Twilight of Soviet Totalitarianism?

Isaac Deutscher: *Russia in Transition,*
Howard McCann, Inc.,
New York, 1957.

Reviewed by Leon Gouré

THE SHATTERING of the rigid Stalinist mold once familiar in the Soviet Union has forced Western Sovietologists to reappraise their previous analyses of the nature of the Soviet system and to speculate about its present and future trends. The scholars who debated these problems last summer at St. Anthony's College, Oxford, came to no firm conclusions and left almost as many questions unanswered as were raised in the course of the discussions. Two trends emerged during the conference: one "optimistic," the other "pessimistic." The "optimists," such as Professor Merle Fainsod of Harvard University, were cautiously hopeful that the concessions made by the post-Stalinist regime would in time, with the help of the rising new generation and its successors, bring about an eventual softening and stabilization of the Soviet regime. The "pessimists," such as Mr. Bertram Wolfe, saw little hope for a fundamental transformation of the system.

Mr. Isaac Deutscher is also an "optimist," but one who is far removed from those who met at Oxford. Professor Fainsod, at that meeting, had summed up his view of the Soviet future in these carefully qualified terms:

> I think I see at last some possibility that an oligarchically governed totalitarian state may be transformed over the years into a more traditional type of authoritarian regime which provides at least minimal safeguards for the rights of individuals and groups and makes some adjustments to the plural energies which run in Soviet society.

Mr. Deutscher, on the other hand, declares unequivocally that the USSR is now passing through the "twilight of totalitarianism" on its way to the final goal of the Russian Revolution—the creation of a socialist democratic state. Mr. Fainsod is merely hopeful; Mr. Deutscher is certain and quite prepared to assert his position as dogmatically as he thinks necessary.

Russia in Transition is a collection of fourteen selected articles published by Mr. Deutscher in various magazines since 1948, all but three of which, dealing with the 1955-56 period, had also appeared in book form in England under the title *Heretics and Renegades* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1955). The author's basic thesis had been on record for some time and has already attracted much comment and criticism. His analysis is based on Marxist determinism, a fact which he himself stated in one chapter of the earlier English edition, but which has been omitted from the American version.

IN MR. DEUTSCHER'S view, Stalinism was the product of the objective conditions existing in Russia after 1917 and therefore not only historically necessary, but even desirable. Stalin's rise to absolute power was the direct result of single-party rule, which inevitably evolved into rule by a single faction, supplanted in turn through the domination and destruction of this faction by a single leader. Deutscher further sees Stalinism as the result of the assimilation of "Russian traditions" by a Russian Bolshevism isolated in a capitalist world. To save the revolution, only a ruthless leader could force the primitive, preindustrial Russian society to submit to the massive "primitive socialist accumulation" which alone could lift Russia by its bootstraps to the level necessary for the development of socialist democracy. Thus, Stalin "used barbarous means to drive barbarism out of Russia" and "towards the end of his life, the great pirate of socialism had done his job." Furthermore, Stalinism was possible because of the "deep political lethargy and torpor of the masses" who had expended all their energies in the great battles of the revolution; the élite, faced by constant emergencies and crises, clung to their chief even at the cost of their own lives.

Thus, if Stalinism was evil, it was, in the author's view, an evil born of necessity and serving a commendable ultimate goal. Stalin's only crime was that he persisted

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in the old ways even after they no longer fitted the new social, economic and political stage of Soviet development. In this new phase, Stalinist barbarism was no longer an asset but a serious liability. Consequently, Stalin's death inevitably opened the gates to reform.

DEUTSCHER sees the new Soviet industrial society as subject once again to the Marxist law of class struggle: in this case, between the bureaucracy and the working class. The latter has only in this decade begun to emerge as a modern social and political force of a magnitude hitherto unknown in Russian history. So far, reform has come from above. Destalinization was "an act of the bureaucracy's self-determination," but the benefits accrued to the people as a whole. "The need to rationalize the working of the state machine and to free social relations from anachronistic encumbrances," says the author, "has induced the bureaucracy to favor reform." Mr. Deutscher seems to expect this movement to go on, leading gradually to an extensive transformation of the system. But the ruling group is also anxious to preserve its privileges and therefore is determined to hold "the initiative firmly and not allow its hands to be forced by popular pressure."

On the other hand, the author contends, the revival of the "long-suppressed egalitarian aspirations of the new working class is bringing increasing pressure to bear on the bureaucratic masters. This is only beginning, and Mr. Deutscher expects that the new working class "cannot possibly remain content with the administrative-ideological limitations of the post-Stalinist reforms" and is eventually bound "to give a distinct proletarian meaning and content to the current ideas and slogans of democratization." Told for forty years that they were the rulers of the Soviet Union, the workers "could not help feeling edified, elevated and even flattered by it" but now are coming to realize that they and not the bureaucracy should be the ruling power not just in theory, but in fact. This neither the bureaucracy, nor the intelligentsia, which is also "inclined to preserve the social *status quo*," will presumably be prepared to concede. Hence, says the author, the Soviet people are "getting ready for another world-shaking historical experience."

