

COMING FROM THE BUND

By Abraham Brumberg

I

Roots and Branches

As I look back, I am struck by how much my image of Russia and subsequently my career as a Soviet or Russian expert had been predetermined and shaped by the kind of world I was born into and in which I was raised. I spent the first years of my life in Poland, the son of dedicated members of the Jewish socialist party, the Bund. Its members were Marxists, democrats, and secular Jews all wrapped into one. Like a Catholic novice reading avidly "The Lives of Saints", so did I devour the Bundist literature on my parents' book shelves, and in my curriculum in the Yiddish elementary school in Warsaw. I read about selfless socialists and especially Bundists who organized strikes and May Day demonstrations in Tsarist Russia, whom the police arrested, who were sent in heavy chains to Siberia, and some of whom were executed for their revolutionary activities. At public gatherings I saw and heard some of the legendary figures who survived Tsarist rule and were now leading the party in Poland. To be admitted into the presence of such people--I recall in particular the kindly mustachioed face of Noah Portnoy, one of the dozen or so men and women who in 1897 gathered in a dingy room in Vilna to lay the foundations of the Bund--was akin to a religious experience. My father was fond of telling the story--it has been one of my favorite bits of family folklore-- of how in 1937, upon returning from a trip to Western Europe, he saw me waiting at the railroad platform in what seemed like a high state of excitement. I ran up to him and announced breathlessly, "Daddy, I am now fully class conscious!"

In point of fact my understanding of "class consciousness" was not something plucked out of thin air. It was based on what I had been taught about the injustice of a

world divided into two "classes", the few rich and the very many poor, and the battle between these two classes that was bound to end with the victory of the latter-- all rather a Marxist version of "the meek shall inherit the earth."

My beliefs, in those halcyon days, admitted of no doubts. These came a bit later, and were indeed crucial in propelling me eventually into Sovietology. We were taught to admire socialists like Karl Kautsky and Jean Jaures, and to condemn Vladimir Lenin, once a good socialist who had gone dreadfully wrong, turning against his former social democratic comrades, and in 1917, with his fellow Bolsheviks, setting up a dictatorial state that in time became more anti-working class than many capitalist countries in Europe.

The conundrum of how a good socialist could turn into an enemy of socialism did not trouble me then, but it became a source of near-agony several years later. Shortly after the outbreak of the war in September 1939 my parents and I, along with tens of thousands of others, left Warsaw to elude the advancing German armies, and arrived several weeks later in Vilnius, then still known by its Polish name Wilno.

I shall forego any description of how Lithuania become one of the USSR's "socialist republics," and dwell only on relevant personal experiences.

It so happens that I was been present with my father in Kaunas, the inter-war capital of Lithuania, on the day when Soviet troops openly entered the homes of Lithuanian citizens to make sure they turned up at the (open) polling booths, I did not need to be told that the whole "democratic" exercise was a farce. At the same time--and this is central to my ambiguous feelings then and for a long time thereafter--I felt that the Communists seemed to be right to denounce many social democratic parties for their supine attitude towards the "class enemy," for appeasing the "bourgeois" parties and even joining them in coalition governments, a practice branded contemptuously as "ministerialism". The behavior of many social democratic parties, above all the largest of them, the SPD, in backing their governments' entry into World War I, remained for

many years a suppurating wound, a shameful page in the history of socialism which many other parties, including the "Bund," could not easily forgive or forget.

Who was right, then, or more right? Was it the Communists, who however contemptible much of their behavior (which I could see with my own eyes), could nevertheless take pride in having staged a successful proletarian revolution and installing the first socialist government in the history of mankind? Or was it the social democratic "reformists," who despite their own questionable record deserved admiration for upholding the principles of justice and democracy and for rejecting Bolshevik morality, the end justifying the means? Furthermore, though still convinced that the difference between Communists and socialists was one of methods, not goals, I wondered whether there might not be a middle road--one that would somehow combine the best ideas from both proletarian camps?

My inchoate search for a "third way", the feeling that the socialists and communists were both right and wrong, derived in large part from the Bund's somewhat erratic position on the question of democratic versus authoritarian methods. The Bund considered itself part of the "left" or "revolutionary" wing of social democracy. It rejected at one and the same time the Communists' stress on violence and on the necessity of at least a temporary dictatorship in order to consolidate socialist rule, and the social democrats' indiscriminating "cult" of democracy which, the Bund maintained, could only hamper and dilute the socialist victory.

