

Whither Russia?

EDITORS' NOTE: The following articles offer some further views on the nature and future of the Soviet system, continuing a discussion launched just a year ago in our November-December issue of 1965. A list of contributions to the discussion during the past year is printed in the annual index at the back of this issue.

Totalitarian Rule and Social Change

By Boris Meissner

The evolutionary trends in Soviet Russia today can be understood only if the interaction between its political system and the social reality is viewed in proper perspective. This requires greater emphasis than in the past on the analysis of the internal structure of Soviet society. In the absence of any precise definition of the several social groups and their role in society, it is impossible to answer the question raised by Zbigniew Brzezinski: namely, whether the present process of change in the Soviet system represents transformation or degeneration.

Soviet society, as the product of two radical social

revolutions,¹ has a Janus face. On the one hand it is a relatively primitive industrial society that is struggling with serious problems of development. On the other hand it is a class society constituted on a totalitarian basis, exhibiting a high degree of social stress. The complex character of Soviet society cannot therefore be understood through study of a single model: besides the totalitarian model, which reflects the political system, models of industrial societies and of the developing countries' societies must also be relied upon. In analyzing the interaction between power structure and social structure, it is most im-

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¹ What is meant here—in addition to the October Revolution, which was primarily the work of Lenin—is Stalin's "revolution from above," which performed the function of a "substitute capitalism" and "substitute Bonapartism."

portant to project a model of totalitarian society that reflects both the static and the dynamic features of totalitarian rule.

Basic Features

All past discussions about totalitarianism have been vitiated by overemphasis on mass terror as a distinguishing feature, due to the impact of the Hitler regime and Stalinism.² At the same time, insufficient attention has been given to the really decisive characteristics of the autocratic-totalitarian regime. These are mainly three.³ The first is the unrestricted autocracy of the party, which is the consequence of permanent one-party dictatorship. It is this absolute absence of any restriction on the party that constitutes the principal difference between a totalitarian and an authoritarian regime, even though today the latter is often also based on a one-party dictatorship.

The second characteristic feature is total control from above. The Soviet control apparatus extends not only to all social organizations and institutions, but also to all mass media and other sources of public information. When total control exists, the function of terror is merely to serve as a constant reminder of the efficiency of the control apparatus. Totalitarian regimes will never give up using fear as an instrument of social manipulation—but neither do they have to depend on mass terror. Not all-encompassing terror, but the control of all functions and thought in every area of the life of society, must be regarded as the distinctive characteristic of totalitarianism.

The third feature is total planning, extending not only to the economic but to the political and cultural sectors of society. This total planning is designed to accomplish the radical transformation of the social structure, in line with the ultimate goal set by Marxist-Leninist ideology; the “socialist society” is merely a phase of transition to a perfect “communist society.” The transformation of the social structure is intended to be revolutionary in terms of its underlying ideological orientation, but it is to be realized preferably by evolutionary rather than revolu-

tionary means. Whatever the means used by the party at any given time, the operative concept is that of *control*. So long as the party possesses the will and the power to exercise control over the autonomous social processes and forms of social spontaneity that it is promoting, the society remains subjected to totalitarian rule—whatever the given relaxation.

This conclusion by no means implies that the mere exercise of control can resolve the basic conflict within Soviet society—that is, the clash between the party’s demand for supremacy in matters of ideology and organization, and the requirements of industrial evolution. Fluctuations in the enforcement of social sanctions are therefore an important guide in evaluating phases of the continuing conflict.⁴ The conflict is waged chiefly between the ruling power elite, on one side, and the managers of the economy, together with the prestige elite (made up mainly of writers, artists, and scientists) on the other. The power elite consists mostly of the portion of the “leadership cadres” that may be described as the top-level bureaucracy (*Hochbürokratie*). The remaining portion of the “leadership cadres” is made up of the top-level managers of the economy, who in the main represent the technical and economic intelligentsia. The prestige elite represents the scientific and cultural intelligentsia, which is also referred to as the “creative intelligentsia” (*tvorcheskaia intelligentsiia*) in the Soviet Union.

