

# For an Eclectic Sovietology

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*Diagnosis of a methodological malady and a suggested course of therapy.*

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Writing several years ago, Daniel Bell, an articulate sociologist, entertaining writer, and part-time student of students of Soviet affairs, identified at least ten schools of thought concerned with the analysis of internal Soviet politics. His description ranged them from the conventional approach of the political scientists through the somewhat more esoteric methods of the "content analyzers" on up to the way-out system of the Freudians ("all Communists are homosexuals"). He did not specify which school he favored but seemed to suggest that each may have something to learn from the others. We concur. In the following we shall examine the sovietological schisms in the intelligence community and enter a plea for a more eclectic approach in this pursuit.

In official Washington the methods used for studying domestic Soviet affairs are fewer than ten: I personally know of no Freudian group, alas, and there is currently a paucity of pure sociologists in the community. But there are a number of other identifiable schools each holding the others in disdain. This, obviously, is too bad; the development of strong vested interests in one approach or another has taken place at the expense of the substance of the research. There is a great deal of energy expended on destructive criticism of the work produced by other groups, with precious little exchange of helpful ideas. Something should be done about it. This paper is an effort to show how something can be done.

# The Warring Schools

Some years ago a CIA analyst discovered Nikita Khrushchev referred to as the First Secretary of the CPSU, whereas previously he had been identified in the official press only in lower case, "first secretary." The conclusion from this evidence, that Khrushchev was on his way up, was subsequently hailed as a methodological triumph, proof of a newfound world of analytic method. No matter that indicators of Khrushchev's ascending fortunes were apparent in almost all areas of Soviet life; this little "esoteric communication" became cause in part for the establishment of a whole new approach to Soviet studies and a whole new corpus of political philosophy concerning the Soviet and Communist systems.

This method does in fact provide the student with an occasionally useful tool. It is based on a truth as old as politics: all political commentary, all speeches by leaders are to a certain extent esoteric, i.e., they contain messages to the elite not ordinarily decipherable by the layman. In a closed society, naturally, the content is apt to be more esoteric than in an open one. But what is as often forgotten as remembered by the professional adherents of this school is that the important problem for the analyst is more likely to lie in distinguishing between the politician's intentions and his capabilities than in trying to ferret out the precise messages that reveal the intent.

Another problem with this school is that it raises more questions than it can answer, and so its practitioners are prone to discover messages and then forget about their possible implications. Last spring, for example, a ranking member of the CPSU Presidium, Kirilenko, was listed in official media out of the normal alphabetical order; this was quickly spotted by alert readers of Pravda and other Soviet journals, but no one could come up with a satisfactory explanation (except possibly that of the waggish school that discerned a plot by the Soviet typesetters' union). It could only be concluded, solemnly, that this was "unusual," could not be mere happenstance, and thus surely meant something.

Regrettably, those who spend their time delving into these arcane subtleties have only scorn for less sophisticated analysts and, even more regrettably, do not make use of sources other than the open Soviet

press. Indeed, I have heard them proclaim their disdain for other sources: "They serve no useful function at all, merely confuse those of us using the press." This is clearly no attitude from which to see the forest. We feel, indeed, that these analysts have been rooting around one particular tree for so long as to be lost to their wider-ranging colleagues. Many of them, however, are gifted students and well endowed, and therefore we address them an anguished plea: come back!

In the school of the political scientists we find a less recondite approach and a broader and more promising methodology. If adequately informed, its practitioners often come up with the right questions and, though less often, the right answers. But they too have no use for other attitudes and methods and are likely to listen only to themselves. Further, some of them sometimes seem to forget that their task is not like making an examination of the affairs of state and local governments in, say, Pennsylvania. We have, for example, very little need for a detailed map of election districts in the Ukraine and even less for a thorough study, district by district, of the election results.

Finally, the political scientists suffer from an analytical malaise all too common to students of Soviet affairs, both foreign and domestic-power fixation. They think that all politics-indeed, all life-can be diagrammed according to a set of political rules derived from the assumption that the political behavior of mankind is essentially a struggle for pure power (no matter what the Freudians say). In fact, of course, this does not work. Men do often behave as the political scientists think they should behave, and certainly power is one of the prime movers; but complete reliance on this notion can lead to ghastly errors of interpretation.