In practice, this meant that the Bund--or some members of the Bund-- came close to exculpating some of the most hideous features of the Soviet system. Indeed, for many years the Bund tolerated a large faction within its ranks who could legitimately be called "fellow travelers". (The reason why the party tolerated the presence of so factious a faction is explained mainly by the Bund's tradition, which remained true for decades, of always seeking accommodation instead of confrontation.) But by the mid 1930s, when

Stalinist terror reached its acme, those lingering illusions had mostly disappeared, and the Bund took to describing the Stalinist regime as "totalitarian."

But for me doubts persisted, immeasurably strengthened by my direct encounter with Soviet reality. In Vilnius, the new authorities took over the Yiddish secular gymnasium I attended in Vilnius, and almost all of my schoolmates, in a surge of revolutionary fervor, joined the ranks of the "Young Pioneers." They taunted me, the son of a well-known Bundist, with barbs about Social Democrats who "feared" revolution, who were more inclined to enter into "rotten compromises" with the capitalists than to fight for the victory of socialism.

I suffered more or less silently during these verbal onslaughts. For one thing I feared that by rising to the bait, I might invite the attention of the GPU and further endanger the safety of my father, who had gone into hiding. But more important, I could not help thinking that perhaps my tormentors were at least partially correct.

An incident taught me a useful lesson about how terror can be applied without resort to violence. It took place in my class on Yiddish (read: by now *Soviet* Yiddish) literature, and it concerned a poem about Stalin penned by the redoubtable poet Itzik Feffer, himself later to be executed as "an enemy of the people". Each student recited one of the poem's many stanzas. When it was my turn, I declaimed:

He is deeper than the oceans,

He is higher than the peaks,

There is simply no one like him

On this giant earth of ours.

(Er iz tifer fun di yamen/er iz hekher fun di berg/nokh aza iz nit faranen/oyf der kaylekhhdiker erd.)

Apparently, however, I did not read these lines with requisite ardor, for my classmates, well aware of my convictions, loudly demanded that the teacher force me to

"read the stanza again--with more feeling." The teacher, whom I knew to be sympathetic to the Bund, looked at me sadly, and complied. So did I.

Models and Options

These events in my life were crucial in steering me into the field of Sovietology, and many other "freshmen Sovietologists" went through similar soul searchings, even without the benefit of my particular brushes with Soviet life. The historian Abbot Gleason, in his book *Totalitarianism*, remarks that "most academics drawn into the study of Russia and the Soviet Union after 1945 were of the same mind and part of the same intellectual world as official Washington"¹, which is to say that they shared the militant and simplistic view of communism as a scourge, a view that constituted for a long time the received wisdom on this subject.

Stephen Cohen makes a similar point in his essay "Scholarly Missions: Sovietology as a Profession." He charges many of his colleagues with adherence to the "totalitarian school" of Sovietology, which regarded the Soviet Union as a fixed, immutable entity, shaped by Russian history and Marxist-Leninist dogma into an agent solely of power and oppression. In his view the most objectionable excesses of this school date from the 1960s.² A Russian political scientist, Evgenii Kodin, levels similar charges at American Sovietologists.³ The assumption of Soviet immutability rendered pointless the study of social processes in the Soviet Union, since nothing fundamental could or would change, and instead emphasized government policies and how they were

¹ Abbot Gleason, **Totalitarianism--the Inner History of the Cold War**, Oxford & New York, 1995, p.122

² Stephen F. Cohen, **Rethinking the Soviet Experience--Politics and History Since 1917**. Oxford and New York, 1985, p. 5

³ **Smolenskii arkhiv I amerikanskaia sovietologia**, by Evgenii Vladimirovich Kodin, Smolensk, 1998.

implemented to achieve a better-functioning totalitarian system, one similar to the phantasmagoric vision of Orwell's 1984.

The strictures voiced by Gleason et al. are not entirely off the mark. The "totalitarian model" certainly was applied to the Stalinist system, though it became increasingly stale and irrelevant. US institutions, both official agencies like the CIA and non-official like the Ford Foundation, found it attractive, and continued to fund projects that accepted the conventional wisdom. The tendency to regard Stalinism exclusively as a centralized, relentlessly expansionist and ideologically-rigid system bent on maintaining and maximizing power turned into a dogma, one that pervaded the field of Soviet studies both because of genuine faith and -- given the funding available -- occasionally of opportunism.

