

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 3, Number 11

Western Theories on the USSR

Disgruntled Moscow intellectuals have misled Western Sovietologists about the state and direction of reform, according to Jerry Hough, professor of political science at Duke University. Speaking November 20, 1989, at the Columbia University Seminar on Comparative Communism, Hough faulted scholars of the USSR for believing rumors rather than relying on their own interpretations and theories.

As a result, he said, the field has shifted a full 180 degrees away from totalitarian theory to one based on notions of a "social contract" and a dominant bureaucratic class. For a more realistic assessment, Hough urged scholars to abandon the image of a conservative bureaucracy and to see that the existence of an ambitious Soviet middle class virtually guarantees the success of *perestroika*.

Theoretical Turnaround

The totalitarian school dominated Western scholarship on the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 60s. This theory described totalitarian movements as extremist, succeeding best in times of enormous insecurity. The Nazi regime, for instance, was seen as a product of the tumultuous 1920s. In this view, Stalinism arose naturally from the Revolution, which was a violent, abnormal event. Bureaucrats were "atomized" as much as everyone else. The essence of the totalitarian ideology was one of sacrifice — "it rejected trade union consciousness and the desire for a higher living standard."

At the end of the 1970s, a Marxian view of the USSR came to predominate among Western scholars. Emigré intellectuals such as Isaac Deutscher "took a simplistic, dogmatic view of Western capitalism and simply reversed it and applied it the Soviet Union." They posited that those who owned the means of production were the privileged ruling class, to which the state was subordinate, and whose interests were protected and defended by ideology. In contrast to totalitarian theory, the bureaucrats "were no longer a part of repressed society, but became the ruling class — one that

had all the simplistic characteristics of Stalin's capitalist class." The political leadership was no longer seen as dominating society, but as a superstructure that reflected the interests of the bureaucracy.

This new analysis substantiated the view of Harvard historian Richard Pipes "that Russians are naturally authoritarian and that periods of reform are what is unnatural." There was some acknowledgement that "workers were doing fairly well, that there was a social contract giving them authoritarianism and security and everything was fine." The stagnation of this period was either a reflection of the wishes of the dominant, bureaucrat class or the Russian desire for an authoritarian welfare state.

"There Is No Working Class"

The striking thing about the shift in theoretical perspective, as Hough sees it, is that the images of totalitarian and social contract theory are poles apart. Naturally, these different theories led Sovietologists to make different predictions. If the social contract satisfied a wide range of people, "then one would predict, and many did predict, that nothing was going to change under Brezhnev's successor." The common perspective was that any attempt at change would be met by overwhelming conservative opposition.

Totalitarian theory describes a society that is a product of the early stage of industrialization. In contrast, Hough noted that the USSR now has a large middle class, which "wants democracy and liberalization, just like the middle class in any Western country." In 1964, 24 million Soviets had a high school diploma or better; today it is 125 million. "Instead of saying a middle class is created, as we did earlier, now we call it a privileged bureaucracy which doesn't care if it's repressed."

"If we had looked at our assumptions more carefully," Hough said, "we would have been less surprised about current changes." It generally bodes ill for democracy if only a lower-middle class exists; at best there will be a troubled



history of reform. Similarly, a strong middle class presents problems for a dictatorship. "We don't apply these universals to the Soviet Union," he complained. "We don't listen to our own theories and experience."

Hough related a number of accepted Western social science theories to the current situation in the USSR. On class theory, for example, he found the very question of worker attitudes toward reform to be a "simplistic Stalinist class analysis." He said that we in the West know "that there is no working class. It is a revolving door that some people enter while others leave." Many young Soviet workers on the assembly line want to be small shop holders. The number of co-ops had gone from 1.4 million in January 1989 to 2.9 million in July. First and foremost, "the vast majority of these new entrepreneurs are young men. Why should they stay in the factory and revolt when they can enter the petty bourgeoisie?"

Most revolutions start with a military coup or with actions taken by young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. In the USSR today, older people are frightened by Gorbachev's reforms, since they have no guarantee against inflation. But to the young, "Gorbachev is offering them the chance to enrich themselves." Gorbachev's contract is with the strong; Brezhnev's was with the weak. "If Gorbachev buys off all those with ambition, talent and drive," asked Hough, "who is going to lead the revolution?"

Colonies vs. Territories

With regard to international relations theory, Hough presented two "absolute" rules. First, when one people control another outside their borders, they almost always let them go. "What we normally call a colony," Hough noted, "is not economically or politically advantageous." The accurate prediction should have been that the Soviet Union would allow its East European holdings to go, since Soviet relations with Austria, Finland and West Germany were more favorable than those with Poland, Hungary and East Germany. "Those who don't think Gorbachev will permit a re-united Germany," Hough asserted, "don't understand current political processes." The real danger to Russia is the fact that both India and China have nuclear weapons and are forging ahead. "If you took realist theory of international politics seriously," said Hough, "you would see that the problems for the USSR are not in Europe, but in Asia."

The second absolute rule to remember is that territories within a country's borders are almost never relinquished, no matter what pressure builds up. This bodes ill for the popular fronts and nationalist groups that have arisen in many Soviet republics. Yet if East German soldiers could not be counted to fire on their own citizens, would Soviet soldiers fire on Estonians or Lithuanians? Hough said that one needs only to remember the massacre in Georgia last April.

Reported by Judith Sedaitis

A New Harriman Institute Occasional Paper:
Present Realities versus Future Possibilities

by Marshall D. Shulman

To order, send a check or money order for \$3 (made out to Columbia University) to "Occasional Papers" at the below address

Harriman Institute
Columbia University
420 West 118th Street
New York NY 10027