THE AMERICAN VIEW OF RUSSIA

by William Zimmerman

There are now more American specialists who know much more about the U.S.S.R. than did their counterparts 30 years ago—or than their counterparts knew about Tsarist Russia prior to the Revolution in 1917.

But their knowledge is not widely disseminated; consequently, numerous misconceptions about the Soviet Union persist in the United States. Indeed, the gap in knowledge between academic specialists and others professionally preoccupied with the Soviet Union—policy-makers and journalists, for example—is often substantial.

This is not to say that the academic specialists themselves do not have what historian Adam Ulam calls "skeletons in their filing cabinets." For despite their substantial progress in accumulating knowledge, American scholars who study the Soviet Union have had their share of misconceptions, biases, and blunders.

What I shall try to do here is to discuss what those misconceptions have been, give the reader some idea of why it is so difficult to acquire knowledge about the Soviet Union (even though we have become better at it), and note several misperceptions of the U.S.S.R. that appear to me to be widely held in the United States. The only way to begin is by taking a step or two backward.

The Early Years

During the period between World Wars I and II, any Americans who wanted information about Soviet rule would have benefited from W. H. Chamberlin's *The Russian Revolution*, which remains one of the best books on that subject. By reading Samuel Harper's *Civic Training in Soviet Russia*, they could have got a sense of the process of political socialization. But on the whole, there were few scholars in the field, and their studies were often distortingly legalistic. As Ulam has remarked: "The average Anglo-

American academician approached categories like 'the police state,' 'terror,' and 'totalitarianism' with the same trepidation and distortions as the Victorian novelist felt when he had to allude to the sexual act." Americans in the 1930s who wanted to know about the Soviet system would have been better off reading the novels of Arthur Koestler or—if they had been available in English—the emigré journals of the Mensheviks.

After World War II, the situation changed drastically. With the onset of the Cold War, American research on the U.S.S.R. burgeoned, thus illustrating, perhaps, that scholarship, rather than trade, follows the flag. An impressive array of scholars and scholarship emerged. What had been a trickle of competent American scholarship in the 1930s became a freshet and then a flood—thanks largely to the pump-priming of major foundations and the U.S. government. At a few universities, great centers of professional competence on the Soviet Union developed. Under the auspices of Harvard's Russian Research Center alone, well over 30 books appeared in the 1950s, including Merle Fainsod's *How Russia is Ruled* (1953), a landmark in the development of Soviet studies. [See Background Books, page 128.] An increase in quality and sophistication accompanied the growth in quantity. American scholars had become—without doubt—the world's most competent repository of detailed information about the periods of high Stalinism (1936–41 and 1947–53).

A Darker Side

But there was a dark side to the picture of American Soviet studies in the 1940s and 1950s, just as there had been between the two World Wars. Scholars' conceptions of the Soviet system too often led them to extrapolate from the periods of high Stalinism to other periods of Soviet history. To be charitable, it should be noted that the disposition to extrapolate the universal from the time-defined particular is a natural human failing.

How did such extrapolations cloud American scholarship on the Soviet Union in the 1950s? And what effect have they had in this decade?

First, analysis by American specialists in the early 1950s frequently ruled out even the possibility of many of the significant changes which occurred in the Soviet Union following Stalin's death in 1953. All too often they implied that the Soviet system was nonreactive to the external world (except in the most mechanical sense) and that it was able to mobilize the entire society to the regime's purposes while remaining insulated from the influence of all domestic constraints.

The general picture they painted in the 1950s was of a static, self-perpetuating, totally politicized Soviet Union in which "politics" did not exist (except during a succession crisis set off by a dictator's death). The aversion to terms like totalitarianism and terror had been more than overcome. It was widely asserted that terror was the linchpin of the Soviet system; that mass purges were a permanent feature of the Soviet system; that the Soviet leader, like the Tsar, dies in office; that the outcome of a succession crisis would inevitably result in an omnipotent dictator; that (given the party-state's monopoly over the means of communication and violence) major overt dissent was inconceivable; that in foreign policy there *had* to be a main enemy, the United States; that the shifts in Soviet foreign policy (and in what was perceived as the monolithic world communist movement) were to be understood to turn almost totally on the question of which states—among those not then in either the U.S. or Soviet camp—to align with and for how long.