Nevertheless, early recruits to Sovietology included disciples of what I would call the "social democratic option," as early volumes of our journal clearly demonstrate. Many of those drawn into Soviet studies regarded the Soviet Union as above all else a desecration of the finest dreams and principles of socialism, a vulgar distortion of Marxism rather than -- as the conservative view held -- a direct descendant of it. Soviet communism, as they saw it, represented a "false ideology", a fraud. Soviet society, that huge "Potemkin village," abounded in odious features, from one-party dictatorship and a centralized economic system to suffocating censorship--the very negation of the Marxist dream. Yet at the same time, it was still a functioning system, its facade of "monolithic unity" concealing a good deal of diversity. It was essential, then, to analyze and explain it -- especially to those influenced by its lachrymous claims -- rather than merely condemn it, if only in order to lay down the foundations, hopefully, for a "third way". (To what extent the latter, too, was a utopia I leave to my readers to decide.)

The mix of animosity, eagerness to understand, and hope animated, I am sure, many "charter members" of the Sovietological profession, and stemmed -- as in my case -- from their own internal conflicts. Whether from Eastern Europe or from radical

backgrounds in the United States, many were veterans of sturdy and passionate ideological battles. They imported both their early battles and their commitment into their professional work.

To the Other Shore

My personal experiences in the post-war years have some relevance to the first years of the image of Russia that inspired much of early Sovietology. In May 1941 my family and I arrived in the United States, and six years later I enrolled as a student at the City University of New York (CCNY). My brief encounter with Soviet reality in Vilnius had liberated me of qualms about socialism vs. communism but my curiosity about this subject had not abated, nor had my eagerness to cross swords with Communist believers.

I also remember an elective course on folk music, and a row with some of my radical (read: Communist) classmates. When I discounted as "genuine" folk songs such carefully composed (though genuinely popular) anthems as the theme from the 1936 film *Circus*, "I Don't Know a Country as Free as Ours" ("A druggy takoy strany ne znayu..."), they sprung into action.: "This is typical fascist rot," I remember one student saying with icy contempt. "Brumberg obviously thinks the world of such garbage as Irving Berlin's "America the Beautiful." Our teacher, another young man but this one less versed in the labyrinthine polemics of Stalinism and anti-Stalinism (he was not Jewish--a significant point), listened to our exchange in stunned disbelief.

By 1949, when I had to make up my mind about the future course of my studies, what later came to be known as "area studies" was just beginning, with Columbia, Harvard, and Yale in the forefront. I chose Yale University, determined to study Russian, Russian history, literature, and politics, and to hone my polemical skills for further confrontations with ideological foes.

Area Studies

American area studies programs resulted directly from the increasing role played by the United States in world affairs, and a concomitant realization that the United States

and its allies knew relatively little about the history and culture of countries they were engaged with, now and potentially. Russia and Japan attracted particular attention (the first result of the increased attention to Japan was Ruth Benedict's seminal book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*). In earlier years individual scholars had studied Russian history, literature, philosophy, and even political institutions but they had labored outside the framework of and lacking much support from academic or government institutions. They had received few grants, scholarships and fellowships; they had attended few international or even local conferences. (The hoopla that Arthur Koestler once waspishly dubbed "the international academic call-girl circuit," and subsequently parodied by David Lodge, belongs to a latter era.)

Whatever their yearnings for a role in national debates commensurate with their knowledge and experience, many of these scholars were content with quiet university lives and an occasional lecture sponsored by National or Royal Geographic Society, the Council on Foreign Relations or Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Men like the historians Bernard Pares and Geroid T. Robinson, Russian and Soviet law specialist John Hazard, the future Czech president Thomas Masaryk (author of a trenchant study of Russian intellectual history), the American journalist cum historian W.W. Chamberlain, the Russians Gleb Struve, George Vernadsky, Michael Karpovitch and many others wrote relatively little that was germane to the issues being aired in the media or that concerned the men and women in the State Department and Westminster.

