

DAVID E. LANGSAM AND DAVID W. PAUL

Soviet Politics and the Group Approach: A Conceptual Note

One of the "Great Debates" among Soviet specialists in the social sciences today concerns the applicability of interest group theory to the study of Soviet politics. Though a large number of specialists have accepted the notion that interest groups do indeed play a certain kind of role in the Soviet system, there are still those who hold to the opinion, once taken for granted but in recent years challenged, that interest group theory simply does not apply to the Soviet Union. The strength of the latter argument lies in the fact that in the USSR interest groups do not operate publicly and openly, as they do in the United States; therefore, interest group theory as developed to fit the American context cannot describe or explain the dynamic processes of policy-making in Russia.

This argument, however, is based on something of an ethnocentric fallacy. For too long a time Soviet specialists have accepted without challenge the theories and definitions of specialists in American (and other Western) political systems. These theories and definitions have, it seems, in themselves excluded the Soviet Union and other authoritarian political cultures from consideration in terms of interest and pressure groups. It is refreshing to see that more and more scholars are now doing interest group studies of Soviet politics, but the argument goes on.

As early as 1908, Bentley wrote that all politics derived from the clash of groups and that only the technique varied in adjusting the differences.¹ He specifically included tsarist Russia in his astute analysis, even though that state lacked legitimate channels of interest articulation and aggregation—not unlike its Soviet successor. We might say that the decisive element in a country's political dynamics is this very matter of "technique," that is, the pattern and style of group interaction within the polity under study. It is the configuration and substance of this "technique" that must be the focus of our attention. But in order to push on with serious studies of interest group politics in the Soviet Union, we must first rid ourselves of the constricting belief that group theory applies only to groups which operate openly and

1. Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government* (Chicago, 1908), p. 216.

straightforwardly within a political culture which not only tolerates, but celebrates, pluralism.

If we can rid ourselves of this notion, then the field becomes at once more interesting and full of possibilities. In addition to the present, the past deserves our scrutiny in terms of group politics; the NEP period comes readily to mind,² but it is conceivable that the Stalin period could also be approached in this light. We must always be careful to adjust our conceptualization of group behavior. It is probably true that for large parts of the Stalin era (1934–41, 1945–53), the “technique” of Soviet politics was that of an extremely centralized elite, perhaps even of what we might call a “one-man elite.” Nevertheless, as Skilling and others have pointed out, even “totalitarianism” is never quite “total.”³ There were factions in Stalin’s entourage, as is illustrated by Conquest’s evidence for the period 1948–53.⁴

As for the present period, the evidence is gradually mounting in favor of the group approach. Skilling’s and Griffiths’s recent book is a case in point. *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* sheds a great deal of light on such political forces as the police, the army, industrial managers, the writers, and others. Similarly, Ploss has examined the role of interest groups.⁵ In foreign policy, Aspaturian has presented an intelligent discussion of the role of interest groups in policy-making.⁶ Content analysis of Soviet elite newspapers has been used since as early as 1964 by Angell, Dunham, and Singer to give empirical evidence of groups, and separate studies by Lodge and Paul have more recently used similar techniques to analyze specific questions involving group self-awareness and policy attitudes.⁷

The argument for focusing on groups is based on several assumptions which deserve explication. The first three have to do with economics. Economic rationality in an advanced society inevitably requires decisions from among different alternative schemes of allocating scarce resources. These

2. David E. Langsam, “Pressure Group Politics in NEP Russia: The Case of the Trade Unions,” Ph.D. diss. (Princeton, 1971).

3. See H. Gordon Skilling, “Interest Groups and Communist Politics: An Introduction,” chap. 1 in H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths, eds., *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 4–5.

4. Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the USSR* (New York, 1967), pp. 79–227.

5. Sidney I. Ploss, “Interest Groups,” chap. 4 in Allen Kassof, ed., *Prospects for Soviet Society* (New York, 1968).

6. Vernon V. Aspaturian, “Internal Politics and Foreign Policy in the Soviet System,” in R. Barry Farrell, ed., *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics* (Evanston, Ill., 1966), pp. 212–87.