Extrapolating the Unextrapolable

Second, there was a tendency by Americans to extrapolate findings based on a reading of the record of high Stalinism to other periods of Soviet history. Consequently, the distinctions between the Leninist and Stalinist periods were often obscured, and the entire Stalinist period was treated as whole cloth. There was, in short, a systematic bias which led Soviet specialists to believe that change—at least change uncontrolled by the regime—was not possible. (Alexander Dallin, Stanford University's distinguished student of Soviet foreign policy, says that he once asked an American Soviet specialist about the likelihood of fundamental change in the Soviet Union. To which the specialist replied: "It won't happen—but if it does, I'll be sure to miss it.")

Why was American scholarship on the Soviet Union so static

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and faulty in the 1950s? Dallin attributes part of it to an "intuitive and often well-founded belief" that no one ever "incurred a risk to his professional reputation by taking a hard line—even if later such a posture proved to have been unwarranted." Then, of course, there was the very human desire to avoid being wrong—or, even worse, ignored. Anxiety on this score was undoubtedly magnified by the fact that widely predicted changes did not occur (such as "the great retreat" politically, which, it was asserted, would accompany the turning away from the radical social patterns of post-revolutionary Russia). American specialists were also guilty—unwittingly—of accepting too readily Soviet depictions of the Soviet Union; thus, Stalin's claims of monolithic unity found their reflections in the American scholar's image of a Soviet Union characterized by absolute control and a hierarchy in which politics was absent. Finally, a major role must be accorded the temper of the times—the context of the Cold War. One can make this point more systematically, but I have always thought the atmosphere was epitomized by a typographical error contained in the introduction to one of the most influential studies of totalitarianism. It said: "This issue runs like a red threat through all the papers and discussions. . . ."

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Soviet studies advanced rapidly. The concentration of expertise continues today in political science, history, and Slavic language and literature, but the shortage of sociologists, anthropologists, and economists persists. Geographically, the diffusion of expertise has proceeded apace. Whereas in the 1950s concentrations of Soviet specialists could be found only at Harvard and Columbia, centers equally capable of sustained research are now operating at Michigan, Indiana, Chicago, Wisconsin, Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, and Washington; and serious work is also being done at numerous other schools.

Access to the Soviet Union has also broadened. While historians have comprised a disproportionately high percentage of the scholars visiting the Soviet Union, some sociologists, economists, and political scientists have also had lengthy research stays there. Such a pattern was inconceivable in the 1950s. But the problems of data availability remained exceedingly difficult. Even by contrast with Yugoslavia or Poland, for instance, the time and effort required to obtain data remained staggeringly large, to say nothing of the problem of "disinformation"—memory holes and deliberate misrepresentations of events. Only in the recent past has there emerged the beginning of concrete sociological investigation of Soviet society by Soviet sociologists—research of the sort conducted by Yugoslav and Polish social scientists for two decades now. Systematic mass surveys of political attitudes in the Soviet Union by Americans and by collaborative teams of American and Soviet social scientists are not even on the horizon. The aggregate data sources—statistical yearbooks and the like—remain incomplete (and, by Yugoslav and Polish standards, methodologically primitive). Yet in recent years an American specialist on Soviet foreign policy could obtain access to unpublished dissertations or conference papers and could interview specialists on Soviet–U.S. or Soviet–Third World relations in the institutes of the Academy of Sciences; the student of local government could interview local government and party officials, and a sociologist with sufficient *chutzpah* could sit in the browsing room of a police station reading an unclassified police journal unavailable in the West.

