

ALEXANDER DALLIN

## Bias and Blunders in American Studies on the USSR

We have often been scornful of the layman's ignorance and misunderstanding of Soviet affairs—and not without reason. The resting place of American views of Russia and communism is littered with the carcasses of incomprehension and misperception which, were they not so sad, would be funny. It has been a pathetic and perdurable obsession, ever since the dispatch in November 1917 that Lenin had died in Switzerland two years earlier and that the impostor who was taking over Petrograd was some unknown named Zederblum;<sup>1</sup> and the rhapsodic exclamations of those who “had seen the future” in Lenin's Russia and found that “it works.” Until the Second World War countless Americans “still envisaged the Russian social structure in terms of bomb-and-whisker Bolshevik stereotypes: sexual promiscuity; easy and cheap divorce (twenty cents); the encouragement of abortion; the abandonment of babies; the weaning away of children by the state; and the encouragement of defiance among the younger generation.”<sup>2</sup> And during the war, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow assured his audience that Stalin's word was “as safe as the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

American attitudes and views, it has been correctly remarked, have often revealed more about the United States than about the USSR. Even those who had every opportunity to be informed, such as newspapermen and government officials, predicted time and again that the Soviet regime was about to collapse, go capitalist, be overthrown, or launch a major attack on the West. One public figure predicted in 1956: “Within the next twenty years, Soviet Communism will collapse under the weight of its economic fallacies, its political

1. *The North American Review*, cited in Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 33–34.

2. Thomas A. Bailey, *America Faces Russia* (Ithaca, 1950), p. 292. In a Senate speech on April 28, 1920, Senator Henry L. Myers denounced the Bolshevik barbarians for “nationalizing” all women, destroying “the home, the fireside, the family, the cornerstones of civilization,” and undertaking to demolish “what God created and ordained.” As Filene puts it, “The Bolsheviks became convenient monsters to be dressed with one's favorite prejudices or fears” (*Americans and the Soviet Experiment*, p. 46).

3. *Daily Worker* (New York), Feb. 25, 1942.

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I am grateful to Professor Herbert S. Dinerstein, SAIS, the Johns Hopkins University, for stimulating me to do some thinking on this subject in connection with the series of conferences he has been chairing. I do not profess to provide here a systematic analysis of Soviet studies but deal selectively with some troublesome aspects of Soviet problems.

follies, and the pressure of a restive, discontented population. These pressures will increase with the rise and spread of education amongst the Russian people. Practical ways and means will be found by the free world to pierce the Iron Curtain and bring home to the Russian people the facts and the truth. The Soviet empire will fall apart as one satellite after another attains its own liberation. The Communist hierarchy will destroy itself by internal struggles for power and will be displaced by a military dictatorship, which, in turn, will give way to representative government."<sup>4</sup> And each such forecast could be matched by another, foreseeing on the contrary the relentless forward march of conquering Red hordes.

Understandably there has been confusion and uncertainty, even in official quarters. A few years ago the then vice-president of the United States, Hubert H. Humphrey, confessed: "I knew so little about Russian history that I was very poorly equipped intellectually or by experience or by aptitude to deal with the top man of the Soviet Union. . . . And so few of our people in public life have any knowledge at all of these areas of the world, so few of us. We deal so superficially, it's really almost frightening how superficial we are. And is it any wonder that we have such misleading headlines?"<sup>5</sup>

To the policy-maker the Communist world was a baffling conundrum long before Vietnam appeared on his mental map. On July 8, 1918, Woodrow Wilson wrote Colonel House: "I have been sweating blood over the question what is right and feasible to do in Russia. It goes to pieces like quicksilver under my touch. . . ."<sup>6</sup> And in 1961, when in a briefing on John F. Kennedy's boat, off Hyannis Port, the discussion shifted to "Communist China," the president called forward, "Jackie, we need the Bloody Marys now!"<sup>7</sup>

But how much better have we "professionals" done? I need not dwell on the remarkable growth of Soviet studies in the United States—not only in numbers but also in quality and sophistication.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is precisely because the best work has been of such high quality that we must, I submit, be more

4. David Sarnoff, *Looking Ahead* (New York, 1968), p. 267.

5. Address at the Annual Dinner of the American Council of Learned Societies, Washington, D.C., Jan. 20, 1966; in *ACLS Newsletter*, January–February 1966, p. 10.

6. Charles Seymour, ed., *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, 4 vols. (Boston, 1926–28), 3:398.

7. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (New York, 1965), p. 423.

8. For standard surveys of studies of the USSR see, for example, Walter Laqueur and Leopold Labedz, eds., *The State of Soviet Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); Harold H. Fisher, ed., *American Research on Russia* (Bloomington, Ind., 1959); Marshall D. Shulman, "The Future of Soviet Studies in the United States," *Slavic Review*, 29, no. 3 (September 1970): 582–88; and Walter Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution* (New York, 1967).

seriously and systematically concerned with the persistent failures in our efforts to understand and explain Soviet reality—past, present, and future.