In Britain and in the States, two sets of texts preceded and paved the way for professional Sovietology: "confessional" books by travelers and journalists, and the writings of Menshevik and Trotskyite opponents of Stalin. All these gathered momentum in the 1930s, with the rise of Naziism and the consolidation of Stalinism. Anton Ciliga's *The Russian Enigma* (Paris, 1938, and London, 1940), contained revelatory material based on his several years -- as a Yugoslav Communist/oppositionist -- in Soviet camps. John Scott's *Behind the Urals* (1942) told his story as an American engineer working in

Magnitogorsk. British and American journalists -- Malcolm Muggeridge, Eugene Lyons, Walter Duranty, Louis Fischer -- wrote of their experiences living in the Soviet Union. In 1951 two remarkable books appeared, Gustaw Herling's *A World Apart* and Alexander Weissberg's *The Accused*, the latter attempting to explain Stalin's show trials, with their fantastic confessions and patently pre-arranged verdicts.

Not all of the personal "been and seen" works were confessional in nature. Lion Feuchtwanger, Emil Ludwig, and Howard Fast wrote what amounted to little more than pro-Communist apologias, though the degree of finesse varied. And after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, a whole cottage industry arose in the United States: supposedly "objective" writers produced pro-Communist propaganda masquerading as reportage or scholarship, for no doubt appreciative customers.

As for the Mensheviks and Trotskyites, the Soviet Union represented the stuff of their dreams and nightmares, the focus of their overriding attention, and they constituted probably the best sources of information and analysis on the Soviet Union and Communist parties throughout the world. The Menshevik writings appeared mostly in the Russian-language journal *sotsialisticheski vestnik*, but English translations surfaced in journals like the New York weekly *The New Leader* and books by Mensheviks such as David Shub, Boris Nikolaevsky, and Solomon Schwarz, all exceptionally well informed and skillful writers, came out in English too.

The Trotskyites, a cluster of tiny groups, published a number of journals and newspapers in English (*The Militant*, *The New International*, *The Fourth International*, *Labor Action*) which carried assessments of developments in the Communist world that were, despite their often pugnacious tone and penchant for unending exegetical debates, both revealing and sophisticated.

(I recall for a time having difficulties in distinguishing the "Workers Socialist Party" from the "Socialist Workers Party", but eventually this whole demi-monde became altogether as familiar to me as the map of Manhattan.) In those early days, this

"pre-history" of Sovietology, provided us, the first generation of Sovietologists, with remarkably accurate information on the Soviet Union and the emerging pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe -- certainly more accurate than the one textbook I recall, *Soviet Politics at Home and Abroad* (1946), by Frederick L. Schuman, a slightly daft left-wing academic who thought that listing the individual rights enumerated in the Soviet 1936 constitution mattered more than ascertaining the relevance of these rights to reality.

Into the Fray

The story of how I became the editor of *Problems of Communism* is amusing, but I shall spare the reader the details. Suffice it to say that for me, barely 26 years old, politically and intellectually preoccupied -- if not obsessed -- with communism, it was as if I'd been handed a miraculous vessel, to fill as I pleased. I could pursue my own interests and, with the help of the growing number of Sovietologists and also of journalists with experience in this area, search for answers to questions that had tormented me for years. Furthermore, the magazine presented an extraordinary opportunity to influence if not die-hard Stalinists, then at least "Stalinoids" (a splendid term coined, if I am not mistaken, by Dwight Macdonald), vague sympathizers and fence-sitters in many countries. My audience would no longer be restricted to the crowded classrooms, library carrels and cafeteria tables of City College: it expanded to the whole world.

The cold war was already raging.. I had no sympathy for its ideological simplifications, nor for the idea that it should be supported by military means, by bogus "indigenous" uprisings, by propping up unsavory albeit "anti-communist" foreign leaders. The bombast in praise of the "free world," a designation which seemed to include many areas not much less odious than the Soviet Union, appalled me, as did the "dirty tricks" engaged in by the CIA, occasionally in tandem with its cousin, the British MI5. But the opportunity to influence the views of so many people who out of ignorance, ideological commitment, or sheer naivete, accepted the Soviet myths, and furthermore, to do so by

honorable means, by reasoned argument and punctilious evidence , was a version of the "cold war" to which my colleagues and I wholeheartedly subscribed.