The easing of the Cold War, changes in the Soviet Union itself, and developments in the social sciences had their impact on the general orientation of American specialists on the Soviet Union. The U.S.S.R. and its basic organizational structure were depicted in developmental terms of adaptation and coöptation. The Communist Party, long regarded as an instrument of repression that would have a decreasing role in an increasingly modernized Soviet Union, came to be viewed as performing what Professor Jerry Hough of the University of North Carolina termed a prefectural role in ensuring and expediting plan fulfillment and in adjudicating competing claims for resources. With the publication in 1963 of *Stalin's Foreign Policy Reappraised*, by Columbia professor Marshall Shulman, the reactive tendencies of Soviet foreign policy began to receive proper emphasis.

The New Crop of Specialists

The 1960s and 1970s have produced a whole new cadre of Soviet specialists who are less preoccupied with immediate policy relevance. These scholars also have extensive research experience in the U.S.S.R., as well as a thorough acquaintance with the methods and approaches of their respective social-science disciplines.

But unlike the dénouement of a Soviet novel, there is no assurance that this story will have a happy ending. Due partly to a vague expectation that peace will break out between the United States and the Soviet Union, partly to a legitimate new emphasis on domestic U.S. concerns, there has been a marked decrease in public attention to Soviet affairs in recent years—and in the availability of research funds as well. Although there has been some reversal in the trend of declining support over the last year or so, the decrease has led to the underutilization of research capabilities at the university centers. Moreover, at many universities, specialists in Soviet anthropology, economics, and sociology are not being replaced when they leave. And these are the fields where the need for analysts is greatest.

As for the current state of the art, the pendulum may have swung too far in a new direction. Whereas a major flaw in the 1950s was the unthinking use of Stalinist concepts, today's problem may well be the mechanical application to the Soviet scene of models and scholarly concepts developed in and for an American context. In addition, the newly acquired ability of specialists on the U.S.S.R. in this country to speak the same jargon as their disciplinary confreres in the social sciences has further compounded their difficulties in communicating with the public.

The New Misconceptions

A casual reading of recent Congressional testimony, major American newspapers, news magazines, and journals of opinion leaves me convinced that the relatively sophisticated knowledge of Soviet specialists has not reached the public or the policy-makers. As a consequence, a number of misconceptions about the Soviet Union are widely held. In my view, these are the major ones:

Disputes within the Soviet Union are viewed too much in terms of dissenters vs. the regime. Witness this exchange in 1974 between Senator Claiborne Pell (D.–R.I.) and Professor Shulman:

> **Professor Shulman:** We know quite a lot in this country about the dissidents. We know quite a lot about the officialdom, the establishment types. What isn't sufficiently understood or appreciated in this country is that the political life of the Soviet Union involves a very rich and complex spectrum, that there are many positions. There are degrees of involvement in a system. There are people who are involved in the system and yet are critical of it in one way or another. . . . There are people who are trying to modernize it . . . not necessarily to liberalize it in the Western sense, but to modify the system.
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> There are many forces for change within the Soviet Union which are not sufficiently appreciated in this country. . . . It is important that there are the dissidents . . . but the effective change is likely to come in the other whole range of in-between positions.
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> **Senator Pell:** . . . . I never read about what you are saying now.

Just as the diversity of orientations toward change is not appreciated, so are the sources of support not understood. Here the *non-specialist* academic is as liable to perpetuate error as anybody else. For example, Hans J. Morgenthau, a distinguished student of international politics, recently remarked that the Soviet system "has to rely primarily on nothing but deception and terror"; and Richard Pipes, a scholar truly knowledgeable about 19th-century Russia and the early Soviet period, described the current Soviet regime as "a government devoid of any popular mandate." Statements such as these serve to suggest only that the Soviet Union is, by our values, a rather crummy place. They show no appreciation of the visceral nationalism of a substantial fraction of the Soviet citizenry—a nationalism generated by victory in World War II, by perceptions of how things are in comparison with the bad old days, and by the satisfaction that comes from being citizens of a world power.