The Intelligentsia

Consequently, what we are dealing with is not, as is so often asserted, a single class of functionaries, making up a social bloc of white-collar workers of a cohesive, broadly-based intelligentsia. The top-level bureaucracy, by reason of the social functions which it performs as a result of the totalitarian power structure—that is, functions of command and control as well as of planning—is sharply distinguished from other groupings that might normally be described as white-collar.”⁵ Similarly, the intelligentsia—using the term in a narrow sense to denote those people with specialties based on university or

² This holds true particularly for authors like Hannah Arendt, Carl C. Friedrich, and occasionally also Brzezinski.

³ For a detailed exposition of the three basic elements of totalitarianism of the Soviet-Communist type, cf. B. Meissner, “Wandlungen im Herrschafts-system und Verfassungsrecht der Sowjetunion” (Changes in the Government and the Constitutional Law of the Soviet Union) in Boettcher-Lieber-Meissner, *Bilanz der Ära Chruschtschow* (A Balance Sheet of the Khrushchev Era), Stuttgart, 1966, pp. 142 ff. See also Meissner, “Party and Government Reforms,” in “Russia since Khrushchev,” *Survey* (London), July 1965, pp. 31 ff.

⁴ See P. Chr. Ludz, “Entwurf einer soziologischen Theorie totalitär verfasster Gesellschaft,” (Sketch of a Sociological Theory of a Society Based on Totalitarianism), in *Studien und Materialien zur Soziologie der DDR*, Cologne-Opalden, 1964, pp. 18 ff.

⁵ Cf. B. Meissner, *Sowjetgesellschaft im Wandel. Russlands Weg zur Industriegesellschaft* (The Transformation of Soviet Society. Russia’s Way to Industrial Society), Stuttgart, 1966, p. 104.

higher technical-school training—can be distinctly set off from the foremen and skilled workers with white-collar status, as well as from clerical employees. The only place where overlapping occurs is between the ruling power elite and the technical-economic intelligentsia, which virtually constitutes a supply or base group for the top-level bureaucracy. One of the decisive problems in this relationship is the fact that the top-level bureaucracy even to this day is largely made up of persons of proletarian or peasant origin, possessing an educational background inferior to that of the members of the intelligentsia. The bureaucracy also includes many so-called “specialists” who joined the party in the period before the war and in most cases have not had a thorough technical training.⁶

The distinction between these two controlling social groups lies primarily in the fact that the power of the top bureaucrats rests in the *positions* they hold, while that of the intelligentsia is rooted in the authority and prestige inherent in the *functions* it performs. The basis of authority as well as of prestige in modern industrial society is specialized knowledge. This is as true in the Soviet Union as in any other country—although Soviet industrial society has not yet entirely shaken off the eggshell of its developmental stage. Ability based on specialized knowledge is not, however, the only avenue to the top positions in society. Another essential requisite is the ability to get ahead; here personality, adaptation to the social norms prevailing within society, and personal connections are all important factors in the selection and promotion process, quite aside from the question of performance.⁷ The ability to get ahead is much more decisive in the hyper-bureaucratized Soviet society, with its single-party system, than in democratic industrialized societies. Contributing to the individual's success in this connection are a knowledge of ideological doctrines and power techniques, recognized service in the organization and party patronage under the “nomenclature system.”⁸

The subordination of specialized ability to the ability to get ahead, particularly in the filling of top positions, is responsible for the marked class character of Soviet society on the one hand, and the

flexibility and heterogeneous nature of the ruling class on the other. From this standpoint, the democratic Western industrial societies—all their structural weaknesses notwithstanding—represent merit societies to a much higher degree than does the Soviet Union, for all its claims that the merit principle is a basic element in the organization of work.