7. R. C. Angell, Vera S. Dunham, and J. David Singer, “Social Values and Foreign Policy Attitudes of Soviet and American Elites,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 8 (December 1964); Milton C. Lodge, *Soviet Elite Attitudes Since Stalin* (Columbus, 1969); David W. Paul, “Soviet Foreign Policy and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia: A Theory and a Case Study,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 15 (June 1971): 159–202.

alternative schemes will never deviate from certain material, financial, and ideological limitations; but nevertheless they would, if put into practice, have varying effects on different sectors of the economy. From here it is only a short step to the second assumption, which is that individuals connected with these various economic sectors—primarily plant managers and planners, but also possibly workers—will have certain preferences with regard to the alternative schemes, and will “lobby” in one way or another for these preferences. This leads to our third assumption: the preferences of the various sectors’ representatives (plant managers, etc.) will find sympathetic ears in the hierarchy of the state planning apparatus, upward through the organs of state and party, and ultimately within the highest ranks of the CPSU. All along the way upward the competing interests give rise to lively discussion and debate over the allocation of resources, and it is this very discussion and debate which constitute interest group influence within the economic realm.

A fourth assumption has to do with more general considerations. Simply put, a state as large and as full of diverse peoples as the Soviet Union cannot avoid being confronted by a plurality of different interests and different wills. In some cases, these interests are amorphous and not well articulated, but in others they are more clearly discernible. The Jews are an example of a group whose cohesiveness and articulateness seem to be growing. The peasantry, on the other hand, continues to be disaggregate and voiceless, save to the extent that kolkhoz leaders actually speak for peasant interests. Perhaps an intermediate case might be the non-Russian nationalities living on the perimeters of the USSR, most of whom are represented in the Soviet of Nationalities; collectively the nationalities have some influence over the shaping of legislation, but individually they are virtually powerless.

Finally, a fifth assumption worth considering is one that has often been suggested by John N. Hazard, namely, that certain existing institutional or quasi-institutional structures have the potential to develop into genuine interest groups. Hazard makes this point with specific regard to the military, the trade unions, and the youth, all of which have formal institutional structures at present, and to the members of the legal profession, who do not. In fact, it seems certain that the military elite already functions as a reasonably cohesive and potent interest group, as Kolkowicz has argued.⁸ Curiously enough, Hazard feels that of the remaining groups the legal profession, even though presently unorganized, is the one most likely to develop into a cohesive interest group in the foreseeable future.

In addition to the institutional and occupational groups discussed by Hazard and Kolkowicz, we might also consider the existence of ad hoc groups

8. Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (Princeton, 1971).

which most often correspond to some loose form of opinion groups. Many specialists, including Skilling and Griffiths, believe these informal groups to be more salient at present than the institutional and occupational groups.⁹ Largely because of severe limitations on legitimate factional activities by "official" groups, the more amorphous opinion groups have some greater degree of flexibility. These opinion groups also facilitate temporary cross-cutting alliances among members of several official groups who share common viewpoints in a specific area. Juviler illuminates this phenomenon in the area of family law.¹⁰ Also, *within* certain large interest groups there are often different points of view on issues of concern to the group. This has recently been illustrated with regard to the Soviet military by Monks, who has discovered at least four distinct factions, each with a relatively stable constituency and a technical periodical in which its views are published.¹¹

Many of the previous studies involving group behavior have been descriptive works unconcerned with group theory. Some have been elite studies, Kremlinological analyses, or conflict works.¹² They are all implicitly group studies insofar as they demonstrate the group process through detailed political examples. To borrow the well-known Soviet term, these writers are "objectively" doing group studies. Increasingly, however, specialists are explicitly using the group approach in their work.¹³

But we must return to our discussion of the "technique" of interest groups. There are, of course, many differences between the political cultures of the Soviet Union and the United States. Autonomous, overt voluntary associations based on economic interest or political belief, so common in the United States, are lacking in the USSR. On the other hand, the USSR has many institutional groupings based on authorized structures already in existence. There are also, as we have mentioned, the cross-cutting informal groupings in the Soviet Union. The fact that Soviet groups occur less frequently and

9. H. Gordon Skilling, "Groups in Soviet Politics: Some Hypotheses," chap. 2 in *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics*; Franklyn Griffiths, "A Tendency Analysis of Soviet Policy-Making," chap. 10 in *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics*.

10. Peter H. Juviler, "Family Reforms on the Road to Communism," in Peter H. Juviler and Henry W. Morton, eds., *Soviet Policy-Making* (New York, 1967), pp. 29-60.

11. Alfred L. Monks, "Evolution of Soviet Military Thinking," *Military Review*, 51 (March 1971): 78-93.

12. For example, Jeremy Azrael, *Managerial Power and Soviet Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin* (New York, 1969), and Carl A. Linden, *Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership, 1957-1964* (Baltimore, 1966).