Another pervasive misconception is that there are no personal incentives and rewards in the U.S.S.R. Many Americans fail to appreciate the immense role of material (and non-material) incentives there, 40 years after Stalin condemned the *petit-bourgeois* notion of egalitarianism. Incentives associated with plan fulfillment are so powerful, in fact, that they explain, in part at least, why innovation is often difficult to achieve in Soviet factories. The preoccupation with fulfilling short-term plans, using established methods, does not allow much room for innovations that might make production more efficient later. The incentive structure also precludes attention to social overhead costs—in much the same way that the profit motive does under capitalism. The results—polluted rivers, smog, and so on—are often the same.

Americans also may not understand the role of incentives in Soviet life because of two related misconceptions. One is that all jobs are allocated by the state; the other is that work plans are specific down to the last detail. Both are wrong. Job choice is not totally defined by the state; for example, it remains difficult for Moscow to get people to work in the far north—even though substantial bonuses are offered for accepting such assignments. An impressive network of rural hospitals and clinics has been built throughout the country, but few physicians are willing to staff them. Similarly, plan instructions are fairly general; enterprise managers have some leeway in determining how a given plan is to be fulfilled.

Although Americans do have a fair understanding that high politics comes into play where the right to rule the Soviet Union is at stake, they seem unaware of the importance of resource-allocation and institutional controversies—that is, disputes about who gets what and who decides who decides. This lack of awareness is not surprising; news of such matters is not the kind that even the *New York Times* deems fit to print.

Lack of awareness in these areas contributes, in turn, to another misconception—one that is something of a mirror image of the treatment of Watergate by the Soviet press (Who is behind Wategate? Enemies of détente!). Some Americans who know something about the Soviet Union tend to explain political events there too much in terms of American-Soviet relations, often without a shred of evidence. Some examples: In advocating improved relations with the U.S.S.R., one Senator said, "We should remember that Nikita S. Khrushchev was removed from power primarily because his advocacy of détente with the West was opposed by Soviet conservatives and the Soviet military"; former Ambassador Averell Harriman, in discussing Leonid Brezhnev's commitment to détente, observed archly, "We know what happened to Khrushchev."

We do know what happened to Khrushchev. What is far less clear is *why* it happened. However, it is almost certain that he was not removed primarily because of conservative and military opposition to détente. Why, then, was he deposed? An awareness of the *Soviet* context of Soviet politics would lead one to look first to events inside the Soviet union, to agricultural failure and to organizational controversies. Such an orientation would lead to an examination of policy decisions by the successful conspirators following Khrushchev's removal in 1964. These included an initial continuity in foreign affairs, the easing of Khrushchev-imposed restrictions on private gardening plots on the collective farms, and the unceremonious abandonment of Khrushchev's pet scheme for bifurcating the Communist Party at the regional (*oblast*) level into separate committees for agriculture and industry.

Myths about Soviet Foreign Policy

Misconceptions with respect to foreign policy also abound. One is that the Soviet Union has, in George Meany's words, "broken every international agreement." This is what a colleague of mine calls a false fact. It is based on a true fact—namely, that the U.S.S.R. blithely disregarded its nonaggression treaties with the erstwhile Baltic states—but it ignores the country's good record in observing commercial and other treaties.

Where the interested public appears to have the greatest knowledge gap is in the area of Soviet foreign policy as it relates to Eastern Europe. I do not think the public realizes that some credence should be given to Soviet claims that it was exploited *economically* by its Eastern European client states in the 1960s —a price it was willing to pay because of the political benefits of bloc cohesion. Also, there seems little awareness here that the energy crisis has prompted the Soviet Union to encourage its Eastern European client states to become *less* dependent on it for sources of energy. And the quiet revolution in Polish trade has gone almost unnoticed in the American press. Whereas in 1970, 63% of Polish trade was with Comecon (the Soviet bloc's Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), this had dropped to 47% by 1974. In 1970, 27% of Poland's trade was with the West; by 1974, it had grown to 44%. A shift of that magnitude has only one parallel in the history of Eastern Europe after the communist takeovers—the trade reorientation that Romania undertook in the 1960s as part of its deliberate strategy to extricate itself from Soviet domination.