The US Information Agency -- at any rate its press and publications department -- waged a holy war against communism on the basis of stories furnished by the AP or UP, and with the help of mainly second-rate journalists, bogus intellectuals, and mediocre radio broadcasters. Half of them did not know the first thing about communism, and the other half didn't care about anything except their safe government sinecures. The material that appeared in Problems of Communism was something else again.:

"Russification of Soviet Minority Languages;" "Soviet Literature and Retroactive Truth;" "Towards a Communist Welfare State"--all this was fare rather beyond my supervisors' ken and experience Better, then, not tamper with the magazine, nor to bother me. My anti-communism reassured them, innocent as they were of the ideological gulf between us. .

The story of the first decades of the journal Problems of Communism is a subject I treat in some detail in the memoirs I am now writing, but I do want to related one incident that is germane to the topic of this paper. It concerned the volume The Protracted Conflict, a veritable manifesto of the "totalitarian school" by Robert Strausz-Hupè of the University of Pennsylvania and three colleagues, published in 1959.. Nearly twenty years earlier, James Burnham, a former Trotskyite and skillful political pamphleteer who'd turned into a dedicated right-winger, had labeled the Soviet Union "not a conventional state but the main base of a world movement, an unprecedented enterprise that is at once a secular religion, a world conspiracy and a new kind of army, irrevocably pledged to world domination."⁴ Now, in 1959, Strauss-Hupê et al rang the same tocsin about a superbly organized system, dedicated to achieving absolute global power, which had orchestrated "almost every international dispute that has gripped

⁴ James Burnham, **Containment or Liberation?**, 1948.

the postwar world," every upheaval, every uprising, every outbreak of industrial unrest. By its very nature, wrote the authors, such a system could never negotiate honestly with its enemies, and the "free world" had therefore a sacred obligation to devise, for the sake of its own survival, its own version of brutal "conflict management."

Because the book was not a shabby product of some obscure right-wing organization, but a work by a respectable publisher (Harper & Brothers) whose authors boasted unsullied academic credentials, I decided that it required a serious review. Alfred G. Meyer, whose scholarship and dedication to the "social democratic option" I admired, accepted the assignment, and delivered a careful (if scathing) rebuttal of the authors' extravagant charges.

In return, Strausz-Hupé expressed his astonishment that a book praised by, among others, Senator William Knowland of California (a prominent "hawk") and Vice President Nixon should be meted out such shabby treatment in the pages of so respectable a journal. To make proper amends, he suggested that we publish not one, but two positive assessments of the volume. I replied by asking whether Strausz-Hupé wouldn't agree that Professor Meyer's credentials as an authority on communism were perhaps greater than those of the Vice President and the Senator from California, and suggested that in view of his strong feelings we would be happy to publish a letter exceeding our usually stipulated length.

My co-editors were aghast, fearing that my letter would surely invite an attack from Senator McCarthy or someone of his ilk. This appealed to me, as I had long been fantasizing, like some latter-day Walter Mitty, being invited to Senator McCarthy's Committee to be pilloried by him and his chums, and standing up to them with admirable sang froid..

Alas, that was not to be. Professor Strausz-Hupé answered most politely, and sent a long letter to which Meyer replied, all of which we published and announced that the discussion has now come to an end.

(About ten years later, I happened to be in Brussels, staying with a friend of mine from USIA. Strausz-Hupé, who was then US Ambassador to Belgium, heard that I was in town, and invited me for supper at his residence. He was cordiality itself. Not a word was said of our past contretemps. He told some Hungarian jokes. The meal, attended by about ten people, was superb. I still remember the paté and the marvelous wine.

Such were those days. Such were the years.

Challenges from Within and Without

From the moment of its birth, Sovietology was buffeted by waves of criticism, some of them originating within the ranks of its disciples, some issuing from without. Internecine struggles and “agonizing reappraisals” surfaced early, as did unkind comments by skeptical outsiders. But during the final years of the Soviet Union and after its interment, Sovietology--indeed the whole field of Soviet (and East European) studies--became the object of merciless scrutiny, sparked by Sovietology’s “failure” to predict the collapse of the Soviet empire. Surely, so it was reasoned, if that vast network of scholars and experts, of academic institutes, professional associations, journals, and international gatherings, could not foresee the end of a system and society to which they had devoted all their scholarly attention, something must have been seriously wrong with their work. Perhaps, indeed, the whole enterprise had from its very inception been doomed to fail?

