

CONTRIBUTIONS TO JOHN KEEP
AND LILIANA BRISBY (EDS),
CONTEMPORARY HISTORY
IN THE SOVIET MIRROR

PROFESSOR BERLIN said the discussion had centred on the question: was Burdzhhalov a brave and obstinate man or did he speak in the name of a powerful protector? The two things were not necessarily incompatible – he might have been a brave man and nevertheless received encouragement in his attitude. As we had no access to the individuals concerned, we could only discuss the question in the way one discussed problems in ancient history – in the light of general hypotheses. Perhaps the point made earlier by Dr Meijer was relevant here: that when people in the Soviet Union talked about an issue of principle, this meant that there was some connection between the point they raised and some important issue of current party politics. Like Burdzhhalov, Varga had persisted in his views, while people like Tarle had caved in. In the Stalin period Tarle had been attacked for his history of the Crimean War and taken to task for saying that there had been a swift Russian rehabilitation after the crushing military defeat (Lenin had spoken of a collapse); and also for saying that the Russian people had been defeated, on the ground that this perhaps had been the case of the Russian government, but never of the Russian people. Tarle did not defend himself; he simply rewrote the history. The same thing occurred with Syromyatnikov's book on Peter the Great. Could one infer from this that Tarle and Syromyatnikov had given way, because the Crimean War and Peter the Great were not issues of burning importance in 1944–5, whereas Varga and Burdzhhalov were raising questions of principle, i.e. issues which were current party issues as well and which therefore could not have been raised without the putative alliance of someone in the top leadership? Or were the differences in their reaction purely personal and psychological?

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Commenting on the infallibility of party and leader and the relation between Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism, Professor Berlin wondered to what extent people were right in thinking that Lenin betrayed Marx, Stalin betrayed Lenin, and so forth. The doctrine of infallibility was founded upon the proposition that the only way to get the right answer was by studying history, which yielded certain laws formulated by Marx; that these laws can only be discovered by certain people whose class position sharpens their awareness of things; that within this class there are the expert analysts of history who are scientists. If only really believed that Marxism is a science, then the Soviet system would appear not absurd, but perfectly coherent: for in that case it would be quite logical to have party experts to tell others what to do and to assume the role of spiritual directors. The belief that the whole art of government consists in being engineers of human souls could be deduced from the purest Marxist doctrine unadulterated by Stalinism.

As to the influence of ideas on Soviet practice, he wished to know whether the *Short Course* contained some specific ideological directive different from those embodied in the previous party histories written during the earlier years of the Soviet regime. Since ideas were officially of great importance, whatever the cynicism with which they were in fact treated, it would be interesting to know whether it was possible to write a kind of Soviet history of ideological progress. Were there various strands of dialectical materialism? Were some heresies denounced for purely ideological reasons? Professor Berlin was inclined to agree with Professor Ulam that at present in the Soviet Union the interest taken in ideology and ideas was extremely low; it could not be compared to the intense curiosity shown in Paris, Germany, or England. Had Stalin, for example, erred in theory? In 1956 Professor Berlin had been assured by a Russian communist that in the view of the party pundits Stalin had been entirely blameless in ideological matters and his doctrines perfectly orthodox, although he had committed many errors of practice and had infringed socialist legality. Was this still the official view?

Professor Berlin asked to what degree Soviet historians today, or at least in the recent past, could be said to write as socialists – that is to say, to apply socialist categories (or Marxist, Leninist, Khrushchevist categories for that matter) in their writing of

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history. He did not mean artificial categories imposed from above and used reluctantly, nor the kind of double-think whereby a certain awareness of the truth is accommodated to opportunistic statements dictated by temperament or circumstance; he meant the genuine use of concepts and categories from those used by most bourgeois historians in the West – whether because they had been subconsciously imbibed through education or because they corresponded to honestly held convictions. This touched on the earlier discussion of the problem to what degree Soviet concepts generally differed from ours. For instance, if a western socialist were to write history, would he in any way be closer to Soviet historians than liberal or conservative historians be called in some sense socialist, irrespective of the quality of their writing.

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