What follows, then, is an exercise in *kritika* and *samokritika*, admittedly selective and impressionistic—though it would be easy to provide the needed apparatus for those who require the paraphernalia of quantification to be persuaded of the characteristic errors of our ways. It is not to belittle what has been achieved, but in order to learn from our record, that I hope to stimulate some discussion of the reasons why in retrospect our hypotheses about Soviet power, purpose, and policy have often been woefully wide of the mark.

I am not here concerned with errors of specific fact, be it Soviet harvest statistics, or the year of Karl Radek's death, or the organization of the Central Committee Secretariat. These errors are natural and under the circumstances unavoidable. It is more bothersome that serious blunders occurred in the middle range of analysis—that is, in what should be the most promising and fruitful dimension of our research.<sup>9</sup> Thus it used to be axiomatic that the Soviet system required an omnipotent dictator. Well, where is he today? And what lessons have we drawn from his absence? Ten years ago a panel of highly qualified experts agreed that the Soviet Union could not, in the foreseeable future, both catch up with the United States in strategic weapons and also increase the standard of living of its population. It has done so. Ten to fifteen years ago most specialists on the USSR held that Moscow would not sign and abide by any international treaty limiting its production, testing, or deployment of nuclear weapons. But it has done so. Virtually none of us would have envisaged, five years ago, that the Soviet authorities could permit tens of thousands of their Jewish citizens to emigrate, whatever the conditions and difficulties.

In other cases, no doubt, it would still be a matter of some dispute what was and what was not an error (for example, the role of ideology in Soviet policy-making). But some things are beyond the threshold of legitimate differences of opinion. Thus, to us as a group, Khrushchev's rise was as much of a surprise as was his downfall; de-Stalinization as much as Stalin's partial rehabilitation; the Czech "Spring" as much as the following "Winter." The Stalin-Tito feud was as unexpected as the Sino-Soviet dispute; indeed, after each of these had become manifest, a number of reputable specialists still insisted that "it could not be." Moscow's recent reconciliation with Bonn was as startling as was the Soviet willingness in May 1972 to proceed with the Nixon visit after the mining and bombing of Haiphong and Hanoi. The question that suggests itself is whether there is any pattern that underlies these blunders.

9. See Robert K. Merton, *On Theoretical Sociology* (New York, 1967), chap. 2.

We need not, I submit, engage in orgies of self-flagellation over our failure to predict discrete events. Not only observers at a distance (with the scant information at their disposal, for example, about elite attitudes and leadership conflicts in the Soviet Union) but even insiders are unable to predict specific occurrences. The classic example is Nikita Khrushchev's own failure to anticipate his ouster in October 1964. He, of all people, surely should have had access to the relevant intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

Soviet history is as full of the unexpected as every other kind of history. Our failure to foresee individual events should not, in itself, bother us. What must concern us, however, is whether such occurrences fit, or do not fit, into the open-ended range of outcomes which we had deemed to be possible on the basis of what we knew or assumed before. Thus, when the Politburo ousts Khrushchev (and the Central Committee approves), manifestly the axiom which says that the power of the Number One man in the Soviet system cannot be successfully challenged needs to be overhauled. When it is argued that the Soviet system must rely on massive coercion because popular loyalty or socialization will never suffice to dispense with purges and mass terror, and then the regime does dispense with them, clearly the time has come to re-examine some underlying assumptions.

Logically the source of all such misperceptions and misconceptions can lie (1) with the object of our observation, (2) with the observer, or (3) with the process or method of observation and analysis. I am prepared to argue that in varying degrees all three have indeed been at fault.

It is self-evident that many of the problems inherent in the study of the Soviet Union stem from the nature of the information available to us. Be it the dynamics of real wages, the extent to which Soviet leaders genuinely fear the United States, Germany, or China, or whether party bureaucrats are inherently conservative, all too often we simply do not know or at best have but tenuous shreds of evidence to go by.

The Soviet definition of what is a state secret goes well beyond what might seem natural to us. This is, after all, the sole *raison d'être* of the whole business of kremlinology. It is not the absence of information alone, however, that has hampered foreign observers. No less serious is the problem of "disinformation." The reader of even the best of Soviet textbooks is struck by the selectivity and falsification intended to support mandatory "conclusions." No

10. In another instance (a Polish diplomat relates), when in October 1962 the duty officer at the foreign office reported to Władysław Gomułka that, according to President Kennedy, Khrushchev was emplacing nuclear missiles in Cuba, Gomułka reportedly replied, "Nonsense: Khrushchev isn't such a fool as to do that!" For a recent discussion of the literature on social science prediction, see Lloyd Jensen, "Predicting International Events," *Peace Research Reviews*, 4, no. 6 (1972): 1-46.

doubt we have all at some point been duped by more subtle distortions of which we had not yet become aware.

Less obvious perhaps is our unwitting reception of Soviet stereotypes and jargon. I am persuaded that some of our past willingness to believe in the totality of the Soviet leader's power, his purposefulness and omniscience, and in the Orwellian images of irreversible socialization and compliance, reflects the effect on us of Soviet ritual reiterations of "monolithic unanimity" and insistence on the "scientific" nature of Soviet analysis and policy-making.

