

# A Mirror of Soviet Reality

Merle Fainsod:  
*Smolensk under Soviet Rule*,  
Harvard University Press,  
Cambridge, Mass., 1958.

Reviewed by Wanda Bronska-Pampuch

AT THE TIME OF my release from the Soviet forced labor camp at Kolyma in 1945, I asked the young criminal prisoner who was attending to the necessary clerical formalities connected with my discharge if I might have a look at my dossier (*delo*). After all, I thought, eight years of imprisonment as a political offender ought to entitle me to that much. A little taken aback, the young man looked up from the folder in front of him, which had my name on the cover, and replied, "No, that is forbidden. Besides, what would you get out of it anyway?" It was useless to press the matter, and so I left the camp without having found out what was in the mysterious file. Did it contain, perhaps, a statement of the grounds for my conviction; an explanation of how the "evidence" against me had been fabricated; or, possibly, a list of those who had informed against me? Much as I should have liked to know the answers, I decided that the young prisoner was doubtless right, and that a look at my dossier would probably have made me none the wiser.

This brings up the larger question of how true a picture of Soviet reality is provided by the documents stored in the massive safes and secret files of the NKVD offices and party secretariats. The ordinary Soviet citizen is inclined to believe that these records hold the answers to all the secrets and mysteries of Soviet life, but in reality they are but fragmentary clues to the citizen's hard existence and the functioning of the system. They

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Mrs. Bronska-Pampuch, who has also written under the pen-name of Alfred Burmeister, is a German journalist of Polish descent. After seven years in the Soviet Union, she was arrested in 1938 as a "spy for Pilsudski," and spent the next eight years in a concentration camp. Her book *Polen zwischen Hoffnung und Verzweiflung* (Poland Between Hope and Despair) has just been published in Germany.

are as diverse and complex as that existence itself—often false or unconvincing, yet sometimes remarkably genuine; frequently grim and terrifying, yet at times uplifting. The overall image pieced together from such fragments can be as true, or again as false, as any picture of the whole based on the observation of individual phenomena; how close it comes to reality depends upon the intuitive, analytical and inductive capacities of the observer.

THE EXCELLENCE OF Mr. Fainsod's study based on the materials contained in the so-called "Smolensk Archive" demonstrates that he possesses these talents in high degree. The Archive, comprising the entire documentary files of the regional CPSU headquarters at Smolensk for the period from the Bolshevik Revolution through 1938, fell into the hands of the Nazi invasion forces in 1941, was removed to Germany, and finally came into American possession at the end of the war. By dint of long and painstaking research, Professor Fainsod has succeeded in weaving this unique body of historical material into a comprehensive and authentic study of the evolution of Soviet rule in the Smolensk region during the first two, formative decades of the Communist regime. But while it is specifically the experience of this small segment of the Soviet Union, with its particular local characteristics, which the author examines, his book in fact illuminates a much broader area. For the Smolensk experience was not merely an integral part, but at the same time a reflection, of the larger experience of the nation as a whole—as the author puts it, "a mirror of Soviet reality" and a "record in miniature" of the emergence of Soviet totalitarianism and its impact on the lives of the people.

The authentic quality of Fainsod's study cannot fail to impress itself particularly upon anyone who lived in the Soviet Union during this period of national transformation. Nor need one necessarily have witnessed the specific developments in Smolensk to recognize this authenticity. The reviewer, for example, lived in the interior of the country and never saw Smolensk or any of the outlying regions. Yet the events portrayed by Fainsod have a

thoroughly familiar ring in that I observed their parallels elsewhere. Even the local officials who drew up the resolutions cited in the book are easily recognizable types whose counterparts were among my own acquaintances.

The author's treatment of the first few years of Soviet rule in Smolensk is perforce sketchy since the Archive itself contained little material covering this period. Only from 1920 on did the documentation start becoming more abundant. One regrets especially that Fainsod fails to bring out the revolutionary emotionalism of the early years. While this gap is probably ascribable to the paucity or shortcomings of the documents rather than to oversight on the author's part, it nonetheless remains true that, without taking into account the element of revolutionary emotionalism or romanticism, the crucial developments of this period cannot be fully understood.

AS THE Bolsheviks consolidated their grip on the reins of power, the circle of people gravitating into the new ruling class began to broaden, radically altering the original revolutionary make-up of the party. Greater stability also brought a more systematic and copious accumulation of documentary records, and through them Fainsod carefully traces the reverberations in the Smolensk region of the great social and political changes which marked the successive stages of Soviet development. Smolensk experiences its first party scandal and the first eruption of internal party opposition. It ushers in the New Economic Policy, marking an interlude of temporary compromise with the old order; then casts it aside as the great campaign of collectivization takes the stage, bringing with it the ruthless crushing of thousands of peasant families who desperately tried to resist. Smolensk also feels the impact of industrialization and the stiffening of labor discipline, and it lives through the grim nightmare of the Stalinist purges.