In the Soviet Union, it is primarily those with university or higher technical-school training who possess the specialized knowledge that is needed by an industrial society in the nuclear age. Even if they do not occupy positions of power, their functions are so crucial that they can influence, at the side of those exercising actual power, the determination of the social norms and sanctions of society. Together with the leading party cadres, this merit elite is to be found mainly in the upper stratum and the upper middle stratum of society. Within this elite, special prestige attaches to scientists, writers, and artists, which permits them to exert an influence—beyond the scope of their own stratum and sometimes in opposition to the ruling group—on the practices of society as a whole.⁹ The value concepts of Soviet society are in some instances more strongly shaped by the intellectual influences emanating from this prestige elite than they are by the accomplishments of the managers of the economy or the norms prescribed by the ruling power elite. This fact is clearly borne out by a sociological survey conducted by the Philosophical Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1961-62, which dealt with the values and aspirations of an elite group of Soviet youth.¹⁰

The top-level bureaucracy and the intelligentsia thus constitute two social groups which, irrespective of their further subdivisions, are clearly distinct in terms of their origin, their social functions, and their relationship to power.

Some Pertinent Statistics

What proportion of the working population and of the CPSU do these two groups represent? ¹¹ In 1959

⁶ Cf. B. Lewytskj, “Die Führungskräfte des sowjetischen Parteiapparates” (the Leadership Forces of the Soviet Party Apparatus), *Osteuropa* (Stuttgart), No. 15, 1965, pp. 739 ff.

⁷ Cf. O. Dreitzel, *Elitebegriff und Sozialstruktur* (Elite Concept and Social Structure), Stuttgart, 1962, pp. 100 ff.

⁸ Cf. Meissner, *Sowjetgesellschaft im Wandel*, loc. cit., p. 103; B. Lewytskj, “Die Nomenklatur. Ein wichtiges Instrument sowjetischer Kaderpolitik (Nomenclature. An Important Instrument of Soviet Cadre Policy),” *Osteuropa*, No. 11, 1961, pp. 409 ff.

⁹ Cf. the revealing report by Mihajlo Mihajlov, *Moscow Summer*, New York, Farrar Strauss, 1965.

¹⁰ Cf. G. Wagenlehner, “Die empirische Sozialforschung in Sowjetunion” (Empirical Social Research in the Soviet Union), *Moderne Welt* (Düsseldorf), No. 6, 1965, pp. 410 ff.

¹¹ The sources of the figures that follow are cited in *Sowjetgesellschaft im Wandel*, loc. cit.; in *Osteuropa's* special issue devoted to the Twenty-third CPSU Congress; and in the author's forthcoming article, “Die soziale Struktur der KPdSU” (The Social Structure of the CPSU), *Osteuropa*, September 1966.

the “leading cadres,” irrespective of their levels of education, and the members of the intelligentsia in all areas of activity totalled 12.7 million—i.e., 60 percent of all white-collar employees. Of this total, the top-level bureaucracy (excluding the military) numbered 0.4 million, the technical and economic intelligentsia (including the industrial managers) 7 million, and the scientific and cultural intelligentsia (including the prestige elite) 5.3 million. A “ruling class” with a core of 0.4 million was thus confronted with a 12.3-million member intelligentsia, using the term in the broad sense; of these, 8 million comprised the intelligentsia in the narrower sense—i.e. specialists with university or higher technical-school education.

CPSU membership figures for 1961 indicate that party members belonging to the “leadership cadres” and the intelligentsia (in the broad sense) constituted 77.7 percent of the 4.5 million gainfully-employed Communists in the employee category, exclusive of the military. In absolute figures, party members in the top-level bureaucracy numbered about 0.2 million (4.1 percent); in the technical and economic intelligentsia, 2.3 million (52.1 percent); and in the scientific and cultural intelligentsia, 1 million (21.5 percent). In terms of overall party membership (1961: 9.3 million), these three groups represented 2.1 percent, 24.7 percent, and 10.7 percent of the total. The variations in these percentages in the period up to 1966 have been minimal.

An entirely different picture emerges when these ratios are compared with the representation at the 23rd Party Congress of the CPSU and the composition of the new Central Committee.¹² The top-level bureaucracy (exclusive of the military), comprising just 2.1 percent of the total party membership, accounted for nearly 40 percent of the party delegates, and emerged with 81.1 percent representation among the full members of the Central Committee. The industrial managers and the technical and economic intelligentsia, representing about 25 percent of the total party membership, accounted for 14.2 percent of the Congress delegates, and only 2.1 percent of the Central Committee members. The prestige elite and the scientific and cultural intelligentsia got a higher percentage of representation on the Central Committee than among Party Congress delegates, but this fact is not significant since—almost without exception—the authors, artists and scientists on the Central Committee function as aides to the official cultural functionaries of the party.