Oddly enough, those who had hardly ever taken part in this enterprise leveled the fiercest charges. I have in mind particularly the historian Martin Malia, who wrote only one contribution to the Sovietological oeuvre, as far as I am aware, an article under the penname of Jacques Fernier that appeared in **Problems of Communism** (“Judaism without Embellishments,” 4/ 64). But others, perhaps not as unilaterally dismissive as Malia, were equally hostile.

What charges against Sovietology were levelled by Malia et al? .

For one thing, that Sovietologists are essentially neo-Marxists and/or apologists for the Soviet system. Convinced that Stalin and his epigones had distorted the real

meaning of socialism as articulated by Lenin, Soviet experts supposedly assumed that sooner or later the Soviet Union would reform itself and return to the pristine principles of the Russian Revolution.

I am oversimplifying, of course, but this was certainly the core of Martin Malia's thesis. He considered socialism not only sheer utopia, but, with its determination to create this utopia **tout court** by abolishing private property, the profit motive and the market, and by eradicating the peasantry as a social class whatever the cost, he saw it as the wellspring of an odious, repressive and immutable regime. Leninism, early Stalinism, the "within-system" challenges to Stalinism (Trotskyism, Bukharinism), "High Stalinism," Brezhnev's "real and existing socialism"--all these were merely variants of the same unworkable and static system. There was never a ghost of a chance that the system could be reformed, and those who believed in it were little more than Lenin's votaries, convinced, all evidence to the contrary, that Stalinism was a mere "temporary deviation from" or "aberration" of the path laid out in the Holy Writ. . The disintegration of the Soviet system was inevitable, a denouement inscribed in its "genetic code." .

Richard Pipes, another harsh critic of both the Soviet Union and Sovietology, has unlike Malia written many volumes on 19th and 20th century pre-revolutionary Russia, as well as on the Soviet Union. Like Malia, however, Pipes questioned the very legitimacy of the Soviet system as a going concern, calling the November 1917 uprising a coup d'etat staged by a master intriguer, with virtually no support from below. Indeed, Pipes consistently attributes to Lenin well-nigh demonic powers that no mortal could successfully resist and overcome. Pipes has characterized the 1917 uprising as "a violent act carried out by a tiny minority." Once establishing themselves in power, the Communists proceeded to rule over the rest of society, imposing their will by force and subterfuge. Lenin and the Bolsheviks, says Pipes, were the precursors of fascism and Nazism. Mussolini and Hitler were mere "emulators" of Lenin. Hitler's hatred of the Jews was in the same league as Lenin's hatred of the bourgeoisie.

Pipes' historiography differs from Malia's in one major respect. Malia locates the roots of the evil in socialist ideology. Pipes, though similarly contemptuous of socialism in all its mutations, finds the origin of the Communist evil in historical precedents, chief among them Russia's tradition of "patrimonial despotism". The attitudes inherent in this and other political despotisms paved the way for Lenin's Bolshevism, for Hitler, Naziism, and the mass extermination of the Jews.

Malia and Pipes eloquently articulated the theory of Soviet totalitarianism, which which indeed dominated the field of Soviet studies for many years. Sometime in the early 1960s, a number of historians challenged this theory. They argued that such an interpretation of Soviet history as propelled by a regime bent on maintaining and maximizing its power and forcing society into the Procrustean bed of Marxism-Leninism distorted the sources and course of Soviet history. It ignores social processes that were sometimes independent of the regime, sometimes supportive of it, and occasionally resulted in bitter conflict between a large part of society and the regime. In their view, the Bolshevik revolution was not just a product of the machinations of a small number of people; it actually enjoyed the support of a part--though not the majority-- of the working class in Russia's largest cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁵

The critics, soon to be known as the "revisionists," also assailed the view of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism as "a seamless synthesis."⁶ In fact, they said, conflicts abounded within the Soviet Communist Party over alternatives to the given "party line," and the choice of policy resulted not only from ideological maxims, but from disputations

⁵ In an article published in 1954, called "Matyas Rakosdi on Bolshevik[sic] Strategy and Tactics" (3/54), I argued that Lenin was indeed contemptuous of "formal" democracy, believing that the propitious occasion for taking power was "a decisive superiority in the decisive place at the decisive time". He made this abundantly clear in his 1919 article "The Election of the Constituent Assembly and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat."

