrary to nature." *Dominium*, with its connotations both of power and ownership, is precisely the quality which distinguishes the *nomenklatura* from alleged Western counterparts.

Having consolidated its position under Stalin, the *nomenklatura* has increasingly come to resemble a caste, into which one is born, rather than a class open to outsiders. "Most high-level *nomenklaturists* were appointed during the Yezhov period and the war," Voslensky informs us, "and the present



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corps of officials has just had time to bring up its children, who are now of an age to become *nomenklaturists* themselves." While it is still possible for a humble Party member to enter the charmed ranks of the *nomenklatura*—assuming, of course, that he possesses such necessary personal attributes as obsequiousness, cunning, and a total lack of scruples—such career paths are becoming rare. Far more typical are

careers such as those of Brezhnev's son Yuri, Kosygin's daughter Ludmila, Mikoyan's son Sergo, Andropov's son Igor, and Gromyko's son Anatoly, all of whom enjoy comfortable positions in the *nomenklatura* by virtue of their illustrious parentage. It is sometimes said in the West that the Soviet elite is about to undergo a momentous generational change, and that as younger leaders assume control, the Soviet

Union is bound to become more liberal. Yet when one recalls the caste-like nature of the *nomenklatura*, and when one further learns from Voslensky that the *jeunesse dorée* of the *nomenklatura* look down on their teachers in much the same way as "the children of the Athenian aristocracy probably looked down on their slave schoolmasters," it becomes exceedingly difficult to believe in the alleged liberal

tendencies of the younger *nomenklaturists*.

Although the *nomenklatura* derives the right to rule from Marxist-Leninist ideology, Voslensky stresses that virtually no one in the *nomenklatura* really believes in Marxism-Leninism. Indeed, some of Marx's writings, such as his violently anti-Russian *History of the Secret Diplomacy of the Eighteenth Century*, are actually banned in the Soviet Union, and "the real Leninists were shot forty years ago in the cellars of the NKVD." The true ideology of the *nomenklatura*, according to Voslensky, is "Stalinist chauvinism." This chauvinism "was erected by the feudal aristocracy, and Stalin and his heirs superimposed onto it Marxist terminology and ideas from Marx and Lenin that serve the interests of the *nomenklatura*." A corollary of this chauvinistic ideology is anti-Semitism, which "seemed to have leaped from behind German lines [during World War II] and infected the *nomenklatura* leaders. . . . It is good form among them to be outspokenly anti-Semitic; if one of their propagandists tries to deny it, disbelieve him, for it is a blatant lie."

The *nomenklatura* seeks to maintain and extend its power through the production of arms and advanced police equipment. Consumer goods are regarded as a necessary evil, an unavoidable concession to the labor force. If he is to remain productive, the Soviet worker must be provided with certain bare necessities: "Accommodation not exceeding twelve meters per person, a simple diet, cheap public transport to take him to work, and cheap propaganda newspapers and propaganda films." In order to get people back to work as quickly as possible, medical care is also provided in case of illness. By adopting the modest life-style prescribed by the *nomenklatura*, Soviet wage-earners can maintain their strength, reproduce themselves, and contribute to the greater glory of their masters. Naturally, when they grow old and end up in old age homes, their life expectancy shortens drastically: The *nomenklatura* can hardly be expected to support those elements of the population from which it cannot derive a profit.

Not unreasonably, the *nomenklatura* secretly believes that if it allowed its subjects to travel freely across Soviet frontiers, the country would soon be empty. It has therefore constructed an elaborate system of frontier fortifications. Voslensky compares the Soviet frontier to a ring fence around a huge concentration camp. "Everyone inside is assumed to be prepared to do anything for the sake of getting out, so everything possible must be done to prevent this." Should someone never-

It's a typical scene: Father confronts son with the inevitable question, "So what do you want to do when you graduate, Jim?"

"Well, I'm not really sure yet," Jim answers. "But I know I want to help people."

"Well, then," his dad responds, "why don't you go into business?"

"Uh...gee!" replies Jim, obviously shaken. "I guess I've never thought of that!"

Most of us probably haven't. Have you ever thought, for example, that a company like Procter and Gamble is in the consumer protection business? It is, you know, and it protects consumers far more effectively than the government.

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Before a single one of these

products appeared on your grocer's shelf, millions of dollars and countless hours were spent asking consumers, "What do you want and how can we do it better?"

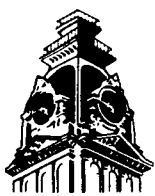
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Now, this isn't a testimonial to Procter and Gamble alone. Every business in a competitive economy must operate this way. Government, on the other hand, has monopolized our postal service, most of our schools, crime prevention, etc.—all of which are among the least satisfactory services known to consumers.

So the next time someone suggests to you that only the government can protect consumers, give 'em the business.



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theless manage to escape, Soviet search parties often pursue the runaway slave beyond Soviet territory.

From this brief summary of Voslensky's description of the *nomenklatura*, it is evident that the Marxist view of the state as the apparatus of the ruling class applies with singular accuracy to the Soviet Union. The *nomenklatura* is the "collective owner" of the means of production. It monopolizes all the political and economic resources of the country. Marxist-Leninist ideology is a "superstructure" elaborated by the *nomenklatura* to justify its exploitative rule. Although Soviet propaganda tirelessly maintains that there are no longer any "antagonistic classes" in Soviet society, this is obviously a ruse designed to induce "false consciousness" among the masses.