Most important, I suspect, has been the widespread acceptance of Soviet assertions that there is "no accident," compounded by Moscow's failure to acknowledge unintended and inconvenient change. We are familiar with Soviet concern for ideological legitimacy, the denial of spontaneity, and resistance to the recognition of anything unforeseen, unplanned, or unwanted. Thus, being unable to deal openly with any evidence of deviation, variation, or failure within the system, the Soviet elite is "objectively" doing itself a serious disservice by clinging to irrelevant categories, denying (and at times, no doubt, failing to perceive) the disutility of orthodox perspectives—as well as their actual erosion. Thus they cannot acknowledge their increasing conservatism, or their proclivity for incremental change rather than new "revolutions from above." They cannot ventilate the problems of divergent interests crystallizing in an increasingly complex and differentiated society. The whole phenomenon of dissent and *samizdat* cannot be openly discussed. It fits neither their nor our conventional wisdom about the Soviet system; in fact, it makes nonsense of the standard defining characteristics of the regime.

As a result, the observer tends to be uncertain about the dimensions of such phenomena. If Soviet controls prevent our learning about sociopolitical cleavages, policy conflicts, and the values and concerns of the average citizen, they also make it impossible to disprove or test exaggerated or unfounded foreign assertions of weakness, near-collapse, or aggressive designs. Clearly the "object" itself bears responsibility for many of our blunders—partly because the Soviet authorities want it that way; partly, in spite of themselves. But this we have known, or should have known, all along.

It is conceivable that the quality and characteristics of the observer have something to do with the inadequacy of his observation. I find, however, that this is scarcely the case. As a group, American specialists on the Soviet Union measure up to those in any other field, in intellect and in professional skill. I know of no reason to think that the incidence of duds in Soviet studies is any greater than in other areas. Even if we limit our consideration to the writings of the most authoritative and seminal members of the craft (however defined or arrived at), we still wind up with a remarkable catalogue of hypotheses and assumptions later abandoned or disproved.

The background and experience of the men and women studying Soviet affairs deserve closer scrutiny than I can give them here. There is the familiar problem of the ex-Communist, who possesses both special expertise and often (but not always) a proclivity to swing to the other extreme. There is the fairly high number of scholars of East European background and of Russian refugees, including some with pronounced political commitments. Such traits do not necessarily constitute a source of systematic bias, but though they often give the specialist particular cultural and linguistic advantages, they may also engender predispositions in favor of certain conceptual schemes and resistance to others.

Since, however, the problem of error is scarcely less severe if we limit our sample to "academic WASPs" without the burden of such political or ethnic backgrounds, we can for the purposes of this discussion dismiss the question. The same is substantially true of experts with prior work experience in the government or in government-connected research institutions. Although such a record is apt to impart particular attitudes and perspectives, it remains true that some of the most searching and original work has come from experts formerly employed by the RAND Corporation, the Foreign Service, or the CIA.

By contrast, we cannot ignore another dimension of the environment impinging on the observer: the unwitting intrusion of politics into academic studies. Let me make clear that I am not suspecting any purposive or conspiratorial effort to make academics or bureaucrats "running dogs" of a political mafia (or of "ruling circles"). But there remains the troubling circumstance that one finds an empirically observable congruence between the political temper of the times and the general thrust of dominant interpretations by specialists on the USSR. With some remarkable exceptions, not many specialists dealing with Soviet problems—in government or in academic life—have been entirely immune to the dominant currents of public opinion, public policy, and public mood.<sup>11</sup> It will not do to dismiss this as an accident or artifact. The kindest and I believe often correct way of looking at this congruence is to posit that the same things that generate changes in public outlook and policy—presumably new data or events—also stimulate changes in the experts' professional orientation.

Yet it is also true that many an American analyst has erred on the side of unwarranted rigidity and certainty, unduly minimizing the alternative ways in which the Soviet system could behave or develop, foreclosing options and

11. The late Henry L. Roberts was one of the few who articulated this concern. In addressing the first convention of the AAASS ("Frontiers of Slavic Studies") he remarked, "It properly makes us uneasy to find our thoughts and research appearing as dependent variables of the vicissitudes of the great world of power, conflict, and political responsibility."

denying indeterminacy. This tendency has characteristically gone hand in hand with a belief in the uniqueness of the Soviet regime and the implied tenet that it is essentially a static system of controls and power, values and goals.

Thus we find two major tendencies which subtract from the objectivity of scholarly analysis: (1) the shifting winds of public moods—and of Soviet-American relations, in particular—subtly informing the specialist's assessment of the USSR (and not only of its present but also of its past); and (2) a hard core of persistent ideological preconceptions which tend to bias the analysis of Soviet policies and trends.

For many years, especially in the 1930s and during the Second World War, a heavy dose of naïveté and wishful thinking colored the dominant interpretations of Soviet reality. These traits have often been remarked upon. Let me focus instead on the opposite and (to my mind) no less serious distortions which form a syndrome that we must associate with the dominant beliefs of the cold war era.<sup>12</sup> It may well be that one of its sources was precisely a reaction to the earlier foolishness. Its tenacity was no doubt reinforced by the circumstance that many of us chose to make Soviet studies our life's work in some measure because of the international situation brought about by the Second World War and the impact of *rigor mortis* Stalinism. We can find this "cold war syndrome" in a wide range of subtle but rather pervasive manifestations, ranging from the trivial to the essential. A few random examples may suggest their scope.