⁶ Suny, *op. cit.*, p. 25

over the proper interpretation of concrete circumstances as well from diverse visions of socialism. Thus the NEP, for instance, cannot be seen simply as a temporary subterfuge designed to shore up the economy before the state inevitably returned to measures aimed at abolishing the market and reasserting unconditional party control. Bolshevik leaders like Bukharin viewed the NEP as a radical departure and as the beginning of an evolutionary, rather than rapid and compulsory march towards a socialist state.⁷time,” says Walicki, “I see such an outcome as every unlikely...I only insist that the victory of the Bukharinist line would have entailed a factual surrendering of some of the basic tenets of communism, and would have resulted in a quick *decommunization* of the party.” (Andrzej Walicki, **Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom**, Stanford Un. Press, 1995, p. 410) The tendency to ignore processes within society as shaping specific Communist policies and concentrating exclusively on the party’s struggle for power and hegemony to explain the dynamic changes in Soviet history was one of the principal charges hurled at the “conventional” Sovietologists by its critics.⁸

The “social historians” or revisionists were first criticized for their alleged misrepresentations of the true nature of Lenin and Leninism. To which the revisionists replied that they were not excluding political factors by investigating the social determinants of historical processes, nor were they, by elucidating Lenin’s inconsistencies and shifting responses to social realities, justifying the crimes committed by him and his followers.

⁷ For what it is worth, I tend to accept Andrzej Walicki’s view that a consistent and long-term implementation of the NEP might have led to the Bolshevik party’s “abandoning its communist character. Given the intensity of its ideologization at that

⁸ See, for instance, Stephen F. Cohen, **Rethinking the Soviet Experience--Politics & History Since 1917**, Oxford, Un. Press, 1985, pp 19-38.

Yet in fact a number of revisionists soon seemed to do just that. Eager to demolish the simplicities of the “totalitarian school,” they produced interpretations of Stalinist policies, particularly of the purges of the 1930s, that glossed over the horrors and minimized the number of victims. A few went as far as denying the very existence of mass terror, asserting that the evidence for it had been deliberately falsified though their fellow “social historians” as well as their opponents vigorously disputed such claims.

Finally, in the 1970s, Sovietology came under attack for yielding to the blandishments of modern social science, with its preoccupation with elaborate “models,” methodological concepts borrowed from fields of study irrelevant to the Soviet Union, and false analogies between Soviet institutions and seemingly similar yet fundamentally different institutions in democratic countries (e.g., city councils in Bridgeport, Connecticut and Sverdlovsk). Moreover, inaccessible terminology, bewildering jargon, and the like accompanied the increased reliance on social science concepts.⁹

Now let me come back to the question of whether these strictures apply--and if so how--to **Problems of Communism**. The short answer is: hardly at all. The notion that Sovietologists were motivated mainly by their hatred of Russia and the Soviet Union strikes me as particularly bizarre. Indisputably, they detested the Soviet system. But certainly the first two generations of Soviet specialists were animated precisely by a fondness, even enthusiasm, for Russia, its history, its culture and its people. Their hope for an evolution of the Soviet system, so often cited against them, spoke of compassion

⁹ Some time in the 19560s, in that the heigfht of the “new social scientists” influence in the Sovietological profession, a political scientist, who will remain unnamed, read a paper at some conference, which bristled with he new fashionable terms and conceptrs. At one point he intrerrupted to say that the passage he was about to read was a revision of the original formulation, which his wife urged him to rewrite “because Mr. Brumberg wouldn’t understrand it.” I found it nasty but amusing. Many years later I told a friend of mine of this incident, and he look at me incredulously: “Why, don’t you reemember?,” he said, “that I was the speaker and autjhopr of this remarkt?” I am happy to report that the two of us remain good friends, partially, I suppose, due to the fact that my friend confided he had long ago broken with his one-time terminological obsession...

rather than contempt. The CIA attracted by and large a different breed, in my experience, one closer in mentality to the champions of the “totalitarian option”, or to the dedicated “cold warriors” who crowded the corridors of power and filled the pages of newspapers and magazines. With a few exceptions, these were not the people who wrote for *Problems of Communism*.

