

# A Neglected Source of Evidence

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The profound changes which have occurred in the Soviet Union in the five years since Stalin's death have been accompanied by many surprising events. It is useful to consider certain means by which Western observers might have reduced the element of surprise.

Some events, such as the arrest of Beria, happened so suddenly that they probably surprised important groups within the Soviet leadership. Sometimes the outcome of protracted conflicts among the leaders probably could not have been predicted long in advance even by the protagonists themselves. But frequently Western observers have learned of the existence of such conflicts only when Moscow announced their outcome. Such an instance was Malenkov's resignation as head of the government, in February 1955, and Khrushchev's nomination of Bulganin to succeed him. Need this event have caused astonishment? Were the Soviet leaders really able to stake their political careers, if not their lives, in factional struggle without leaving evident traces of their mutual opposition?

Actually there was clear evidence of the contention which issued in Malenkov's resignation, and other surprising events as well might have been anticipated by examining the traces left by the contending leaders. These traces lie principally in published texts whose surface meaning does not reveal their political significance. They are "esoteric communications," hidden messages, which enable factional leaders to communicate quickly, safely, and decisively with the sub-elites whose

support they solicit.<sup>1</sup>

Serious students of the Soviet Union, aware that esoteric communications play some role in Soviet politics, scrutinize Soviet publications for hidden messages and try to elicit their meaning. On the other side, Soviet leaders and publicists employ their ingenuity to screen such messages from eyes for which they are not intended. That they have succeeded rather well is indicated by the surprise with which the world has greeted a number of events announced from Moscow.

An important reason for their success is that Western observers underestimate the refinement and subtlety of Soviet esoteric communications. Only the most obtrusive messages, designed for a wide Soviet audience, are generally noted. Let Beria not attend an opera with his Presidium colleagues and even our morning newspaper will ponder his fate. But let Khrushchev's party title of *pervi sekretar* (first secretary) become *Pervi sekretar*, and, though hundreds of copies of *Pravda* are read in the West for signs of Khrushchev's status, the change may go unnoticed.

The first impulse of one unaccustomed to take such minute variations seriously is revulsion as from a kind of talmudism. The Soviet politicians and publicists do engage in a kind of talmudism, probably not learned from studying the Talmud but absorbed from their political environment. The tradition of esoteric communication developed early in the Soviet regime, being a direct offspring of bolshevik practices in evading the czarist censorship. Malenkov, Kaganovich, and Molotov have been officially designated talmudists; Khrushchev, be it noted, deserves this epithet as much as they. So to be a talmudist is to be in good company if one's purpose is to understand Soviet politics. At any rate it is a fact, talmudic or not, that the Central Committee of the CPSU elected Khrushchev first secretary in 1953 and First secretary in 1956; and this fact must either be explained or accepted without interpretation.

Facts which are accepted without interpretation—especially seemingly trivial facts like the capitalization of an initial letter—have little value. They acquire value when they are explained, and only in the degree that the explanation has political significance. Besides, some facts are so egregious that they *demand* to be explained. And if one's business is the serious and difficult one of trying to analyze Soviet politics with insufficient facts, can one disregard so intriguing a fact as *Pravda's* decision in 1955 to capitalize the initial letter in Khrushchev's party title?

In this case it is probably the enormity of the explanation which causes the student of the USSR to balk. The disproportion between the minuteness of the evidence - *pervi* changed to *Pervi* - and the conclusion drawn from it in my book-that the change magnified the authority of the senior secretary - could hardly be greater. Yet one cannot reject the inference out of hand, since Khrushchev's authority rose appreciably in the months after Pravda introduced the change, in May 1955; and it is difficult to dismiss the symbolic change as trivial, since it was subsequently confirmed by an action of the Central Committee.<sup>2</sup>

One of my experiences as I was preparing material for *The Rise of Khrushchev* may illustrate why I take such apparently inconsequential changes seriously.

On November 3, 1955, the Soviet press published a telegram from a New Zealand official, Holyoake, which wrongly addressed Khrushchev by Stalin's title of "general secretary." Not Holyoake's mistake, but the Soviet publicity for it, suggested that Khrushchev might be making a bold bid for Stalin's old title, and therefore for the powers which had been associated with it. I decided to test this hypothesis by examining the evidence more closely, at the same time investigating the general proposition that minute symbolic changes bearing on sensitive political questions embody hidden messages, and can therefore be made to yield important evidence about the Soviet leadership. A few weeks of research led to a series of discoveries:

(1) When I examined Stalin's obituaries to see how they treated his famous title of general secretary, I was surprised to learn that they did not even mention it.

(2) Further investigation showed that Soviet newspapers had not mentioned the title of party general secretary once in the two-and-a-half years from Stalin's death until the Holyoake telegram.

(3) The articles on Stalin in Soviet reference works published since his death disagreed remarkably as to whether Stalin had remained general secretary until his death in 1953 or had abandoned the post in October, 1952.

