

COMMUNISM IN RUSSIA TODAY

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ONE is always tempted to view the Communist order, as it exists in Russia today, as something essentially static. But Communism does not differ from other orders: it is subject to the same eroding process of time.

The Communists themselves firmly believe that the 'contradictions' inherent in the capitalist order are insoluble, and that, sooner or later, they are bound to bring about the downfall and disintegration of the bourgeois society. They admit the existence of certain conflicts in their own society, but claim that these conflicts are merely the natural outcome of the eternal struggle between old and new elements. A closer scrutiny of these conflicts reveals, I think, that their character is far more serious than the Communists would be prepared to admit. Indeed they constitute a grave danger to the continuation of the régime as we know it. Four of these conflicts—one in the sphere of foreign policy and three in that of domestic affairs—may be usefully considered.

The contradiction which exists in the field of foreign policy is a comparatively simple one. The Soviet Union tries to pursue two contradictory aims at one and the same time, that of expansion and that of isolation.

The expansion is an essential element of the Communist doctrine of the world revolution. This expansion requires a great number of Soviet citizens to be stationed abroad. Their stay abroad implies close acquaintance with the outside world; the penetration of certain ideas and attitudes alien to their original Communist attitudes. At the same time, ever since 1948 at least, perhaps even earlier, there has been the doctrine of isolationism, the doctrine that the bourgeois world, the non-Soviet world, is an evil thing against which the citizens of the Soviet Empire ought to be guarded. Therefore contacts with foreign countries of all types are cut off; any exchange of students, of scholars and of publications is banned; only selected delegations of reliable people are permitted to visit the Soviet Empire, and only favoured people are allowed to go abroad on official visits. Either of these two policies on its own is consistent enough.

What is illogical and inconsistent and fraught with danger from the Russian point of view, is the attempt to pursue both these policies at once. You cannot both expand and isolate yourself. That is one aspect of Soviet foreign policy on which I can only touch here, but it reflects a very grave contradiction which makes nonsense of much of Soviet policy.

Much more involved are those conflicts and contradictions which exist in the domestic field. There is first of all the question of nationalities. When the Russian Revolution occurred in 1917, the old Czarist Empire was a multi-national State. It consisted of one dominant nationality, the Russians—or Great Russians as they are called—belonging to the Slavonic race, and a large proportion of non-Christian populations.

The Bolsheviks argued that the Czarist Empire was what they called 'a prison of nations'; they claimed that the national minorities would be liberated from the colonial yoke. They implemented a number of reforms, which seemed to point in this direction. They formed something approaching a federal structure for the country. They introduced teaching in the languages of the Republics in question in secondary schools and in Universities. Publication in the vernacular languages of books and newspapers was allowed. The growth of a local intelligentsia was encouraged. The Bolsheviks particularly insisted on new textbooks of history and the history of literature, in which the histories of these minority peoples were presented in quite a different way from that of the official old Czarist version—that is, the struggle of these peoples was extolled as a struggle against colonisation or conquest by the Czarist Empire. This course was pursued up to the middle thirties.

Then a change occurred, for reasons which are too complex to be analysed. There came an upsurge of Russian nationalism, not Soviet nationalism, but Russian nationalism. After all, the Revolution was achieved in the first place by the dominant people of the Empire, the Russians, and also in the first place in their territory. The territories on the outskirts of the Empire were acquired or conquered and integrated into the Soviet Empire later, during and after the Civil War, and the Russian achievement during the first five-year Plan, with

the construction of a great many factories and railways, bridges, dams and so on, must have increased the awareness of the Russian people as such of their special contribution to the new order.

The Soviet Government and the Party, who have a very sure instinct in these matters, noticed this upsurge of Russian nationalism and canalised it into channels which they considered to be useful from their point of view, and that brought conflict with the smaller nationalities of the Soviet Union. From then onwards it was no longer allowed to extol the national heroes of these peoples, who resisted the Russian conquest. If you look at history textbooks published in Russia now, you will see that the same people who in the twenties or early thirties were praised as having been the fore-runners of the Revolution have by now become something quite different. They are described as agents of Britain or of Turkey, foreign imperialists, who misunderstood the real yearnings of their own nations and fought against Russia, whereas the only natural course for their people was to join the Russian Empire.

All these nations should have known that only by being united with the Great Russian people would they have a chance of being liberated in 1917.