To blame Sovietology for its failure to predict the collapse of the Soviet imperium is to confuse it with astrology. Certainly during the period of “High Stalinism” and the subsequent decades it seemed altogether plausible to assume that the Soviet Union, whatever its ultimate fate, would endure for a long time. Let me stress once more that I am speaking of the first two decades or so of Sovietology and of the journal I edited. With the influx of new blood from the universities and think tanks the situation changed somewhat. The new Sovietologists were now motivated primarily by pragmatic--or if you will opportunistic-- considerations, but among them were those who were inspired by humanitarian concerns, too.

What about the other alleged sins of the profession--categorical adherence to the totalitarian model on the one hand, or “revisionism”, “social history” slipping into apologetics on the other, as well as obsession with the new social science theories and terminology?¹⁰ How were these characteristics reflected in our magazine?

I went through twenty years of the journal, and I was struck again how we managed to steer clear of the various fashions, foibles, and fetishisms. I could cite voluminous chapter and verse, but again, I shall leave this for my memoirs to appear, I hope in the near future.

The Social Democratic Option

Instead, let me say a few words about what earlier in the paper I referred to several times as the “social democratic option.” By this term I do not mean to suggest a

rigid doctrine or dogma. Rather, conditioned as I was by my childhood experiences and subsequent confrontations with Soviet reality, I understood the Soviet system as a product of both Russian history and Leninist ideology as carried forward by Stalin. I accepted that Marxism spawned Leninism and other genres of socialism, including those that explicitly rejected some of the Marxian tenets. I believed that any attempt to justify Stalinism, even when engaged in out of naivete or ignorance, was morally reprehensible. I also assumed that Soviet society did not consist of an inert mass easily manipulated by the ruling elite, that it was capable of evolving, although for how long and to what end could not be predicted. (So many articles ended with the words “remains to be seen” that my colleagues and I were embarrassed as well as amused - yet we stuck to it come hell or high water.)

Sweeping if not simplistic as these generalization may be, they represented my personal assumptions, which foretrunately were shared by my fellow editors. Clearly, some of these assumptions contradicted conventional wisdom.

In Pespective

Rereading the journal I edited for so long, I delight once more in one special achievement, what I should most like to be remembered for: creating and stubbornly maintaining, with the dedicated and perspicacious help of my entire staff, an **open** journal, one that was prepared to entertain the widest range of interpretations of the processes taking place in the Soviet Union and of the widest spectrum of future possibilities. Almost from the first issue we posed questions, challenged conventional wisdom, postulated hypotheses that no doubt sounded bizarre at a time when it was tempting, as one of our first contributors remarked, “to regard communism as a mixture of madness and crime and nothing else”¹¹--and to do so, moreover, in a publication sponsored by the US Government. Stalin’s death in March 1953 only accelerated our

¹¹ Soviet Codes and Conduct,” a review by Roger K. Wilson, P.C., 1/52.

efforts. You might say it energized us. In contrast to the prevalent notion that his death would change little, we emphasized the inevitability of change.

So many of these titles end with a question mark. Which is hardly surprising. We hardly intended to supply ready-made answers. We were determined to raise questions, suggest possibilities, challenge conventional wisdoms, outline choices and alternatives worthy of exploring by any serious student of Soviet affairs. As a result, we were the first to raise the question, in articles by Donald Zagoria (1960-1962), of a Sino-Soviet split, long denied by those who took it as gospel truth that communism was monolithic and immutable, and that any suggestion of a split within the camp was simply a ploy to mislead and confuse the West. On matters concerning the entire Communist bloc, Eastern Europe, and international communism, subjects I do not cover in this essay, we tried to explore similarly provocative issues. Precisely because we favored the “social democratic option,” we did not close the doors to adherents of altogether different conceptions, such as Strauss-Hupé, Stefan Pacini, Eugene Lyons, Kurt London, and Karl Wittfogel

In conclusion, then, I think it is fair to say that **Problems of Communism** stood for what might be called the “evolutionary” school of Soviet studies. We rejected the view that Soviet society was rigid and incapable of change; we assumed that the country, despite its totalitarian past and deeply seated authoritarian traditions, could evolve, though how much and how far “remained to be seen” (to cite again our favorite finale.). This, I dare say, had much to do with my own conception of the “social democratic option,” my own image of what Russia--or the Soviet union--was and how it should be perceived and judged. I was lucky that my ideas found an echo among my colleagues on the journal, and among many students of Russia I remember that time with pride and with pleasure.