(4) A few weeks after publication of the Holyoake telegram which initiated this research, the journal *Kommunist* mentioned, for the first

time since Stalin's death, his incumbency as general secretary.

(5) Further attention to Khrushchev's official party title developed the minute fact which we have been using as an illustration, that just a few months previous to publication of the Holyoake telegram Pravda had changed Khrushchev's title by capitalizing its initial letter.

All of these discoveries, it will be noted, involve unobtrusive facts which are pregnant with political symbolism. They belong to a world of meaning which is largely closed to the ordinary reader of Soviet publications. To detect the most elusive of these symbolic facts a reader must anticipate them. He must expect to find something relevant to the object of his inquiry, although not necessarily the particular discovery which actually turns up. It follows that a Soviet specialist ought not simply to sit by the stream of Soviet communications and hope to fish out their hidden messages; he must cast into it at confluences where he believes a hidden message lies concealed. One is led to these confluences by reflection founded in knowledge of Soviet politics and an understanding of the current situation.

A pregnant symbolic fact may provide the stimulus to such reflection. One symbolic fact leads to another. That is why, when we stumble upon such a fact, we should not accept it uninterpreted, but ought to pursue its explanation. The first step in the pursuit, however, is not a frenzied search for more symbolic facts; it is rather to explain by means of a hypothesis the one we already have. Once the hypothesis is articulated, deductions can be drawn from it in order to test it. In order to form fruitful hypotheses and to make verifiable deductions from them, an assessment of the political situation is required.<sup>3</sup>

To illustrate the process of reflection set off by a suggestive symbolic fact, let us return to the telegram addressing Khrushchev as general secretary. The hypothesis set up to explain its publication is that Khrushchev used Holyoake's error in his effort to acquire Stalin's old office and the powers associated with it. From this hypothesis one can deduce the following: (1) Stalin's famous office of party general secretary was probably a highly sensitive topic at the time of his death and afterward; (2) Khrushchev's title as the senior secretary in the party Secretariat must have been even more sensitive. These deductions suggest where to look for hidden messages as well as what kind to expect.

One test of the validity of a hypothesis is its capacity to bring the researcher to important new evidence. If the search resulting from these deductions had disclosed nothing of political import—if Stalin's title of general secretary had been treated after his death in the same way as before, and if Khrushchev's party title had not been tampered with—then the hypothesis from which they were derived would have become less credible. Instead, by leading to the discovery of important political facts, the hypothesis gained a measure of confirmation. These discoveries also lent credence to the general thesis under examination, that esoteric communications play a key role in Soviet politics.

Another, and in some ways a better, test of a hypothesis is whether subsequent events support it, and particularly whether predictions deduced from it are confirmed. The predictions deduced from my interpretation of the Holyoake telegram and related evidence were, in my opinion, largely substantiated by subsequent events, including some which have followed publication of *The Rise of Khrushchev*. Khrushchev's assumption of the premiership in March 1958, for example, provides further evidence of his boundless ambition and his continuing need for authority as well as power. Moreover, the manner in which he has chosen to juxtapose his party and government titles is congruent with his personal strategy as the book reconstructs it. While the previous joint holders of the top party and government posts, Stalin and Malenkov, were designated "Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Secretary of the Central Committee," Khrushchev has reversed the order. By thus subordinating his government to his party office he has displayed his continuing concern to maintain the supremacy of the party apparatus. Again, his distinctive party title remains an important symbol of his special position: while Soviet publications usually referred to Stalin as "secretary," not "general secretary," they designate Khrushchev "First secretary."

The evidence that Soviet leaders commonly employ esoteric communications seems conclusive, however strange the practice may appear to Western observers. Men whose understanding of political reality has been formed by a free society find it difficult to suppose that piddling with stereotyped formulas can be an important mode of political behavior for powerful leaders. Even in default of the customary data used in political analysis, they are understandably reluctant to accept farreaching conclusions drawn from this elusive evidence. Yet the fact remains: these minutiae—no less than purges and policy debates—are the very stuff of Soviet politics. The frequency of esoteric

communications, and the ends served by them, may vary widely. But they will remain a necessary link between leaders and followers until such time as men are allowed to go openly into the Soviet political arena to seek support for their views. When politics, in this sense, ceases to be "anti-party" activity, the Soviet political system will have become something different from what Stalin made it, and what it remains today.

If esoteric communications play this vital role, then studying them should enable us to extend our knowledge of Soviet politics. Two questions arise in connection with such studies: what kinds of knowledge can they provide, and how should they be conducted?

The particular knowledge which can be obtained necessarily depends upon the content of the hidden messages which can be uncovered. In recent years, when factional conflict has permeated Soviet politics under cover of "collective leadership," hidden messages have chiefly served factional ends. But this has not always been true. In Stalin's last years, for example, although contending subordinate leaders used their limited access to publications for factional purposes, the most important esoteric communications were the dictator's programmatic pronouncements, which he delivered in an appropriately oracular style. Thus it should not be supposed that esoteric communications can be made to yield conclusions only about dissension among the leaders: important information on other intelligence problems can also be derived from them.