A somewhat smaller school in the intelligence community (one probably overlooked by Bell because it does not extend to academic circles) can best be called the biographic school. Analysts spend anxious hours scanning the backgrounds and careers of Soviet officials in search of clues as to their future political behavior. To these practitioners, a common element in the lives of two functionaries—a coincidence of birthplace or congruence of careers—somehow creates a political alliance in perpetuity. Thus if party secretaries A and B are found both to be Ukrainians who once served in Omsk and they are now working together in Gosplan, they obviously conspire together against non-Ukrainian, non-Omskian careerists at a similar or slightly superior level. The old school tie thus assumes a significance vastly exceeding its proverbial

importance in Great Britain (where, as everyone knows, Conservatives and Laborites all went to the same school anyhow).

A sub-species of the biographic school is the provincial faction group, which resolves all politics by place of birth and subsequent service. Thus the chief political forces in the USSR are the Leningrad faction, the Moscow faction, and the Kiev (or Ukrainian) faction. To some extent these groupings certainly exist, but they do not ordinarily determine the direction of all Soviet political life. Like any school of study which concentrates on one analytic formula to the virtual exclusion of others, the adherents of this one are blinded by their own searchlight, and the fact that one "Leningrader" may have served in Leningrad a full decade before another does not dissuade them from tying the two together. The achievement of discovering that two men served in the same place, no matter when, is acclaimed as a breakthrough and becomes a sufficient reward in itself.

Next we must contemplate the pure researchers. These haunters of old files and library stacks are a breed apart. They escape the world of current problems and political forecasting and retire amongst the musty shelves. Every so often they may emerge with a scroll containing a seemingly endless compilation of facts. This, if turned into a paper of sorts, must be at least 100 pages long, contain no speculation, reflect no insight, and, hopefully, avoid all conclusions. A common denominator of very generally applicable qualities may be isolated, but the chances are that this will be of only marginal academic interest or else so long accepted as to be platitudinous. This school is scarcely aware of the existence of others, views current intelligence as "mere journalism" (as if there were something heinous about journalism), and when challenged deigns not to reply. After all, the facts speak for themselves.

There is a Stalinist school of Soviet studies, too. Fortunately its ablest practitioners are outside the community, usually senior professors at august universities. They once wrote a book (say in 1935), twice visited the USSR (in 1933 and 1938), and have established reputations. They do not feel secure, however, in these elongated reputations and are therefore impelled to do two things: one, they decry the notion that there can have been changes in the USSR since the publication of their work—thus their analysis stands immortal—and two, they colonize other institutions and government offices with students trained in their ideas. Thus some adherents of this school reach Washington, and they make themselves known, but always negatively. Throw one of them a fresh

idea and he tosses it right back. Being in a position always to cry nay, they are of course oftentimes right. But they are never novel.

We cannot end this examination without at least mentioning a few lesser but well-known Washington schools. A pair are formed by the economic determinists and their brethren the scientific determinists. All politics is but a reflection of economics (or science) and can be studied only in the light of this great truth. Non-Marxists, they outdo the Marxists in their devotion to determinism. And finally there is the clandestine school, for which everything is subordinated to the greater mission of espionage, clandestine sources, and secret data (Limited Background Use Only/Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals). But it would be improper, really, to think of this as a school of Soviet studies; rather it is an approach which transcends the purely Soviet and all studies, including its own substantive results: it is a way of life.

These, then, are the schools, somewhat arbitrarily defined. Clearly something should be done about their dissonance, and soon. The analysis of Soviet politics is too important a pursuit to be fragmented by divisions based more on methodology than on substance. Here are some ideas for putting it together.

## Curative Measures

There is no such thing as the right school or the wrong school. And there is no such person as the ideal sovietologist. All schools have something worth while to contribute and all political analysts can become good contributors. We need researchers, content analysts, biographers, economists, and even (if only to remind us of the nature of the society with which we are dealing) Stalinists. We need political scientists with broad background and insight, not necessarily Russian-speaking specialists in Soviet affairs. But we also need the experts whose Russian approximates native fluency. Each has a proper function and a job to do.

What we are saying, perhaps, is that there should be no single school or methodology at all, but a variety of schools, or sub-schools, which ride with the assigned function, not with the individual. But in another sense there should be only one school, one which combines the discipline of

the social scientist with the insight of the empathic specialist, permitting the social scientist to lecture to the specialist and in turn be tutored by him. Most important, the various analysts should hold one another in respect, assuming the individual worthy, and should exchange thoughts and ideas; there is no room for tight compartmentation in sovietology.