¹² Cf. this author’s analysis of the 23rd CPSU Congress in *Osteuropa und Europa-Archiv*.

While party congresses have always been shows of strength on the part of the ruling power elite, what makes the 23rd Party Congress different is its reflection of the sociological effects of the Kosygin economic reform, by which the power position of the state and economic bureaucracy has been greatly strengthened in relation to the party bureaucracy. This has restored the situation that existed prior to 1957. The industrial managers appear as only secondary beneficiaries of this development, and so far—as the Central Committee figures indicate—the reform has not increased their influence on the policy-making process. As for the prestige elite, party opposition to the recent expansion of its social influence was reflected in the removal of several progressive Soviet writers, among them Tvardovski and Surkov, from the Central Committee.

Thus, nothing has been changed in the actual class structure of the party. The economic reform has resulted in a better balance within the top-level bureaucracy and has at the same time strengthened the position of the power elite as a whole. As the state and economic bureaucracy has gained influence, the “party organizers” within the party bureaucracy have been reduced to their control function. At the same time, the 23rd Party Congress revealed the effort of the “party ideologists,” through stronger emphasis on ideological control, to preserve the primacy of the party bureaucracy and to give new confidence to the full-time party apparatus.

Whereas the party leadership is recruited without exception from the top-level bureaucracy, the intelligentsia is the key social group in the rank and file of the party. The conflict arising out of the party leadership’s absolute monopoly of power is intensified by the conflict of generations resulting from the considerable age difference between the leadership and the rank and file. An age analysis of the party shows that 2.5 million members (20 percent) today are under 30 years of age, and 4.6 million (53 percent) are less than 40 years old. The middle generation (51 to 60 years of age) and the old generation together account for only 22.1 percent of the total party membership, yet most of the top functionaries come from these groups. The younger generation, comprising over one-half of the party rank and file, and 47.1 percent of the party as a whole, has no representation in the top leadership at all; this group in the main joined the CPSU in the “destalinization” period, after 1956.

In the intelligentsia, men and women are about equally represented. However, the influence women have in the leadership of the party is remarkably weak: though women, who make up 20.2 percent of

the total party, constituted 23.3 percent of the Congress delegates, only 5 (2.6 percent) emerged as full members of the Central Committee, and none is now included in the supreme party leadership.

Conflicts and Tensions

All of these statistics demonstrate that the gap between the top-level bureaucracy and the intelligentsia, far from diminishing, has widened in recent years. The ruling power elite is increasingly regarded as parasitic, for two reasons. In the first place, it represents a foreign body in the fabric of the elite structure of an industrialized society, since it does not submit to the economic rationality that is characteristic of an industrial merit society. The goal of promoting the conditions for existence and growth is only of secondary relevance to it. Its primary objective is the consolidation and expansion of its power base.

Secondly, the ruling elite is immensely exploitative of the other social groups. Through its absolute monopoly of power and unrestricted control over the means of production and property of the state, it is in a position to divert a disproportionately large share of the social product to the achievement of its political objectives, and at the same time to secure a higher personal income for its members. These advantages would be reduced if a larger proportion of the social product were to be applied to economic investment and mass consumption. As a result there is a marked conflict of interest within the "leading cadres" between the power elite and the managers of the economy, who aspire to a greater recognition of economic factors in policy-make-up and to an expansion of industrial autonomy as well as "personal property." Even deeper is the conflict of interest between the ruling elite and the prestige elite, which seeks to enlarge the sphere of individual freedom through curtailment of the omnipotence of the state.