Until now, Soviet specialists have for the most part limited their search for hidden messages to *current* Soviet publications, hoping to find there clues to future developments. However, the uses of esoteric communication in research are not limited to short-run predictions.<sup>4</sup> Retrospective examination of Soviet publications in the light of subsequent events frequently reveals hidden messages which eluded contemporary investigation. Such esoteric communications, when considered in the light of the events which they helped bring about, can enhance our understanding of the situation in which they appeared. By such means, for example, the use of key institutions as power bases by contending leaders during the Stalin succession crisis might be considerably illuminated.

The second question which arises regarding studies of esoteric communication is how they should be conducted. The researcher who makes extensive use of symbolic evidence adopts special procedures,

develops uncommon skills, and accumulates abundant data. These can usefully be passed on to researchers who have had less experience in using such evidence. But such by-products of specialization should not be cultivated and exaggerated so as to produce a "methodology" to be set alongside other "methodologies." Esoteric communications are simply one kind of evidence to be woven in with other data in analyzing Soviet politics. The rigorous and exhaustive analysis of such minutiae can produce significant results only if the researcher maintains a broad political outlook and considers other relevant evidence in arriving at his conclusions.

If, as we have emphasized, an assessment of the political situation enters into every inference drawn from symbolic facts, how can an evaluator engaged in making a departmental or national estimate take such inferences into account unless he fully shares the specialist's estimate of the political situation? All that is required is that the specialist's inference be fitted into the evaluator's estimate of the political situation. This fitting-in may make necessary some modification of the evaluator's earlier views, and therein lies the specialist's contribution to finished intelligence. Few of our beliefs about the current Soviet political situation are so firmly based that they cannot benefit from new evidence.

To illustrate, imagine that a specialist skilled in the interpretation of symbolic evidence brings this Holyoake telegram to the generalist evaluator in December 1955. The specialist, having analyzed the telegram and related symbolic evidence in the light of his concept of Soviet politics and of the particular situation in late 1955, has concluded that Khrushchev is actively engaged in destroying the collective leadership. After being presented with this conclusion and with the argument on which it is based, the evaluator, who may believe that Khrushchev is satisfied to act simply as the spokesman for a collective leadership, must set these views against his own. He must then inquire into the grounds for his own belief: it has been reported that Khrushchev's colleagues show him no special deference in the presence of Western officials; Soviet propaganda extols collective leadership and criticizes the "cult of the individual"; Khrushchev lacks a dictator's bearing and self-control; and so forth.

Are these grounds adequate to maintain the view that Khrushchev's power and ambitions are no threat to collective leadership, despite the symbolic evidence which has been interpreted to support the opposite

view? The evaluator may believe so; but he ought not simply to dismiss the symbolic facts which have been brought to his attention. If he rejects the specialist's explanation of them, he should try himself to provide an interpretation which is not inconsistent with his estimate of Khrushchev's political position. His explanation of the symbolic evidence must be a plausible one, as the specialist's is. If he is unable to develop such an interpretation, the evaluator should recognize that his estimate has become less credible. He must be prepared to alter it if subsequent events (e.g., Khrushchev's secret speech) cast fresh doubt upon it.

By this or some similar procedure the researches of "talmudists," as of Soviet specialists generally, can be more widely exploited by those who must estimate future political developments in the U.S.S.R. These researches can provide new evidence on important problems; they can bring plausible hypotheses to areas of admitted ignorance; they can raise provocative objections to views held uncritically. More generally, in minds which have not been closed to their influence, they can stimulate reflection about the very nature of the Soviet political system.

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1 The role of esoteric communication in Soviet politics is discussed at some length in *The Rise of Khrushchev*, pp. 88-94.

2 It is noteworthy that in discussing my book in the last issue of this journal the reviewer evades this difficulty through an inadvertence. In treating this evidence he grows inattentive and misrepresents the conclusion which was drawn from it. According to the review: "Initially [Khrushchev] was designated 'first secretary,' then 'First Secretary,' and finally 'First secretary,' all of this purportedly reflecting the ups and downs of his political fortunes." The book, however, does not infer ups and downs but only two rises in his power; the form First Secretary was used only twice, a few days apart.

3 Without making some assessment of the political situation it is logically impossible to draw any inference from symbolic evidence; one cannot draw valid inferences without taking account of the many complex factors which influence Soviet developments. It is an error, then, to suppose that there is a method (the reviewer chooses to call it "content analysis") which makes it possible for inferences to be developed independently from the symbols and then "placed side by side with inferences developed by other means."

4 An important historical study based on such evidence is *The Ritual of Liquidation*, by N. Leites and E. Bernaut.

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