Mr. Deutscher expects that the outcome of this momentous struggle will be the creation of a socialist democratic society. It will be socialist presumably because the evolution which produced the present economic structure is largely irreversible and because of the egalitarianism of the workers. It will be democratic because, in Deutscher's belief, a highly developed and expanding industrial system, such as that of the Soviet Union, fosters democratic trends. On the basis of these questionable assumptions, the author concludes that "it is the twilight of totalitarianism that the USSR is living through." The outcome thus determined, the world has only to sit back and wait.

There is however, another outcome which, despite its incongruity with his own logical construction, Deutscher recognizes as possible, namely Bonapartism. This may come about, he foresees, as a consequence of foreign threats and of internal unrest resulting from the struggle between the workers and the bureaucracy, in which case the Soviet military leaders may tire of being mere gendarmes for the regime and may themselves seize the reins of power. The author rejects historical inevitability in this instance, denying that the struggle of the new working class must *necessarily* lead to Bonapartism. He evidently bases this on the vague hope that the "formation of a new political consciousness will not lag dangerously behind the revival of mass movements."

Since Mr. Deutscher sets no time limit either on the duration of the "twilight of totalitarianism" or on the completion of the predicted social-political struggle, the validity of his thesis obviously must await the long-term test of history. But unless he expects the reader to accept his analysis simply on faith, he must find some support for it in current developments in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, he seems to rely more on simple assertion than on facts. Thus the key proposition that the working class is now becoming a "modern social force" increasingly ready to challenge the power of the ruling bureaucracy is left without any real substantiation; in fact, it rests above all on the author's mere belief that sufficient time has elapsed for the consolidation of the urban industrial proletariat to make it such a force.

TRUE, THE AUTHOR does cite evidence of the growing egalitarian demands of the workers. It is certain that the Russian workers want an improvement in their living conditions and that they resent the privileges of the ruling group, but this does not mean that their demands can be equated with socialist egalitarianism. Nor is there any proof that the reforms instituted by the leadership in the field of wages, pensions and working conditions were the result of egalitarian demands. It does not follow, for example, that the "abolition of school fees is the rulers' tribute to the new egalitarianism." All such reforms were needed in any case, if the operating efficiency of the expanding Soviet industrial system under conditions of labor shortage was to be improved. The enlargement of labor incentives, also, is not necessarily indicative of the emergence of a class-conscious working-class: rather, the managerial groups favored such reforms since they were, as Deutscher himself admits, the "prerequisite for a steady rise in labor productivity and higher industrial efficiency."

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The author's basic argument concerning the irreversibility of present politico-economic trends in the Soviet Union is founded on the assertions that Stalinism no longer fits the present stage of Soviet social-economic development, and that the new regime has committed itself publicly to anti-Stalinism to such an extent as to be incapable of reversing its course. Mr. Deutscher believes that destalinization, as "an act of the bureaucracy's self-determination," has "exploded the idea of the monolithic party and of the monolithic state": Khrushchev "has exposed not only Stalin but Stalinism, not only the man but his method of government, and this renders the continuation or revival of the method nearly impossible." In support of this belief, he points out that "major policy decisions are not taken by Khrushchev alone" or by the Presidium, but by the full Central Committee in which "free debate has apparently . . . been restored and differences of opinion have been resolved by majority vote." Similarly, the author describes the power of the political police as "broken" but indicates, in somewhat contradictory fashion, that he cannot yet tell whether the "nightmare of mass deportations" has ceased once and for all or only temporarily. The author conceded that Stalinism is being revised by Stalinist methods, by carefully controlled reforms from above which have granted freedom only to the highest ranks of the "bureaucracy," but he confidently predicts that "eventually the higher ranks will either share their newly-won freedom with the lower ranks, or else they themselves must lose it."

A distinction must, of course, be made between the specific character and methods of Stalinism on the one hand, and the totalitarian system on the other. No one can deny that Soviet life today reflects great and significant departures from the specifically Stalinist form of totalitarianism. But this does not automatically imply the end of totalitarianism itself for a long time to come. Transitions of power in a totalitarian society are nearly always a painful and difficult process. Pure Stalinism was incompatible with "collective leadership" and, as pointed out by Mr. Deutscher, only hindered rationalization of the operation of the state and of the Soviet economic machine. Furthermore, since the political police was an instrument of Stalin's personal rule, its down-grading was unavoidable under conditions of "collective leadership." The consolidation of the new regime, even while its members struggled for individual power, had therefore to be achieved by means other than police terror. Since the leadership had to rely for its power on the party and the bureaucracy rather than on the police, and since it faced the problem of maintaining a high rate of industrial growth under conditions of labor shortage, over-centralization and agricultural backwardness, a certain mellowing of the totalitarian dictatorship was probably unavoidable. But the political concessions and economic reforms granted so far have not significantly lessened the one-sided emphasis on the development of heavy industry, while at the same time they have strengthened the role of the party—both essential elements for the preservation of the totalitarian system.