The managers of the economy and most members of the prestige elite, in exercising their leadership functions, hold state offices. Despite this, they are much closer to the other strata of Soviet society than is the ruling power elite, whose core is the full-time party apparatus. To be sure, social tensions exist not just between rulers and subjects but also between the intelligentsia and the popular masses; yet the latter range of tensions differs in that they are "non-antagonistic," in Marxist terms.

In evaluating the possibilities for social change under the conditions of totalitarian rule, it is irrelevant

in the last analysis whether the intelligentsia (in the narrower sense) is viewed as a distinct class or whether its top group is looked upon as a counter-elite. In either event, the intelligentsia must be regarded as the force pushing the reform efforts associated with "destalinization," which are in part openly directed against the party bureaucracy as the nucleus of the "ruling class." The conflict of roles which marks the existence of the intelligentsia has, to be sure, prevented it up till now from developing that dynamic force that would have enabled Soviet society to embark upon a post-totalitarian phase of evolution.

Given the special position of all those whose role is primarily social leadership in a modern industrial society as opposed to political rulership, would it not be appropriate to conclude, as Rolf Dahrendorf, the German sociologist, has done, that the social conflict arising out of the very structure of rule constitutes the most productive source of social change, and that the social change can only come in the form of a revolutionary upheaval?¹³ In the opinion of this author, this theory has much to recommend it, in that it correctly points to the constant danger posed to the rulers by a party which—as the only authorized political organization in the country—may itself become the breeding ground of revolutionary trends and movements. What it neglects to take sufficiently into account, however, are the pressures for more gradual change exerted by those who exercise functions of social leadership as opposed to political ruling functions. It is these pressures which, once set in motion, cause the gradual erosion of the autocratic-totalitarian system, thus in turn creating conditions for accelerated social change as well.

An important role in this connection is also played by conflict existing within the "ruling class," since this class includes elements which want to have rule interpreted in terms of social leadership. The power elite in the USSR is by no means the unified body it is so often believed to be. There are frictions not only between the party and state bureaucracy, but also between various sectors of the top-level bureaucracy and the mass organizations, especially labor unions, as well as between the bureaucracy and the military. The power elite includes forces, lodged for the most part in the area of the state, which oppose the power monopoly of the full-time party apparatus. The case of Col. Penkovsky shows that this attitude also exists among high-ranking military officers.

¹³ R. Dahrendorf, "Zu einer Theorie des sozialen Konflikts" (Towards a Theory of Social Conflict), *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts und Gesellschaftspolitik*, vol. 3, Tübingen, 1958, p. 90.

The same disunity exists within the party bureaucracy itself where distinctions must be drawn between national, regional and local levels of the apparatus. Stalinist opposition, in essence expressed inertia, is much more pronounced at the district and regional levels than in the central party office in Moscow or in the basic party organizations.

The conflicts which contribute to social change therefore operate horizontally as well as vertically in the power structure. Democratic societies are characterized by free competition among the groups of the elite. Such a situation does not exist in totalitarian societies; yet a limited pluralism of the elite can be noted even within the framework of autocratic-totalitarian systems.

Prospects for Change

Two consequences follow from the present situation. First, the progressive forces in Soviet society, particularly the creative intelligentsia, are making efforts to accomplish a speedy social change through reforms. "Progressive" applies to all social forces which, whether they lean more to the "liberal" or to the "conservative" side,¹⁴ seek a decisive repudiation of totalitarianism. The principal confrontation in this connection takes place within the Soviet upper stratum, involving the top-level bureaucracy on one hand, and the university-trained group among the managers of the economy, together with progressive elements of the party elite, on the other. The upper middle stratum has not been touched by this confrontation to any great extent.

Kosygin's economic reform has brought the managers of the economy greater freedom of action. At the same time, progressive authors, artists, and scientists within the party elite have demanded a

more liberal cultural policy and have courageously denounced all attempts at "restalinization." This situation has compelled the present leadership in the Kremlin, despite the ultraconservative forces still exerting pressure within its ranks, to introduce reforms which sometimes go farther than Khrushchev ever did.