In all this, Fainsod's book cannot be said to add anything substantially new to the overall picture of Soviet development as already known abroad. Rather, its distinction lies in the fact that it corroborates the picture and fills it in with new detail from source material of a uniquely authentic type never before available. Unlike published Soviet source materials, the documents of the Smolensk Archive are records which were privy to the party and official organs, and not meant for the public eye. They thus afford, as the author puts it, an unparalleled "view from the inside" of the evolving processes of Soviet rule.

One of the most revealing documents cited in the book is a secret directive of May 8, 1933, under the signatures of Stalin and Molotov, which ordered "all party and Soviet workers and all organs of the OGPU,

the courts, and the procuracy" to put a stop to "disorderly mass arrests in the countryside." The directive complained that all sorts of unauthorized persons, even down to subordinate *kolkhoz* officials and secretaries of party cells, were arresting anyone they chose, often "without any basis," and that the "saturnalia of arrests" had swamped the prisons with twice the number of prisoners they could handle. The authorities were therefore directed to "regularize arrests" and to "relieve congestion in the prisons" by reducing the number of prison inmates to 400,000, which was set as the maximum level for the future. The reduction was to be effected, however, mainly through the mass transfer of certain categories of detainees from the prisons to forced labor camps and labor settlements, which the directive specifically exempted from any limitation. This measure actually proved a milestone on the road to a slave-labor economy, for it did not curb arrests, but merely led to the substitution of forced labor penalties for regular imprisonment on an ever-increasing scale. By 1939, when most of the inmates of the so-called *politisolatori* (places of confinement for important political prisoners) were also transferred to forced labor camps, the latter had already swallowed up millions of NKVD victims.

OTHER DOCUMENTS cited by the author are interesting as sidelights on the development of Stalinist practice. One finds, for example, inquiries from lower-echelon party units asking what to do about the deletion of names on the proscribed list from books written by irreproachable authors, or in cases where they were mentioned together with Lenin. The stage in which such inquiries could be made, however, was only a passing one. Later, even to inquire was to risk becoming "suspect", and soon after the beginning of the Great Purge (*chistka*) all published materials containing references to proscribed persons vanished automatically and completely. It is especially to Fainsod's credit that he shows that these and other features of Stalinist dictatorship did not emerge full-blown overnight, but developed progressively, and against opposition not only from the public but even from within the party.

Indeed, as Fainsod stresses, the prevalence of widespread popular discontent and opposition to Stalinist rule is one of the most impressive facts established by the mass of evidence in the Smolensk Archive. It is a fact which is important not only in the historical context, but in the context of recent Soviet development as well. One might well surmise that the reforms instituted by Khrushchev were influenced to a considerable degree by these lessons of the past, so copiously recorded in the party archives. For, from them, Khrushchev can certainly

recognize the past mistakes of the party leadership in hastily imposing measures that proved clearly detrimental to its claims to power. At the same time, he must be particularly apprehensive of a recurrence of the strike movements and other manifestations of worker protest which, as the Smolensk Archive attests, occurred even at the height of Stalinist repression in the 1930's.

PROF. FAINSDOD'S work also provides much valuable and detailed documentation concerning the expanding power of the security police and the functioning of the machinery of law enforcement (a substantial part of the Smolensk Archive consisted of police and judicial records). In a broader sense, too, the book as a whole brings out the close interrelationship between the increasing severity of police and other totalitarian controls and "the imperatives" of rapid industrialization. The author shows how the stifling of discussion not only among the workers in the factories but also within the party organization intensified *pari passu* with the regimentation of the economy along Stalinist lines; in fact, all traces of democratic party life vanished as the industrialization effort reached its apogee. The forced industrial development of the country, accomplished without outside help, thus had the effect of destroying, one after another, all elements of democracy in the political system. Their disappearance went hand in hand with an increasing disregard of the economic needs of the population.

Still, the Smolensk region, though oppressed and unhappy, and though ruled by an inhuman police machine which served as an instrument for the subjugation and terrorization of the local party organization, developed modern industries, mechanized its agriculture, and built schools. By the time of the German invasion, the region, which in 1917 had been one of the more backward areas

of a generally backward country, had vastly changed.

There is, however, nothing incongruous in the Soviet picture of tremendous material progress coupled with an oppressive system of rule. That is, there is no incongruity unless one seeks to find in the system as it has evolved some trace of the concepts of social justice which were part of the original Communist program. But it is abundantly clear that industrial and technological advance, or even cultural progress, do not, *per se*, bring about social justice; at most, they might be considered a starting-point for its attainment. Certainly, the Soviet experience demonstrates this. In order to accomplish large-scale industrialization in an unprecedentedly brief space of time, the Soviet leadership systematically stamped out the original Communist principles of social justice and those who persisted in espousing them. Fainsod's book graphically relates how this was done right down to the remotest village. The Komsomol, too, was purged in order that its members tainted with the early ideals might be replaced by a newer generation impervious to them.