One is the addiction to quotation-mongering—another element of style carried over from Soviet practice into our own. It is as easy for a non-Communist as it is for a Soviet or Chinese propagandist to find a suitable quotation from Lenin or the Marxist classics, whatever the current "general line." The temptation is always to cite the most extreme and dramatic statement, on the unstated and unproved assumption that it reflects the true sentiments of the Bolsheviks (regardless of medium, context, or target audience), whereas all the "softer" ones are mere window dressing or tactics (something which in any particular case may or may not be true). Thus it has been standard procedure to quote from the "ultraleftist" Third Period of the Comintern rather than from the "united front" endeavors that preceded and followed it. But, even forgetting about particular referents, what is open to challenge is the underlying assumptions that one can tellingly clinch an argument by quoting from authoritative sources and that such citations suffice to demonstrate what Moscow is up to, a generation or two later. Moreover, we have assumed that aggressive Soviet rhetoric is a clue to behavior—not a substitute for it or an alibi

12. I am quite willing to acknowledge that my own concern with this problem—though it is, I am persuaded, a genuine one—may also reflect the changing character of the times and in particular of Soviet-American relations.

for inaction—and that if once true, this was bound to remain so. I believe these have been largely problems of ideology, not methodology, on our part. But while the talmudism persists in much of the Communist world, we may be mercifully growing out of this particular infantile disorder.<sup>13</sup>

A different kind of unwitting politicization is exemplified by several studies depicting the Bolsheviks in 1917 as German agents. At the time of the Revolution this was, of course, a widespread view among their adversaries. In retrospect it is scarcely a tenable argument. It does, however, serve (probably quite subconsciously) to make the Bolshevik takeover somehow “un-Russian” (not unlike the assumptions behind the late Un-American Activities Committee or the tendency of local authorities and university administrators to blame disturbances on “outside troublemakers”).

Petty but symptomatic of another kind of bias, I believe, has been the obsession with trivia that seem to conceal something politically derogatory—often requiring a totally disproportionate research effort by illustrious scholars. I have in mind such questions as whether Lenin had a Kalmyk or Jewish grandmother (or a mistress) or whether Stalin had once been an Okhrana informer.

Still, the pursuit of such questions is, in the last analysis, a matter of personal interest and taste. More pernicious has been the tacit and quite unwitting selectivity in the choice of trends and topics to be researched and brought to public attention. In the years of the cold war, the overconcentration on “applied scholarship” to the detriment of straight academic topics was an entirely natural but nonetheless regrettable phenomenon. Until recently there was similarly a disproportionate concern with political issues and a corresponding neglect of social and cultural trends. All too often this has gone hand in hand with a general reluctance to acknowledge *any* positive accomplishments in the Soviet period, as if the image of the system must be primitively homogeneous in all respects.

Two or three recent examples may illustrate this point. In the last few years we have witnessed new Soviet attempts to tighten political controls over arts and letters; but some of our colleagues who (properly) bemoan this trend never got themselves to recognize that these controls had earlier been loosened at all. And a good many of those who (very justly) condemned the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 had never acknowledged that the country had slipped from its erstwhile satellite status in the first place. I also detect a novel nostalgia for Nikita Khrushchev on the part of some colleagues who evinced no particular affection for him while he was in office.

13. A related phenomenon has been the (perfectly understandable and innocent) proliferation of dissertations dealing with the writings and pronouncements of individual leaders—a corpus obviously easier to survey than their behavior.



On a more abstract level, some ten years ago many observers took note of Soviet promises to boost living standards and ultimately to overtake the United States. One noted scholar reacted with consternation that this only made the Communists more dangerous, because it was bound to make the Soviet Union more appealing. And another promptly provided an ideological rationale for unremitting hostility. Since when, he remarked, is material plenty a measure for the achievements of a civilization, anyway? In the event, of course, the contingency never arose.

The general instinct was thus, in case of doubt, to opt for the "harder" of alternative interpretations. To be sure, such a predisposition had been conditioned by bitter experience and earlier disappointments which had made some commentators and analysts look foolish. But there was more to it. The impulse was evidently based on an intuitive and often well-founded belief (especially, but not only, within the government) that a person never incurred a risk to his professional reputation by taking a "hard" line—even if later such a posture proved to have been unwarranted—whereas there seemed to be grounds for fearing that one would be considered gullible or incompetent if one opted for a "soft" interpretation of Soviet conduct or trends.<sup>14</sup>

The complementary belief (as Herbert S. Dinerstein has put it) was that an "error in judgment [regarding Soviet intentions] might have momentous consequences" and therefore that "doubts have been generally resolved in the direction of the worst possible outcome." Hence the general conclusion that "judgments therefore of Soviet politics have been more prudential than analytical."<sup>15</sup>

Who cannot recall some of the countries which—we were told—Moscow was taking over or was about to seize? Greece, Finland, Ghana, Guinea, Egypt, the Congo, Indonesia, Iraq, and all the rest. Was there ever a corresponding acknowledgment that these countries were in fact not under Soviet control or no longer actively threatened (if they ever had been)? One need hardly dwell on the possible implications of such a tendency, which (if anyone took us at all seriously) could easily set off patterns of self-fulfilling prophecies.