Now this is a change at the top in Moscow, and a change, in a way, of the attitude of the Russian people, but it must be remembered that slightly under half of the population of the Soviet Empire is made up of non-Russian nationalities. All these non-Russian nationalities cannot be expected to forget from one day to another all that they had been taught for twenty-five years or so. They still, by habit, occasionally praise their heroes, the same heroes who were acknowledged as such up to fifteen years ago, and that brings them into conflict with the central power. The Soviet reforms have brought about a great revolution in education in various backward parts of the Russian Empire, but the new intelligentsia is now being persecuted and told to change its views, and history textbooks are now being re-written all over the Soviet Empire. That is a very real conflict.

You can take administrative measures, you can order people to change their textbooks, but you cannot alter their

views and sentiments. You cannot, first having encouraged the patriotic pride in the past, now ban this pride and proscribe it as if it were a crime. That is indeed a very serious potential conflict, a contradiction between two types of nationalism—one, the very powerful Great Russian nationalism, with the Russians claiming that they are the leader nation in this family of nations as they call it, and the other that of nationalities resenting this monopolistic attitude of the Russian people.

That is the first contradiction existing inside the Soviet Empire, and though it is slightly beyond the framework of my subject, obviously this clash of rival nationalisms extends to the satellite peoples who are bound to come, sooner or later, into conflict with the dominant Russian nationalism, and we have seen that in one particular case, that of Yugoslavia, it has already happened; she has severed herself from Russia precisely because of this state of affairs.

The second conflict concerns the peasantry. Here again, the conflict is of the Soviets' own making. When the Revolution happened, it happened against all the rules of Marx in theory. Marx predicted that the proletarian revolution would happen in highly industrialised societies, such as the England he knew.

Russia in 1917 was far from being an industrial country; the main bulk of the country was the peasantry. The peasants had no desire for a proletarian revolution; they were interested in the land that they were tilling, but which they did not own. Lenin knew very well that he would not succeed if he did not attract the peasants, so the slogan he used in 1917 was 'Peace and Land'. It worked miraculously. The peasants went back to their villages, and divided up the land that had belonged to the squires.

The twenties was perhaps the happiest time in the bitter and tragic history of the Russian peasantry. For the first time they were the masters of the whole countryside. But from the point of view of the Soviet Government, it was a complete loss; having dealt with a numerically very weak stratum of capitalists in the towns, they suddenly found themselves faced with millions of small capitalists in the villages. The peasants were not interested in industrialism,

they were interested in selling as much as they could, and selling at as high a price as possible.

The ambitious programme the Communists laid on could not be carried out as long as there was not enough cheap bread. Marx and all his followers were always obsessed by big structures. Their theory was based on the production of large units, huge factories, trusts and concerns. Socialism would be operating the same technique in production units as capitalism did before. All this provided Marx and Lenin and Stalin with a yearning for large production units. They could not abide all these innumerable small households as they existed in the countryside.

So the greatest social upheaval that has ever taken place in Russia was planned, namely, the collectivisation of the peasantry. At a tremendous cost of millions of lives and tens of millions of livestock, it was carried out between 1929 and 1932. It carried in its wake two disastrous famines, because, having destroyed all the old farms, the Bolsheviks were not able to organise the new farms quickly enough. But the cost did not matter. The programme must be carried out, and the collective farms were formed. Gradually the peasants, though never acquiescing in this state of affairs, had to give in.

The collective farms differ, of course, vastly from one another. Some are extremely backward and poor; others in fertile parts of the country are flourishing—as co-operatives, not from the individual peasant's point of view, of course. The co-operatives as such have developed into something very powerful, indeed into something that is more powerful and more effective than the Communist leaders would like them to be. In his latest pronouncement, published on the eve of the nineteenth Concourse of the Communist Party in October 1952, Stalin deals with this problem. He is perturbed by the fact that the collective farms are allowed to sell their surplus produce on the free market. The main bulk of the produce is surrendered to the State at very low prices, in fact it is a form of tax. The price is absurdly low, and the Government re-sells it then at a tremendous profit to the workers in the towns.

But a fair proportion of the produce remains in the hands

of the collective farms. It is used for other purposes; the machine and tractor stations have to be paid for in kind, and so on, and the individual farmers get their share according to the work they put in. It is the grain that is distributed among the collective farmers which is sold on the free market. We are so used to considering the Soviet Union as a State where everything is in the hands of the State (and in most cases it is), but there is this one exception, namely, the sale by the farms and the collective farmers of the produce on the free market, where they can compete with the State. Stalin is perturbed by this state of affairs; he says it cannot be allowed to go on. 'We are still', he says, 'in the stage of Socialism, and Communism will be reached only after these attributes of capitalism are eliminated, and as long as the farms are allowed to sell the produce freely, this has not yet been achieved.' So he suggests that this whole system should be abolished, and a system of barter installed. The farms should surrender all the produce to the State, and instead should get industrial goods. But, he says, that for the time being is impossible, since the State does not produce enough goods for this type of economy.