Even so, the attempt at suppression was not wholly successful. With Stalin's death, and with the limited relaxation of totalitarian controls that the Soviet regime was impelled to grant in its wake, there was a rebirth among the young intelligentsia in the Soviet bloc of the early revolutionary ideals of social justice and democratic egalitarianism—ideals which, as events proved, had lost none of their vitality through long suppression under Stalin. Now once again under fire—particularly since Hungary—these ideas nevertheless still spark the imagination of young intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain. It is this sequel that we must bear in mind as we leaf through the pages of Fainsod's masterful account of one of the most brutal chapters in modern history.

### *The Italian Ex-Communists*

ON NOVEMBER 22 AND 23, 1958, an unusual gathering took place in Rome: some 300 ex-Communists, representing various shades of leftist opinion among the hundreds of thousands of Italians who have defected from the Communist Party, met together for the first time in a national convention. The delegates included a large number of former key officials in the party hierarchy, as well as incumbent office-holders at all governmental levels, trade union officials, intellectuals and other notables. The purpose of the convention, as outlined by its organizers, was to discuss the political platform and organizational machinery most suitable to the task of "freeing from the ill-omened influence of the Togliatti-Amentola-Pajetta clan [the PCI top leadership] those proletarians, those intellectuals, those young people who were once at our side and who feel, as we do, the vital need for democracy as being inseparable from socialism, but who still are blinded by the Togliatti myth, by the duplicity of the Italian Communist Party, by the seemingly persuasive and righteous language of the Communist leaders."<sup>1</sup>

This convention—and its outcome, which will be discussed shortly—has added a new element to the Italian political scene; for the growing body of defectors from the PCI must now become not only an object of bitter concern to the Italian Communist Party but also a potential political force to be taken into account by the democratic parties of both the government and its opposition—a force which aims at a reform of the left, in the process "compelling the Communist Party to become something more than a body alien to the interests of the Italian workers and to the life of the nation, a private club of fanatics and expounders of formulas."<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Ranks of "the Disenchanted"**

Considered merely from the standpoint of numerical strength, Italy's former Communists represent the most direct and significant proof of the political and organizational crisis which for years has beset the PCI, particularly since the double impact of Khrushchev's disclosures at the

<sup>1</sup> "Libero Incontro" (Free Encounter), *Corrispondenza Socialista*, November 23, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Eugenio Reale, "Relazione al I° Convegno degli ex Comunisti" (Report to the First Convention of ex-Communists), Rome, November 22-23, 1958.

Twentieth CPSU Congress and of Moscow's brutal actions in Hungary. A few figures will attest to this crisis: according to data supplied by the PCI's organization committee, party membership decreased by 435,478 during the period 1947-57; in the same decade 100,000 young persons who formerly belonged to the Communist Youth Federation allowed their membership to lapse.

The outflow of members has been felt most acutely in northern Italy, where the large industrial centers are located and the working class is active in politics. By contrast, the PCI has remained relatively unaffected in the south-central sections of the country, where the basic source of party strength has been day laborers and poor farmers, who were culturally unprepared to understand the great ideological and political problems posed by the Khrushchev report, the Hungarian revolution, and the events in Poland. A comparison of regional membership percentages confirms the varied course of the party crisis in different sections of Italy. Of the total PCI membership, the north's contribution of 56.95 percent in 1947 has dropped to 53.5 percent today, whereas the proportionate figures for the central and southern regions have risen respectively from 22.5 to 24.1 percent and from 20.55 to 22.4 percent.

The impact of the 1956 events on the party in north Italy merely accelerated a political and organizational crisis which had been going on for years. To cite a few figures, in Turin (where the Italian Communist movement was founded back in 1921) membership in Communist cells operating within factories fell from 31,107 in 1950 to 16,712 in 1955, "thus showing how seriously the organization in industry has been affected."<sup>3</sup> In Milan, 15,713 party members defected from 1948 to 1953, while in the industrial centers of Liguria membership declined 8.5 percent in 1955 alone.

Further proof of the gradual withdrawal of the industrial proletariat from the Communist organization is to be found in the decrease of membership dues collected by party federations (provincial organizations). Last year the central administrative office of the PCI admitted that "with respect to 1955, fully 82 federations have collected

<sup>3</sup> Gillio-D'Amico, "Le forme di organizzazione del Partito nelle fabbriche" (The forms of organization of the [Communist] Party in the factories), *Quaderno dell'Attivista* (published by the CC of the PCI), No. 12, August 1, 1956, p. 9.