To focus on this set of persistent biases is by no means to deny the distorting effects of other orientations. In the eyes of some observers—and not

14. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to the tendency to prefer an attribution of malicious intent to a more neutral interpretation (e.g., inertia, incompetence, bureaucratic inefficiency, or uncertainty) whenever developments could be explained either way.

15. Herbert S. Dinerstein, "The Soviet Outlook," in Robert E. Osgood et al., *America and the World* (Baltimore, 1970), p. 79. There may also be nonpolitical components built into political predictions of this sort. As Lloyd Jensen remarks, "There is a tendency toward conservatism in human prediction, particularly in a situation in which a subordinate is reporting to a superior." He relates this to the "fear of being wrong" ("Predicting International Events," p. 17).

only the revisionist students of the origins of the cold war—the indictment of United States motives and behavior since the escalation of the Vietnam War has made Soviet purposes and actions, by contrast, appear more benign and virginal than they used to seem. But, while a reassessment of Soviet motives may well be in order, it must surely not become, as in a zero-sum game, the residue (or by-product) of the allocation of blame and virtue on the United States.

Methodological problems in Soviet studies have invited extensive comment in recent years.<sup>16</sup> There is little point in rehearsing them here. But surely some of our conceptual blunders have been related to assumptions in the selection, analysis, and interpretation of data. Unfortunately there is no simple way out. A good computer run is preferable to a misleading guess; and a sound instinct is more valuable than pages of unhelpful tables.

Neither a descriptive-intuitive approach nor more rigorous social science methods can provide insurance against bias or blunder. Essentially intuitive judgments may be right or wrong but scarcely provide models which can be replicated or taught. Long-range assessments and generalizations are often by definition incapable of proof or disproof—for example, whether advanced industrial systems will ultimately converge (whatever this means) or whether the Soviet government pursues “Russian national interests.” This makes the statements less than helpful.

Yet the introduction of refined techniques and sophisticated concepts (for example, from the behavioral sciences, theories of development, or organization theory) and the use of quantitative methods (for example, in tracing career patterns or in content analysis) do not get around the problem of unwitting bias. The selection of issues and indicators, and the interpretation of data are bound to reflect prior hypotheses. To be made meaningful, even the most “objective” data require extraneous assumptions, where ignorance of Soviet conditions is as likely to lead the analyst astray (however superb his skills in computer programming or regression analysis) as is the persistence of area specialists in faulty or obsolete premises.

Only a few characteristic tendencies can be mentioned here. They do not all tend in the same direction of political bias; but it will be apparent that some of them tend to reinforce the syndrome I have alluded to in the preceding pages.

16. See, for example, Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution*; Sidney Ploss, ed., *The Soviet Political Process* (Waltham, Mass., 1971); Frederic Fleron, ed., *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences* (Chicago, 1970); Roger Kanet, ed., *The Behavioral Revolution in Communist Studies* (New York, 1971); and T. Harry Rigby, “Totalitarianism and Change in Communist Systems,” *Comparative Politics*, April 1972, p. 433 ff.

There used to be (and to some extent still is) a widespread failure to be aware of the *sui generis* meaning of Soviet terms, their provenience and their connotations in prior Communist rhetoric. (“Economism” and “great-power chauvinism” are among obvious examples that come to mind.) Less demonstrably, an earlier tendency to take Soviet pronouncements at face value has often yielded to the contrary assumption that all Soviet evidence is bound to be deceptive and hence useless; statistics cannot be trusted; differences in public formulations are all contrived; official statements are intended to deceive or indoctrinate. Hence it is best to ignore all Soviet sources.

The complementary tendency has been to project categories and processes familiar to us from other systems onto the Soviet scene. The tendency to analogize in the absence of evidence—say, about functions and relations—is understandable but risky. To some extent this may also have applied to the tendency of erstwhile students or victims of Hitlerism to bracket the Nazi and Soviet regimes as exhibits of the same genus.

Our inability to test hypotheses by empirical evidence is also at the root of two other kinds of distortion. One is the perfectly natural and desirable effort to fabricate “models” that conform to some salient features of Soviet reality, and then to explain subsequent events in terms of such an untestable framework. We forget too easily that models are necessarily fictions, and are valuable as heuristic devices, not as mirrors of the Soviet system and not endowed with predictive attributes. And we have all too readily assumed that once the Soviet Union “conforms” to a model in certain particulars, it must fit such an ideal type in every respect and forever after.

The assumption that a model would provide us with continuing insights was one of the fallacies underlying the “totalitarian” vogue, which has been sufficiently explored and exploded elsewhere not to require rearguing here.<sup>17</sup> It was also responsible for more specific myths, such as the once common view that the Soviet leadership had a “timetable of conquest” or a “blueprint of world revolution” which it was attempting to implement. The same sort of misconception underlay our belief in “aggression” as typical of Soviet foreign policy behavior. And it gave rise to the working assumption that, whenever a new Soviet proposal was made, Moscow’s intentions need not be tested, because “we already knew what they were up to.”<sup>18</sup>

17. On “totalitarianism” and its implications see, in addition to Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); Carl J. Friedrich et al., *Totalitarianism in Perspective* (New York, 1969); Robert Burrowes, “Totalitarianism: The Revised Standard Version,” *World Politics*, January 1969, pp. 272–94; Herbert Spiro, “Totalitarianism,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), 16:106–13; and Leonard Schapiro, *Totalitarianism* (London, 1972).