Hedrick Smith's Best Seller

For a special illustration of the gap in perception between American specialists on the Soviet Union and informed generalists, I turn to a brief consideration of Hedrick Smith's *The Russians.* [See Background Books, page 127.]

I do not pick on Mr. Smith because he is an easy target. On the contrary, he learned a lot during his stint as Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times.* I focus on his book because, as a best seller, it may have reached a larger public than have the combined works of all the academic specialists on the U.S.S.R. now at work.

His book is a voyage of discovery: Mr. Smith candidly tells us when his previous conceptions were altered, and provides us with a vicarious sense of having been there. But the armchair traveler is likely to be misled by his narration (the accuracy of which I do not dispute) in two important respects. His tales of the Moscow elite's affluence, corruption, and cynicism are likely to impart a mistaken conception about this elite when compared with other elites. After the "thirteenth-month" payment, the "Kremlin ration," the special access to consumer goods, the special holiday, medical facilities, and all the other perquisites which power, status, and *blat* (influence) obtain, it is still true, as the British sociologist Mervyn Mathews has observed, that the Soviet elite "is by international standards poor."

The reader is also likely to be misled in some respects about ordinary Soviet citizens. One gets a sense of the regime's strong support from the Soviet "hard-hats" and of the nostalgia for Stalin on the part of some. Unfortunately, one also gets the impression that Moscow is representative of the Soviet Union and that the Russians and the Soviet citizenry are either synonomous or on their way to becoming so. As a result, the reader is likely to be much more persuaded of the progressive Russification of the Soviet Union than is warranted by the evidence. Mr. Smith quite properly reports the "persistent official efforts to promote the learning of Russian." But his readers are nowhere made aware that the 1970 census shows the U.S.S.R. to be less Russian than did the 1959 census or that assimilation has been modest (even when non-Russians adopt Russian as their principal language, they do not declare themselves Russians ethnically). As University of Michigan historian Roman Szporluk has written: "Eleven among the 15 major Soviet nationalities which possess their own 'Union Republics' increased at a higher rate than the Russians" during the years 1959–70. In the five Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan), the three Transcaucasian Republics (Armenia, Azerbaidzhan, and Georgia) and in Lithuania, the population of the titular nation increased as a proportion of the total population of the republic and the Russian fraction decreased (except in Lithuania, where each increased marginally).

The Knowledge Gaps

In short, specialists on the Soviet Union do have an expertise which differentiates them from journalists, policy-makers, and the general public. The gaps among and between them stem partly from the specialists' failure to disseminate their knowledge. And even though the specialists know a lot about a lot of areas of Soviet life, much (that is researchable) remains to be learned. Little is known about the urban lower classes, their lifestyles and their beliefs. Soviet mass culture is largely unexamined. At the elite level there exists only the merest beginning of an understanding of the links between social background, attitude, and behavior. The emerging social and political role of the scientific elite has been only modestly explored. Research on resource-allocation controversies and the connection between issue and policy process is not far along. The connection between U.S.–Soviet and Soviet–East European relations has been insufficiently explored. One could go on. So much still needs to be known that one can only welcome the glimmer of a renewed awareness that continued study of the Soviet Union should have some place in national research priorities. What gives an added importance to the American (and, more generally, the Western) study of the Soviet Union is that Western specialists are doing what remains exceedingly difficult for Soviet citizens to do: they are objectively analyzing the contemporary Soviet Union and keeping straight the historical background that lies behind the Soviet present.

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