'A SENSE OF REALITY' ABOUT RUSSIA

BOOKS ON THE SOVIET UNION originate from many motives: uncritical enthusiasm and uncritical hatred; from the desire to inflame or assuage these emotions or to explain away, justify or pillory Russian conduct; from the wish to promote goodwill and sympathy or their opposites.

among these motives, the rarest one is the desire to tell the truth – no more of it than the author can reasonably vouch for – avoiding not merely the temptation to say things which the author suspects not to be entirely true, but also the less easily detectable but far more common and scarcely less fatal temptation to say things which the author does not know – but sees no harm in supposing – to be true. To this rare category Bedell Smith's book belongs.

General Smith's narrative, whether he damns or praises, is singularly free from the urgent tone of special pleading; he offers no theses for which the foreign Ambassador is inherently unlikely to possess adequate evidence; he avoids speculative flights of pro- or anti-Soviet fancy; he is above all concerned to give an account of his own experience in plain terms. The sense of reality which his book conveys is consequently remarkably strong.

The value of so much sanity and good sense – and good temper – is particularly high at this moment when the public is inevitably exposed to violent cross-currents of opinion and, for want of better guidance, is apt to put its faith in any view which corresponds to its own hopes and wishes and anxieties.

One of the most powerful springs which today feed the unceasing stream of literature about the Soviet system, life in Russia and so forth, is that most destructive emotion – unrequited love. A Familiar figure on the present-day scene is the frustrated and embittered ex-Communist who, originally drawn to the doctrine by some initial revulsion against the circumstances in which he had lived and later rejected by it or revolted from it, turns all his accumulated spleen and indignation against the State

and party and ideology which so ruthlessly and finally destroyed his last hope, the sacred cause, now in ruins, in which he had invested the moral and intellectual resources of his nature.

The state of mind of the once-zealous believer scorned – when united with an acute intellect and a rich and active imagination and an insight obtained at the cost of much suffering – makes a literary instrument of great violence and effectiveness; with the result that the view of the Soviet Union held today by the average intelligent layman in the West who no longer trusts the champions of the Soviet Union is largely affected by the works of those able and gifted disappointed lovers of Russia, some of whom, like the aging Jacobin exiles, faithful in adversity to the principles of 1791, still believe in the supreme value of the original great revolution, itself wretchedly betrayed in their eyes by this or that leader in this or that year.

The reality of the spiritual tragedy of these literary descendants of Dostoevsky gives their experience value as material for what could at its best be moving works of art; and almost always leads to effective pamphleteering; but it is not an asset in the writing of history.

Against this disturbing medium General Smith’s book is a powerful antidote, written as it is in the light of common day. The author was sent to Moscow in 1946 at the moment of considerable tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. He remained for three years in that atmosphere of artificial insulation and remoteness from the outside world which sometimes greatly darkens counsel, and has nevertheless managed to give an account of his mission which displays a degree of detachment and the scrupulous regard for evidence which marks this book out as being probably the least biased description of life in Moscow today so far achieved in any language.

General Smith arrived in Moscow with a mind not warped by any particularly unhappy experiences with Russian soldiers on the German or any other front; and he left clearly somewhat saddened but not blinded with emotion either favourable or hostile. He claims no uncanny powers of insight into the moods and characters of Soviet statesmen. His prose, whether he describes his interviews with Stalin, Molotov or Vishinsky or his visits to collective farms or medical institutes, remains serious, sober, concrete and above all founded upon directly observed data; and it

consequently conveys a sense not merely of honesty and anxiety to discover facts but of reality.

General Smith's chapters on such controversial topics as the present state of Soviet industry or agriculture impress mainly by the rare virtue of arranging and interpreting such few facts as he – or his staff – was allowed to verify for himself with maximum common sense and coherence and a freedom from the desire to startle or to fascinate the reader or to move him to anger or enthusiasm or pity.

If there is little that is arrestingly new in this book, there is much which serves as an inherently dependable test for the more coloured accounts of others. Thus, his detailed account of dealings both with Stalin and Molotov in connection with the Berlin crisis is valuable evidence of their respective relationship to the Politburo: General Smith gives no credence to the persistent but baseless rumours of the decline of Stalin's personal authority.

There is an admirably careful log of changes in the political weather containing realistic and convincing accounts, for instance, of the mounting tension before and during the Berlin crisis, of the campaign against 'cosmopolitan' and Jewish artists and intellectuals, and of the increasingly severe steps taken to discourage communication between Soviet scientists and their colleagues in the West; which being founded on first-hand experience and commendably free from moral generalizations gives an impression of solid reliability, the value of which in a region so liable to mirages and hallucinations and storms and cataclysms is today almost unique in books of this kind.