18. As a student of earlier American attitudes toward Russia commented, “Those

Now it is true that, everything else being equal, it is proper to assume a continuity of existing trends. Soviet policy-makers themselves bear some responsibility for the myths of continuity. Yet this assumption of linearity has in turn served to make many observers impervious to both the reality and the logic of changes in the Soviet system and to permit a facile rationalization for intellectual and bureaucratic indolence by invoking formulae such as "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

There is also the fallacy of misplaced analogies. Book after book, article after article have sought to trace a "deadly parallel" between Ivan the Dread and Stalin, between Peter the Great's "ruthless modernization" and the Soviet performance, between secretiveness in the days of the Marquis de Custine and the controls under Lavrentii Beria. However suggestive of continuities of political culture, such exercises tend to mislead more than to inform, as they ignore differences in development and context. But in their ideological overtones they also tend to reinforce the stereotypes of the "Scratch a Russian . . ." variety.

In its most extreme form the "durability of dictatorship" school leads some of our colleagues to disdain the painstaking efforts at microanalysis of Soviet politics. Put more crudely, their argument has been that we are wasting our time if we try to study day-by-day developments and minutiae of official rhetoric or shifts of personnel.<sup>19</sup>

The difficulties of data-gathering are also responsible for another source

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who complained of distorted information about Soviet Russia falsely assumed that Americans would revise their views if given the facts. On the contrary, the distortion was in itself an attitude—the attitude that contrary facts could not be true' (Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment*, pp. 68–69). In addition, American students of Soviet foreign policy frequently failed to give proper weight (1) to the reactive aspects of Soviet policy, and (2) to the impact of the behavior of other states on internal elite arguments and assessments of the international "correlation of forces," even if such effects were not promptly or visibly translated into Soviet foreign-policy behavior.

For some further comments on American assessments of Soviet foreign policy see also William Welch, *American Images of Soviet Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1970); William Welch and Jan F. Triska, "Soviet Foreign Policy Studies and Foreign Policy Models," *World Politics*, July 1971, pp. 704–17; Herbert S. Dinerstein, *Intervention Against Communism* (Baltimore, 1967); William Zimmerman, "Elite Perspectives and the Explanation of Soviet Foreign Policy," *Journal of International Affairs*, 24, no. 1 (1970): 84–98, and his "Soviet Foreign Policy Goals in the 1970's," *Survey*, no. 87 (Spring 1973), pp. 188–98. On fallacies in models of Soviet behavior see also the review article by Harvey Fireside, "Analyzing Soviet Affairs: Methods and Myths," *Problems of Communism*, May–June 1972, pp. 77–79.

19. Rather pathetically a senior scholar once warned against too readily accepting evidence of change in the Soviet system. Every zig, he maintained, had always been followed by a zag; and in his entire lifetime of experience things had invariably wound up "right back where they started, only worse." But what, I recall asking him, if some day there should be genuine and significant new departures—how would he tell? He replied disarmingly: "It won't happen—but if it does, I'll be sure to miss it."

of bias: reliance on evidence or analysis provided by those who have access to the desired information—and this means above all the United States government. Such dependence has been inevitable. Indeed, as with the “secret” Khrushchev speech of 1956 or periodic compilations and analyses of Soviet economic data, officially released information has been of substantial value to private scholars and analysts. But there is no way to verify such materials independently (or else we would not need them). At times we have been at the mercy of self-serving officialdom when they are the only ones who can tell us whether, for example, Moscow is willing to settle outstanding debts, mediate the Vietnam conflict, conclude an arms-control agreement, or reach tacit accords on the “rules of the game” in international relations. Especially in regard to assumptions implicit in government-sponsored information, there has often resulted a symbiotic relationship which at worst has been parasitic and at best has stimulated a vicious circle in which government-sponsored research helps shape the work of private scholars, which in turn serves to reinforce the conceptions and biases of official agencies. A perfectly innocent process, it has nonetheless been a dangerous invitation to the self-perpetuation of fallacies.

As in other fields, there has been a substantial time-lag in the American apperception of trends in the Soviet Union. This too is rooted partly in Soviet failure to acknowledge unintended or secular change, and partly in the reaction against the “journalistic” overinterpretation of atmospherics. George F. Kennan once remarked that American opinion has typically been something like a decade behind the times in responding to developments in the Soviet Union: “Not until the late Twenties . . . did it begin to be generally recognized in this country that a revolution had taken place in Russia of such strength and depth that it was destined to enter permanently into the fabric of our time. When F.D.R. recognized the Soviet government in 1933, he was acting largely on an image drawn from the Russia of Lenin’s day. . . . Even in World War II, Roosevelt’s view of Russia, and that of many other Americans, was one that took little account of the purges, little account of the degree of commitment Stalin had incurred by virtue of his own crimes and excesses—a commitment which would have made it impossible for him to be a comfortable associate [of the U.S.]. . . .” Writing in the Khrushchev era, Kennan added: “Today, there are many equally worthy people who appear to be discovering for the first time that there was such a thing as the Stalin era, and who evidently have much difficulty in distinguishing it from what we have known since 1953. I could even name professional ‘sovietologists,’ private and governmental, who seem afraid to admit to themselves or to others that Stalin is really dead.”<sup>20</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, an analogous case could be made today.