Viewing the Soviet state as the creature of the *nomenklatura* yields a number of insights into the nature of Soviet foreign policy. One often hears it argued, for example, that the Soviet leadership's awareness that the country has so often been invaded in the past causes it to live in a state of chronic insecurity; it is therefore up to the West to ease this historic insecurity by offering various and sundry unilateral concessions. Yet even a cursory familiarity with the Soviet class structure suggests a very different explanation for Soviet insecurity: When less than 1.5 percent of the population mercilessly exploits more than 98.5 percent of the population in the name of a doctrine no one believes in, one might well expect the exploiting class to feel insecure. How Western concessions can possibly serve to alleviate this sense of insecurity is far from self-evident.

Again, it is often said that the Soviet Union's Leninist orientation leads it to adopt a very cautious foreign policy. There may well be some truth in this assertion, but surely the *nomenklatura's* awareness that it rules a population whose loyalty is far from certain is also likely to induce a degree of caution. Because it cannot be sure that its subjects will prove reliable in the event of a crisis, it must avoid crises whenever possible. In this connection, the *nomenklatura's* reluctance to commit Soviet troops to the invasion and occupation of Poland, despite its alarm over Solidarity's activities, may have stemmed, at least in part, from its unwillingness to expose large numbers of its people to what can only be called a revolutionary situation. Who knows what dangerous ideas the soldiers might have become infected with? Apologists for General Jaruzelski claim that he is essentially a Polish patriot who acted to stave off an otherwise imminent Soviet invasion; yet

when one considers Jaruzelski's actions in light of the *nomenklatura's* class interests, it seems clear that the General actually rescued both the Soviet and Polish *nomenklaturas* from an extremely dangerous situation.

Finally, consider the much-debated question of whether the Soviet Union is bent on world domination. Those who answer this question affirmatively often cite Soviet declarations in support of world revolution and the inevitable, world-wide triumph of socialism. Their opponents reply by questioning the sincerity of such pronouncements. How is one to decide between these two views? According to Voslensky, the *nomenklatura's* foreign policy once again reflects its class interests. What it fears above all else is the possibility that its subjects may one day tire of living in oppression and servitude:

Because the mere existence of a free and affluent West shows its subjects that the capitalist system, in spite of all its faults, provides better living conditions, the *nomenklatura* believes that that day might come. As this has nothing to do with any provocative attitude on the part of the West, but is a consequence of its mere existence, no amount of détente or "good conduct" on its part will cause the Soviet leaders to depart from their general line and abandon their objective of destroying the Western system. The same consideration underlies

nomenklatura policy in the countries of the Third World. . . . The *nomenklatura* fears that the countries of the Third World will take the Japanese path and make the Western system even more predominant on the world scale, permitting it not only to survive but to triumph. It therefore tries to force the developing countries down the Cuban path, which explains its dogged neocolonialist expansionism in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Because Voslensky's analysis of the structure, organization, and mode of behavior of the *nomenklatura* is unrelentingly grim, perhaps it is best to conclude on a somewhat lighter note. The story goes that one day Leonid Brezhnev invited his provincial mother to the Kremlin for a visit. He showed her his eighteen-room apartment, his collection of cars, his precious gems, his country dacha, yet the old lady seemed unimpressed. He proceeded to take her in his private plane to his hunting lodge, but her gloom only deepened. Finally, he asked her what was wrong, wasn't she proud of him?

"Of course I am, son," she replied, "only I can't help worrying about what might happen if the Reds should ever come back."

Keeping the "Reds" at bay at home, while encouraging them abroad—that, in a nutshell, is the policy of the *nomenklatura*. □

INSIDE THE CRIMINAL MIND Stanton E. Samenow/Times Books/\$15.50

William Tucker

Late last year in New York, a 21-year-old gang member killed a 23-year-old Harvard graduate while trying to rape and rob her on a rooftop. A few days later, a 16-year-old high school dropout murdered his girlfriend's 33-year-old mother because she tried to stop the couple from dating.

When reporters asked the 21-year-old why he killed his victim, he shouted, "It was her fault! She was a slut! She deserved it!"

When an uncle of the 16-year-old was asked to describe his murderous nephew, he replied: "I don't know what happened to this boy to make him so crazy. He was always fighting, never listened to his parents. He wouldn't go to school and he wouldn't go to work. He was no good in any way. He

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punched his sister the other day and broke her mouth just because she wouldn't get him a glass of water."

All this, of course, is what most of us now consider an ordinary day in American society. Such things happen as a matter of course. Thus, it wasn't long before the newspapers and the justice system were beginning to assure us that, just in case we felt any sense of outrage about all this, we'd better get those antiquated notions of crime and punishment out of our heads.

Within days the *New York Times* had written a long article suggesting the rape-murderer's problems probably stemmed from a head injury he sustained when he was struck by a car ten years ago. At the same time, his lawyers were moving to suppress his bragging confessions on the grounds that the police had failed to contact a lawyer who was already representing him on

a previous assault charge. The story about the 33-year-old mother, on the other hand, quickly disappeared from the headlines—probably because the victim was Puerto Rican.

For anyone who reads Stanton E. Samenow's *Inside the Criminal Mind*, however, these brutal incidents fall into an ominously familiar pattern. They are the all-too-recognizable pieces in a true-life jigsaw puzzle that Samenow

William D. Snider

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