But there is another conflict between the Soviet and the collective farms, many of which are by now aware of their strength and prosperity, and of their influence on the economic life of the State. There is the conflict between the peasantry, which is still, whatever administrative form the collective farms take, living in the old eternal rhythm of the earth and soil. Their lives still depend on the weather, on the land, and all other natural conditions. The Communists, who are urban, and whose starting point is always the co-operatives as such have developed into something approaching the factory workers. So the struggle goes on.

The third conflict is a very interesting process which has been going on for the last twenty years: the growth and the birth of a new leading class in the Soviet Union. Soviet Communism started as a declaration that in the State everybody is equal. And during the first stages of the Communist régime this process of equalisation was pursued fanatically. But human nature being what it is, nothing could prevent the gradual building up of a new privileged class—a class

described vaguely enough as an 'intelligentsia'.

The members of this intelligentsia have now acquired a class consciousness of their own. They are very much aware of what they are: they are the people who run Russia now. In a centralised industrial state such as Russia has become, you need a great many experts such as engineers, managers, scientists, people who deal with agriculture, and so on. There are thousands of professions now which did not exist in old Russia, and these millions of people are the people with the 'know-how'. They run Russia, and they are aware of it. As an individual, every person is at the mercy of the Party. If he is unlucky, he will lose his job and go to a camp. But collectively they are now a force which the Party can no longer control.

An interesting illustration of the effect of this conflict may be taken from the field of literature. What is happening in Russia now is that literature is being written by members of the intelligentsia for and about themselves. No play or novel which deals, say, with the workers or peasants, can hope to achieve a high sale in the Soviet Union. High sales are guaranteed only to those novels portraying some event in the life of the intelligentsia—perhaps how the war affected their lives, perhaps some sexual problem, but always it is the intelligentsia that wants to see itself mirrored in literature. That is a very important test. The intelligentsia is like a Narcissus, fascinated by its own reflection; and the writers obey.

That is another potential conflict. We have no means of knowing what the young people who belong to this class really think. But it would be a safe guess to suggest three things that they want to be put into focus. First of all, they obviously want a greater freedom of movement. I have heard from people who have come back from Moscow that there is one question which defeats every Russian. They will be very dogmatic on anything dealing with social or industrial progress, they will say that Russia is at present the strongest and most progressive country, but when you ask them why they are not allowed to travel freely abroad, they have no answer. In the old days, not only before the Revolution, even up to the end of the twenties, going abroad was the favourite hobby

of the Russians. In nineteenth-century literature, the two types of inveterate travellers were the English and the Russians. This tradition is still alive. In the twenties, every self-respecting Soviet official used to go abroad for holidays and for business trips—it was the thing to do. So it is not quite a thing of the immemorial past. That yearning, of course, pre-supposes a friendlier foreign policy.

The second point is the quite natural desire for safety from arbitrary arrest—some sort of legal guarantee against the present state of affairs when anyone can be arrested and sent to a camp without trial. That is again so natural, so human, that I think we can anticipate that this second point is one on which the intelligentsia would insist if it had a greater proportion of power.

The third is more debatable. Some people say that at present, although the earnings of the intelligentsia are enormous, there is nothing to spend the money on, and they would like to be able to spend it in a way in which it is spent in other countries—on houses or investments perhaps. Some people who claim to have a good knowledge of Soviet Russia assure me that this is a very natural desire among the Soviet intelligentsia.

These, then, are the three internal potential conflicts as I see them. The conflict between the dominant nationalism of the Great Russians, and the suppressed nationalism of the minorities; the struggle between the State and the peasantry, who want two different things—the State trying to obtain as much cheap grain as possible from the peasants, and the peasants interested quite obviously in different aims; and the growing awareness of the intelligentsia, which is distinct from, or only partly coincides with, a ruling bureaucracy.

None of these conflicts is likely to yield quick results, but I would like to suggest that we tend to overlook the changing face of Communism inside Russia. We all tend to consider Communism, and Communism in Russia particularly, as something static, as something that has been there for thirty-five years, and that is going to remain there unless it is overthrown by a catastrophe. It may not have changed much, but it is changing all the time, and the changes are not only in the direction of greater strength.