SOVIET SOCIETY cannot simply be divided into two classes of workers and bureaucrats: the interest groups and their relationships to one another are far more complex than that. Above all, one cannot equate the Communist Party with the state and industrial bureaucracy. The party, or political élite, does not represent a social class in the Marxist sense and, despite a certain overlapping with the state bureaucracy, its interests do not, in many instances, coincide with those of the bureaucracy. This is why Khrushchev, while attempting to build up the position of the party, is able to carry out a concentrated attack on the state bureaucracy, shipping thousands of its reluctant members off to the provinces, subjecting them to tightened party supervision, criticism and controls. The defeat of Malenkov's attempt to revise the heavy industry program and Khrushchev's victory over the "anti-party group" in June of this year are also indicative of the party's successful domination of the bureaucracy.

There is, moreover, little indication so far that the working class has had any appreciable effect on the power struggle at the top. Even though, along with elements of the bureaucracy, the working class might have preferred Malenkov's consumer goods program to Khrushchev's renewed favoritism for heavy industry, and although it had every reason to fear the emergence of the party as the dominant instrument of power, it played no noticeable role in the recent developments. In fact, Mr. Deutscher himself acknowledges that at present it is the intelligentsia and, above all, the youth who are leading the assault on Soviet totalitarianism, rather than any specific social class. The widely reported unrest among the youth, in particular, is not surprising since they did not experience the full weight of Stalinist terror and have the most pronounced ideological fervor and romantic hopes. It is not unreasonable to assume that the attitude of the rising generations, rather than of the "new working class" *per se,* will in time exert considerable influence on the development of the Soviet system, but whether it will be in the "right" direction cannot be predicted.

As for Mr. Deutscher's unproved contention that the course of the new Soviet leadership is irreversibly set toward democratization, this is by no means apparent from developments to date. Indeed, reversals in the trend seen by the author have already occurred. Thus,

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his expectations that "collective leadership" would endure and that increasing freedom would be granted to the lower ranks have not been borne out by Khrushchev's successful climb to overweening personal power. Mr. Deutscher may find some consolation in his impression that Khrushchev is "probably still the Russian worker, writ large—the Russian worker who inwardly remained true to himself even in the Stalinist straitjacket," but he cannot ignore the plain fact that this particular "Russian worker" has already begun to curtail the freedom seemingly granted to the Soviet people through destalinization. One by one, the intellectual rebels among the writers, historians, scientists and artists have been made to recant and to re-subscribe to the supremacy of the party line. At a recent gathering of Soviet writers, Khrushchev is reported to have said that the revolt in Hungary would never have occurred if the regime had taken out and shot some of the rebellious writers in the summer of 1956, and that, should a similar situation arise in the Soviet Union, his own hands would not "tremble."[1] The political police (KGB), which is controlled by two Khrushchev adherents, Serov and Lunev, has already begun to arrest the more unruly students and workers. But even admitting that a full-fledged return to Stalinism is unlikely, there is certainly no evidence to support casting Khrushchev in the role of a "liberal" and asserting, as Mr. Deutscher does in one of his recent articles, that he "fights against an opposition that stands in the main for the preservation of totalitarian practices."[2]

Indeed, according to Mr. Deutscher's own analysis, the continuance of single party rule, coupled now with the victory of one of its factions, should logically lead to the emergence of another autocrat. The changes instituted so far have been designed primarily to revive and perpetuate the dynamism and supremacy of the Communist Party. For the present at least, to borrow the author's words, the "edifice of post-Stalinist society has to be built with the bricks left over from Stalinist Russia," which is precisely why the system has shown itself to be stronger than the forces which feared and opposed the emergence of an *apparatchik* "leader." In a totalitarian society each new leader has to build up his own charisma, and destalinization may serve this purpose in Khrushchev's case. Mr. Deutscher himself concedes that "in a sense the man who smashes his idol stands above the one who prostrates himself before it." Whether or not, in the long run, Khrushchev can control the forces which he has helped to unleash and whether he will be able to find a viable solution to the contradictory demands of party supremacy and economic efficiency cannot be predicted at the present time. Much as one would like to share Mr. Deutscher's optimistic view of what the future holds, it is essential to remain aware that his hopes are not convincingly rooted in reality and that Soviet totalitarianism may still be far from its "twilight" stage.

[1] "The Silent Writers of Hungary," *The Times Literary Supplement* (London) August 16, 1957, p. xxii.

[2] Isaac Deutscher, "New Line-up in the Kremlin," *The Reporter,* August 8, 1957 p. 34.

Latin American Communism

Robert J. Alexander:
Communism in Latin America
Rutgers University Press, N. J., 1957.

Reviewed by Victor Alba

UNTIL WORLD WAR II, Latin America was a comparatively little known and neglected part of the world, politically and otherwise. Even Moscow, embroiled in its old world conflicts, paid little attention to the area. The postwar era, however, has brought about a visible intensification of Communist interest in the Latin American countries. Discontent and social antagonisms make all too many of these a vulnerable target for Communist penetration.

The grave implications of this fact emerge in a newly published analytical history of communism in Latin America by Robert J. Alexander, a professor of economics at Rutgers University, New Jersey, who has devoted years of study to the problems and affairs of the area. His volume is a valuable contribution not

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