This brings to mind some crucial intelligence failures and the notion that at least some of them might have been avoided if the various sovietological school\$ had been willing to exchange ideas and had some medium for such an exchange. It might have occurred to a good content analyst in 1955, for example, that something of a fight was brewing between Khrushchev and Molotov and that this struggle perforce involved questions of high national policy, such as the proposed peace treaty with Austria. At the same time, the political scientists who were viewing the problem from their own vantage point might have maintained a relatively flexible attitude concerning the Austrian treaty had their views not been predetermined by their devotion to power politics and firm conviction that the USSR was not about to pull back on any issue, anywhere, at any time.

As it was, the signing of the Austrian peace treaty caught just about everyone by surprise. It had never occurred to the Kremlinologists to tie the Moscow struggle in with matters of policy, much less the peace treaty; they were concerned strictly with a political struggle and esoteric manifestations thereof. They were looking under rocks for invisible writing on slugs and whatever else was uncovered, they were not looking under the headlines in their morning papers. And meanwhile the political scientists, who normally speak only to one another, were concentrating on those very headlines but were ignorant of the factional duel in the Kremlin. Neither could add the two and two together. And of course the researchers at this point were still playing games with the removal of Beria, the Stalinists were looking for evidence of an increase in troop strength in the Soviet zone in Austria, and the economic determinists were racking up the statistics concerning the shipment of Austrian POL to the Soviet Union. And so on.

Perhaps, to be fair, we should cite at this point not another failure but a particular triumph of the Kremlinologists. Or, to be more accurate, a partial triumph: the political scientists saw to it that the victory was not total. In 1958 a small but persistent band of Kremlinologists discovered through content analysis that the Chinese Communists and the Soviets

were engaged in an increasingly bitter struggle. They published their findings and sought to advertise their conclusions, but their journals were obscure and their voices were not heeded. The political scientists, in particular, suppressed any corrupting notions of Bloc disarray, in part because it did not jibe with their ideas of sensible power politics and in part because of firmly held views long expressed in their own writings.

Finally, of course, it became all too obvious that a dispute in fact existed. Still the political scientists had not learned their lesson. While they now reluctantly admitted the generalization of a Sino-Soviet struggle, they were as yet not prepared to apply the generalization to any particular area of politics or policy. Thus when the Kremlinologists demonstrated, for example, that the Chinese and Soviets were at odds over the Congo and Algeria, the political scientists were scornful. In one particular instance that we remember, an article by a content analyst concerning the Algerian imbroglio was almost killed by the strident criticism of a vested-interest political scientist. Fortunately for the readership, this effort was thwarted. In other instances, however, the Kremlinologists were less fortunate; what the political scientists lack in depth they more than make up in sheer numbers.

A small beginning toward a unified school has been made with the creation of an ad hoc working group from overt and covert elements of CIA, chaired by the chief of a Soviet research unit. Devoted in the first instance to a look at the succession struggle sure to follow the death of Khrushchev, it must of necessity deal with other political problems and in fact does so. The national estimates process may sometimes provide a similar opportunity: it occasions contacts on substantive matters between CIA and other intelligence organizations, and when an estimate concerned at least in part with internal Soviet politics is being coordinated there can be a profitable cross-fertilization of ideas. It might be wise to put this on a more regular basis, however, by adding to the CIA ad hoc group some representatives from other agencies.

This working-group approach in any case needs strengthening by other measures. Most practical and perhaps desirable would be a medium of written exchange among interested sovietologists, both within the community and outside it. Such a medium could be created, though it might require a small government subsidy, in a journal devoted exclusively to the field of sovietology. Researchers could be given space to display their products (many of which might otherwise never see the light of day), and analysts could present their speculations and reviews.

Non-sovietologists might be permitted to ask questions and bring the specialists up to date on related matters such as foreign affairs. The experts could testify and the students learn. There is at present no periodical in existence which offers such opportunities to the practitioners of the aggregate school. What more painless way to keep the currents moving, to exchange ideas and gain inspiration? What better way to end the provincialism so characteristic of the field, to destroy the myths of exclusive infallibility nurtured by the several methodologists?

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