On the other hand, the leadership's fear of more far-reaching experiments is unmistakable. Khrushchev's successors could soften the conflict between the ruling elite and the progressive forces among the intelligentsia only if they were prepared to curtail the permanent and absolute dictatorship of the party and emancipate large areas of social life from party control. This applies especially to the various branches of the humanities and social sciences and the area of literary and artistic creativeness. Such a development would not mean the end of Bolshevik one-party rule, but it would mean a transition from the totalitarian to an authoritarian system. The process would be comparable, for instance, to the transformation of absolutism (at a time in history when despotic features had already diminished greatly) into *enlightened* absolutism. The transformation of totalitarian rule into authoritarian rule, such as projected by the conceptions of reform communism, would be a gigantic step forward from the standpoint of Soviet society. Authoritarianism would mean a type of dictatorship that would be content with the centralization of political power, limited control over some sectors of society, and a skeletal form of planning that would mainly concentrate on the economy. Whether such a development would be a step in the direction of genuine liberalization or even democratization is difficult to foresee; given the strength of Russian nationalism, for example, a form of Russian national communism might in the end adopt fascist features.

The Communist Party, using ideology and the methods of totalitarian rule, has always been successful in enforcing unity in the face of class division and in integrating divergent social groups and forces into a single body. This task is becoming increasingly difficult with the growing complexity and, in the sociological sense, greater density of Soviet society. There is a steadily growing number of people who feel that the party, in its totalitarian form, is an obstacle to the continued development of Russia, and who are working toward abolition of the exploitative features of the Soviet class society.

¹⁴ In this writer's opinion, the distinction drawn by Brzezinski between "leftists," "centrists," and "rightists" in the political spectrum of the USSR relies on an obsolete historical pattern. A distinction between "liberal," "conservative," and "restorative" forces would seem more apposite today. Among the "conservatives" a differentiation can again be made between "liberal conservatives," the conservative "center," and the "ultra-conservatives." The reform wing includes liberal "revisionists" and "liberal conservatives," while the orthodox wing contains both "ultraconservatives" and restorative "dogmatists." Finally, the radicals of both wings also include revolutionaries.

Some Historical Parallels

By Robert Strausz-Hupé

An analysis of change in the Soviet Union should take into account two kinds of phenomena: those that recur in the history of all peoples, and those that are peculiar to the Soviet political and social system.

In the history of all peoples, the passage of time and the procession of generations have brought about radical change to one degree or another. There is no reason to except the Soviet Union from this generalization. The dynamism of contemporary industrial-scientific civilization has accelerated the forces of change that have always been at work in human society. In the United States, this acceleration has been more notable than in any other country. Indeed, some evidence can be adduced to show that the forces making for change in the human condition have operated less freely in the Soviet Union than in North America and Western Europe. The impositions of the Soviet political system have retarded urbanization and the shift of manpower from the agricultural to the industrial and service sector. Had the Russian people been permitted to abide by the workings of a market economy and to follow their own preferences, it is likely that more Russians would now inhabit cities and fewer would tend the soil. The relatively

slow adoption of mechanized farming techniques and the compulsory deployment of the labor force in agricultural development and undercapitalized extractive industries probably have delayed by some twenty years a population shift which, under Western-type conditions of mobility, would have placed four-fifths—rather than three-fifths—of the Soviet population in urban-industrial employment.

Professional revolutionaries and zealous doctrinaires created the Soviet system. Because of circumstances which are peculiar to the phenomenon of violent revolution and to the Russian historical-cultural environment, these professional revolutionaries and doctrinaires have been hanging on to power longer than they might have under conditions of more gradual social and political change—such as obtained, during the last hundred years or so, in Western Europe and North America. Of course, this hypothesis is not testable—but it is not without meaning. In any case, the very violence of the Russian revolution destroyed all alternative elites and gave the revolutionary cadre as absolute a control over the populace as has ever been vested in a numerically minuscule ruling minority.

The power base of this ruling elite has remained, to this day, relatively narrow. The Stalinist and post-Stalinist purges, the heavy toll on all social classes of World War II, and the exclusiveness of the party bureaucracy have stunted the growth of those secondary elites which, throughout Western democratic countries, supply the catalyst and articulation of popular consensus.

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