13. Joel Schwartz and William Keech, "Group Influence and the Policy Process in the Soviet Union," in Frederic J. Fleron, ed., *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 298-317; Lodge, *Soviet Elite Attitudes*; Skilling, "Interest Groups and Communist Politics" and "Groups in Soviet Politics"; Griffiths, "A Tendency Analysis"; also Philip D. Stewart, *Political Power in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1968).

are less visible than American groups does not make them less real. Soviet ideology is hostile to interest groups ("factions" in Soviet parlance), but in this aspect, as in so many others, there is and always has been a large gap between theory and practice. We must not let ourselves be misled by the strength and repetitiveness of Soviet objections to the contrary. Even the CPSU cannot run a gargantuan system completely devoid of interest groups which express the heterogeneity of the enterprise.

One of the distinctive features of the American political culture is its toleration and even encouragement of group activity. But even in the United States there are some kinds of group activity that are carried on illegitimately but nonetheless often have important political impact. These activities can range from petty bribetaking on a local or ward level to corruption of various kinds on a national level. A sharp distinction must be made between individual and group activity which is regarded as legitimate in America and that which is accepted *in practice* even though lying outside accepted norms. Such a distinction may be paralleled in the Soviet Union. Without implying that there is any similarity in style, purpose, or scope between illegitimate political practices in the United States and interest group practices in the USSR, we may still be able to see that in each case the aberrant phenomenon exists and has even been unofficially incorporated into the system as a reality in practice. In other words, the aberrant phenomena are facts of life, whether hated or loved.

The existence of group politics in the Soviet Union does not by any means indicate the beginnings of any sort of "democracy" as we know it in America, even if Soviets fear such "factionalism" as a mark of bourgeois decadence. The continuing authoritarian and nondemocratic character of the political system mirrors the nature of the larger Soviet society. The connection of groupism with political pluralism and, by extension, with democracy is a fallacy that seems to be accepted by many scholars, if only in an unstated way. The "technique" of group politics must be seen on a continuum in which one end tends toward the democratic methods known in the United States and kindred states and the other end toward various kinds of authoritarian states, including the Soviet Union. It is not interest group politics, but the *type* of interest group politics, that will determine whether or not a system is "democratic."

What is being said here is that political systems in general are systems of group politics. This concept is not "American" at all, for, as we have argued, group politics and "democratic" politics are far from being indissolubly bound together. It is not group politics that distinguishes the United States from the USSR (or any other state) but the way in which it is conducted. It is not the reality of interest group politics that is uniquely American or Western; the idea that group politics is uniquely American

(or Western) is an ethnocentric misconception. Moreover, American politics is far more than merely group politics. America's peculiar political culture is evident in the "Barnum and Bailey" style of politics so colorfully described by the late V. O. Key.¹⁴ This style—overt, spontaneous, even raucous—is peculiar to the United States. It has little to do with interest group politics, strictly speaking, and any characterization of the American political scene without reference to it is incomplete.

Because American politics is more than group politics, group politics is in itself not the secret of American democracy. Rather, the relationship is in the opposite direction: the group process takes the form it does—overt, legitimate, and energetic—because America *is* democratic. In other words, the "technique" of the group process is a manifestation of the American political culture. In the same way, albeit with opposite results, the group process in the Soviet Union—covert, limited, and theoretically illegitimate—is a manifestation of the Soviet political culture.

One further point. America's political culture is much more of a "mass" political culture than is the Soviet Union's. One of the most significant functions of democratic elections, and indeed of our civil liberties in general, is to restrict the privileges of special interests and make possible a "dispersion" of political influence. As we know very well, the system is far from a perfect model, but it is by no means totally ineffective in bringing about such a "dispersion" effect. The Soviet political culture, on the contrary, is one which in practice allows special-interest groups to flourish at the expense of mass interests. Special interests command a relatively larger share of the resources—and of political influence—than their counterparts in the United States do. In this respect we might even say that the Soviet system is, curiously, more conducive to interest group power than the American system is.

Americanists, it seems, have never fully realized or appreciated what Bentley meant by the universal applicability of his principles.¹⁵ The theory of interest group politics in its essence has never been parochial, even though its application has been traditionally limited to Western systems. The entry of Soviet specialists into the field of group studies has helped to clear up the resultant confusion and to show Americanists (as well as Sovietologists and other scholars) how group theory is indeed applicable to, and even subsumes, all potential systems under study. It has also helped bring to the fore a frequent admonition by Robert C. Tucker that Americanists have tended to overlook the fact that they too are area specialists.

14. V. O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, 5th ed. (New York, 1964).

15. For an exception to this generalization about Americanists see David B. Truman's introduction to the paperback edition of *The Governmental Process* (forthcoming), pp. 10 and 13.