20. George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston, 1961), pp. 396–97.

Some recent comments on methodology—in the social sciences generally and Soviet studies in particular—have pointed out features which have contributed to the tendency to oversimplify and streamline, and to understate the elements of diversity in Soviet polity and society. A case in point is the reification of heterogeneous institutions into stereotyped singulars, such as “the party” or “the military.” Another is the static bias which has led to the assumption of stable patronage networks: it requires little research to discover instances of “clients” turning on their masters or betraying their patrons’ political outlook—be it Khrushchev vis-à-vis Stalin or Brezhnev vis-à-vis Khrushchev. And a third is the temptation to provide simple and sweeping answers to complex questions, as if the difficult problems of perception, objectives, and motivation could be disposed of by monistic reference to “Russian national interests,” “the urge to the sea,” “swaddling,” the use of Pavlovian psychology in Soviet policy and propaganda, or ideology (or for that matter the “end of ideology”). Whereas “Russian” explanatory clichés—balalaikas, beards, bombs, and Berdiaev—appear to be on the wane, the corresponding arsenal of “Communist” stereotypes seems still to be well stocked.

Another example of the monochromatic approach is the stubborn rejection of the “conflict model” of Soviet politics and of “kremlinological” analysis. Several converging reasons seem to account for the tenacity of this point of view. Of these, at least one is manifestly political in nature; it is rarely stated so explicitly and blatantly as when a senior government analyst of Communist affairs cautioned me in 1963 against stressing the seriousness of the Sino-Soviet conflict, insisting that “to assert diversity in the Communist fold is to contribute to the moral disarmament of the West.” The notion of a single, scheming, relentless Communist “devil” has been deeply embedded in the American subconscious.<sup>21</sup>

A second reason is the impatience of the practitioners of diplomacy who, whether in Washington or in Moscow, have had little use for “consulting steaming entrails” (as a former U.S. ambassador referred to it). Linked to this facile disregard are two other and more substantial reasons. For one

21. See also Harold J. Berman, “The Devil and Soviet Russia,” *American Scholar*, Spring 1958, pp. 147–52. Such an orientation may well be related to what Richard Hofstadter called the “paranoid style” in American politics. For a variety of reasons Americans have been “inclined to conceptualize their relationship with the rest of the world in conspiratorial terms.” David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy* (Ithaca, 1971), p. xix.

On more than one occasion, however, American interpreters have seemed to insist simultaneously on incompatible opposites: both the omnipotence of Soviet control structures and the imminent collapse of the system; both the fanaticism of the Soviet leadership and its calculating rationality; both condemnation for their being Communists and gloating over their abandoning doctrinal orthodoxy; both their dependence on economic and technological assistance and know-how from abroad and the imminent prospect of the Soviet Union “overtaking” the West.

thing, there has, of course, been a good deal of “vulgar demonology” among instant experts and in the mass media, sometimes evolving crude notions of power struggles in the Kremlin—typically, exaggerating the purely personal aspects of elite conflicts—on a slim and often fictitious evidential base. Such nonsense has unfortunately served to discredit the more earnest efforts as well. And even among the “professionals” there has been a tendency to over-analyze, overinterpret, and overkill.

Finally, it is true that by its very nature it is hard to prove that “krem-linology” can be a valid technique productive of sound findings. Yet with the benefit of hindsight and perspective, the work of the best practitioners has stood up remarkably well,<sup>22</sup> and without thereby changing the minds of those rejecting it, it would seem.<sup>23</sup>

For years there was similar skepticism about “comparative studies” encompassing the USSR. Some deemed them impossible to undertake because (as one colleague put it) “there was nothing to compare,” since Communist and non-Communist systems had nothing in common. The fallacy of this approach need not be spelled out. Others demurred, because it seemed somehow compromising or immoral to put the Soviet Union on a par with Western democracies, if only for purposes of comparison. But apparently such hesitations have been overcome, and it is standard practice now to analyze, without moral overtones, different answers given by Soviet and other systems to common questions regarding polity, society, and economy.<sup>24</sup>

As a group we have, I suspect, been rather slow to challenge notions that are no longer viable. In large measure this exemplifies the fact that it is the specialties “that must scramble the hardest for data” which are “today

22. I have in mind the work of such men as Carl Linden, Michel Tatu, Roman Kolkowicz, Sidney Ploss, and Robert Conquest, however much they may differ among themselves.

23. For more systematic comments see, for example, Ploss, *Soviet Political Process*; Donald S. Zagoria, “A Note on Methodology,” in his *Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1956–1961* (Princeton, 1962); William E. Griffith, “On Esoteric Communication,” *Studies in Comparative Communism*, January 1970, pp. 47–54; Alexander Dallin and Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Issues and Methods,” in Alexander Dallin et al., eds., *Diversity in International Communism* (New York, 1963), pp. xxv–xliv.