The central fact which General Smith grasps more firmly than most of the other writers on this topic is the obsession with the need for haste under which the Soviet rulers labour.

This derives from their belief that the capitalist world is fated to be torn by inner 'contradictions' which must grow sharper with every new stave of production. When the final crash comes the Soviet Union must be found prepared, else it may go under in the final battle of the worlds in which the proletarians may triumph and yet the Soviet Union be destroyed. To assume the possibility of peaceful coexistence of the two systems is to make nonsense of Marxism, and there may remain little time before the final duel which will settle the fate of mankind. If it is to survive the Soviet Union must be made as unconquerable as is humanly possible before the last and greatest fight, a climax towards which mankind

is inexorably moving; unless, indeed, the capitalist world gives in without a struggle, which is considered unlikely.

General Smith quotes Stalin as saying in 1930:

> At times people ask whether we could not slacken pace and slow down. To slacken paces means to lag behind, and those who lag behind get defeated. […] We have either to catch up with capitalist countries or die. We are fifty or one hundred years behind their leading countries. We must catch up within ten years. Either we do so or we shall be destroyed.

If Soviet citizens are to face this formidable prospect they must be toughened ceaselessly. Thus, the atmosphere in Russia, is that of a severe, half-militarized educational establishment in which the boys, more backward and in some more difficult than those elsewhere, are driven remorselessly to make up for centuries wasted by the tsars. Perhaps humaner methods might succeed equally well or better, but there is not time for experiment: the rest of the world is advancing too rapidly and so force must be applied if the pupils of this institution are to make any showing at all; everything is directed toward this single end; no doubt the boys are cold and hungry today, but the resources are still lacking to remedy this and yet keep up the pace; the outside world is out of bounds because the capitalist countries are doomed if Marx was a true prophet and they must grow increasingly hostile to the USSR.

Nor are foreign visitors welcomed, since even if their personal intentions are benevolent they merely interfere with the men and women who are undergoing training and who have no time for anything outside their appointed tasks. Strangers with their travellers’ tales about conditions elsewhere merely disturb the workers, who only by making the most desperate effort can begin to hope to succeed where history and geography have placed so many disadvantages in their path.

As at school the central virtues are moral and not intellectual – character and especially loyalty are everything; if the pupils are not clever or proficient they will perhaps not be promoted, but if they are liars or disloyal or sceptical about the purpose of the school they must be punished or expelled.

This is the central fact about the tempo of development and the moral atmosphere prevailing in the Soviet Union – in the terms of which much that seems puzzling and is too easily ascribed to the

vagaries of the ‘Slav soul’ or the ‘Oriental despotism’ or ‘Byzantinism’ – grows clearer.

General Smith, who perhaps wisely does not refer to such dubious entities, is well aware of this as the central purpose of the Soviet Union, and he does not underestimate Soviet efficiency or resolution or inventiveness. His pages on the relation of the historical tradition of the Russian State to the Marxist principle by which he believes the Soviet leaders to be guided is a clear analysis of this unique blend of traditional Russian military and political policy with a pervasive ideological pattern.

He concludes that, although the Soviet Government assumes the inevitability of a final collision with the West, it is unlikely to attack unless its changes of victory are very high; and therefore whatever is done by the West to diminish this chance preserves peace. In developing this thesis, General Smith sometimes seems not to allow enough for the genuine Soviet fears of attack by the United States and he complains that the Russians seem gratuitously to charge their opponents with their own wicked ways; yet, however groundless such Soviet fears may in fact be, they are more easily explained by a combination of Marxism, isolation and national *amour-propre*, all of which the author amply recognizes elsewhere, than by the hypothesis of a Machiavellian campaign of deception which leaves the deceivers wholly undeceived by their own mendacity.

General Smith’s conclusion that Great Russian domination of the Soviet Union helps to explain its (at times) not very Communist conduct is not compatible with the steps taken since the war by the Soviet leaders to check the rise of nationalism. This nationalism was released by the war and the Soviets are trying to force a return to a stricter ideological discipline which is the only cement capable of binding the heterogeneous nationalities of the union into an effective whole.

There are many small points of detail which specialists may question, both with regard to the careers of the members of the Politburo, with which General Smith rapidly briefs the reader and other minor historical points. The spelling of Russian names is at times eccentric, dates are occasionally badly misprinted, but all in all this remains a model of clear and candid if not very subtle exposition.

Above all, it contains a collection of first hand data (especially on agricultural and industrial production, the state of the churches

in Russia, and the technique of negotiation) upon which historians of the Soviet Union and its origins will inevitably draw more trustingly and more fruitfully than upon those more spectacular but more tainted sources which today alternately attract and repel the serious student of this the most tantalizing of all the political subjects of our time.

Review of Walter Bedell Smith, *My Three Years in Moscow*,
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