I am not here concerned with the debate between “krem-linological” and “behavioral” protagonists, which strikes me as in large measure based on a false dilemma. For a recent discussion see Karl W. Ryavec, “Krem-linology or Behavioralism?” *Problems of Communism*, January–February 1973, pp. 81–85.

24. Suffice it to mention three volumes: Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel Huntington, *Political Power USA/USSR* (New York, 1964); Donald W. Treadgold, ed., *Soviet and Chinese Communism* (Seattle, 1967); and Chalmers Johnson, ed., *Change in Communist Systems* (Stanford, 1970).

least engaged in renewed theoretical concerns.”<sup>25</sup> In part we deal here with misplaced academic deference. And in part the problem is the genuine difficulty of what to put in the place of what one would discard (even though one might unkindly invoke Morris Raphael Cohen’s saying that upon cleaning out the Augean stables Hercules was not called upon to fill them again).

Some of the problems we have encountered are specific to the study of Russia—its culture and heritage, its language and institutions. Some of the other difficulties are generic to the social sciences as a whole or are shared by other area studies as well.<sup>26</sup> Assiduous American analysis of Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and more recently of Chinese affairs, has exhibited comparable shortcomings. It is also true that West European analysts of Soviet problems have done no better than their American brethren. And the United States itself—so accessible and so closely studied—has confounded the greatest experts by the turns and twists of public policy and public attitudes which, in the last few years, could not have been anticipated.

Although such a comparative glance may be reassuring, this does not diminish the challenge of our own failures, for—when all is said and recognized—there is still a lingering, and damaging, film of political preconceptions which has often made it difficult to “see it like it is”—diffuse premises and unspoken assumptions not related to any particular topic or body of evidence or any one discipline.

Some of the past distortions have been rooted in wishful thinking. Even during the post-Stalin period we may all have had lapses of overoptimism. As late as 1968 many competent students (along with Alexander Dubček) believed that Moscow would be constrained to tolerate systemic diversity and dissent within its sphere. Some of the more extravagant arguments about “convergence” and the periodic assertions (not by Maoists but by “capitalist” observers) that the Soviet Union is “reverting to capitalism” have been little better than silly. Indeed, we may be heading into another such phase of facile

25. David B. Truman, “Disillusion and Regeneration: The Quest for a Discipline,” *American Political Science Review*, December 1965, p. 870.

26. Similarly, public understanding of Soviet affairs may be no worse than of other areas. While most college students (in a national cross section, excluding freshmen) could in 1967 identify Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev, some 10 percent thought that the Soviet Union had fought on Germany’s side in World War II. But roughly one-quarter of the same sample could not identify Mao Tse-tung, and one-fifth could not properly place the Suez Canal. See Don D. Smith, “An American Elite’s Knowledge About the Soviet Union,” *World Affairs*, Spring 1972, pp. 344–51.

Sad to relate, another investigator, who asked a sample of journalists, military and civilian government personnel, and academics to make predictions, reports that “even when isolating the Soviet expert in terms of his predictions about Soviet behavior, his accuracy was shown to be no greater than that of persons with other specialties” (Jensen, “Predicting International Events,” p. 35).



optimism, in which experts will need to resist the dominant currents of public mythology.<sup>27</sup>

And yet, it seems to me, the most damaging patterns of misinterpretation have continued to be located at the opposite end of the spectrum. As some of my examples should have illustrated, the single most characteristic bias has been the denial of actual or latent diversity, variety, change, or choice. This has been only too congruent with the psychological requisites of the "image of the enemy," however sincere and painstaking the research which it has informed. The integrity of one's ideological set is facilitated by the perception of consistency on the part of the "adversary."<sup>28</sup>

Military planners are said to be bound to operate on the basis of "worst-case analysis." Given any situation in which two or more possible explanations or projections may fit the case, it is their predisposition to assume "worst things first." Unwittingly we have often been inclined to follow the same kind of prescription in our own work.

There is little we can do about the errors of analysis which are due to the nature of the Soviet system and the inherent limitations of the state of the art. Other blunders, however, have been due primarily to ourselves and to the biases which we unwittingly absorb from our political environment. If this is so, then a greater awareness of such shortcomings and a greater openness to alternative interpretations should be the first conditions for avoiding such failures in the future.

27. Walter Laqueur has argued that "on past occasions American public opinion has almost invariably erred on the side of exaggerated hopes, followed inevitably by feelings of equally unwarranted anticlimax." He warns that "now the era of regarding Marxism as evil incarnate has perhaps been replaced by what could be called the new age of false symmetry, the belief that Russia is much like the United States, a conservative, status quo power in foreign relations, sharing its desire to 'decommit without withdrawal symptoms'" (Laqueur, "The Cool War," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 12, 1972, p. 15).

28. One need not share his unduly benign view of Soviet policy to be impressed by Parenti's evidence and analysis of American attitudes toward communism. See Michael Parenti, *The Anti-Communist Impulse* (New York, 1969).