

MUSCOVITE MAKE-BELIEVE

Deceit and self-deception—so vital to the functioning of Soviet society—make the Russians both dangerous and difficult to deal with. Our best move is to face it realistically.

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IT IS A WELL-ESTABLISHED fact that dealing with the Soviet Union is both difficult and dangerous. One of the main reasons is that throughout Soviet life much that is said and done either is designed to deceive or is based upon self-deception. Make-believe is important in the functioning of Soviet society. The Soviet state and the people of the Soviet Union constantly practice, even in their confessions of past deception, to deceive each other and the outside world. They succeed depressingly well.

The western observer (who is usually handicapped, of course, by his own illusions as well) is hard put to it to separate the fiction from the fact on the Soviet scene. This has had some unfortunate consequences. Some people have become informaniacs. Stimulated and yet frustrated by the tragically unreliable information available, they avidly consume ever-increasing quantities of the stuff. They are, to borrow a term from a related phenomenon, "hooked." Their diet is indigestible.

Others, in the meantime, have decided that the Soviet Union is an unresolvable enigma. Convinced that we shall be duped if we deal with the Soviets, they advocate that we have nothing to do with them. There is little to choose between the two extreme reactions. Both are, of course, understandable—but neither is justified.

A more fruitful attitude toward Soviet deception and the problems growing out of it can be built upon the realization that the phenomenon is not new in Russian history, nor is it exclusively Russian. It is a phe-

nomenon which has developed, and inevitably develops, under certain historical circumstances. Just as inevitably will it decline in importance when the circumstances become permissive—but only then. Impatience avails us not at all.

Soviet deception and make-believe have roots and counterparts far back in Muscovite history. They grew up out of weakness and despair, out of isolation and boredom, out of extreme pressure. They grew up as a technique to cope with a reality which was almost always bleak and often unbearably harsh. Deception was an indispensable aid to physical survival. Self-deception followed, not only as a consequence of confusion but as a balm to self-respect.

Russian history is monotonously a story of grinding poverty in a hard land, a story of inadequate resources and recurrent crises. In its struggle to survive and expand, the Muscovite state called upon the people, generation after generation, for extraordinary sacrifices. In order to force compliance, the state, which had few rewards to distribute, had to threaten very severe penalties for those who failed to obey. A subservient Church added terrible religious sanctions. Myths and pretenses were always employed to justify and to facilitate all that the rulers wanted. Unfortunately, such practices were necessary. Without them the Russian people could never have been driven.

As it was, more often than not, the Russian people resorted to massive and ingenious evasion in order to survive the impossible demands. At every social level

they countered the orders from above with imaginative, wonderful and endlessly repetitious excuses. They learned to evade every intent of law and contract while performing with great intensity every detail of the rituals prescribed and pretending to slavishly obey every letter of the commands received.

The Muscovite rulers, practicing deception, were well deceived in turn. They started hopeless enterprises based upon false expectations, and when they failed they invented ingenious excuses to rationalize the facts. In dealing with foreigners and foreign powers the Russian rulers, like the people, of course, employed the methods learned at home. Deception was always cheaper than naked force—and when adequate force was lacking, as it often was, deception was mandatory.

The vicious circle

Study of the Muscovite past of the Russian people reveals the operation, through the centuries, of the same vicious circle of deception and self-deception, of belief and make-believe, that characterizes Soviet society in our times. The mechanism in each case is clear. The basic factor has been an acute fear of failure, a fear all the greater because the penalties of failure have always been unacceptably great and because unrealistic aims have often made failure virtually certain.

Deception has either brought success or masked and mitigated failure. The vicious circle will continue just as long as the failures of the Soviet people and of the state continue to be numerous, humiliating, and heavily penalized. The Russians will then continue to deceive themselves and others. They will refuse to face reality, excusing failure in wildly imaginative fashion—or confessing it in abject, grovelling (and equally unrealistic) terms. People in this country and elsewhere, who gloat over every report of difficulties experienced by the Soviets, should stop for a moment and consider the fact that such setbacks are far more likely to give new impetus to the vicious circle than they are to teach the Russians respect for reality as we see it.

Removing the blinders

Actually, if we are interested in seeing a real change in the Soviet practice of deception, we must look forward to the day when failures and shortcomings there become less frequent and less catastrophic, or are offset by major successes. Then we could hope to hear fewer lies and more facts from that corner of the earth. When and if they begin to compare favorably with the rest of the world, the Soviet people may well be permitted to remove their blinders, so that it will—in time—be possible to deal with them and with their state on a more objective basis.

It will be objected, of course, that every success will make the Soviet Union stronger and more dangerous. Soviet leaders will wield tremendous power *before* the agreeable and relaxing effects of success begin to modify

their habits materially. That is all too true! It is also disagreeable to contemplate the evidence that Soviet success may have been won to a considerable degree by such dirty methods as force and deception. Coexistence, under the circumstances, will undoubtedly be uncomfortable and dangerous. The question of whether we can afford to deal with nations such as the Soviet Union (and Communist China) will become ever more acute if they enjoy success; it is already an important question. But let's face it. History, including our own history, is full of highly respected ex-bastards who gained their respectability after first gaining success.

Breaking the vicious circle

Very likely the course of discretion and common sense is to see to it first of all that we do not find ourselves victimized by Soviet deception (or force). This we can guard against quite adequately by refusing to be stampeded by superficial changes in Soviet behavior. We can also maintain sufficient strength to prevent overt aggression. But certainly Soviet successes need not be at our expense, nor need they be mainly due, if they come, to deception and myth-making. We should not begrudge them; rather we should welcome them as steps toward the eventual breaking of the vicious circle of deception and make-believe which makes the Soviet Union of today so hard to deal with and so dangerous.

When we consider that vicious circle in the Soviet Union, and the reasons why it has persisted, we might also do well to contemplate the state of our own myths, our own respect for reality, and our own dream world.

Realism or delusion

What are we doing when we choose to regard Soviet successes as defeats for our way of life—are we judging objectively or are we hallucinating ourselves? What are we doing when we refuse to recognize Soviet successes (either belittling them or building them up into monstrous threats)—are we being realistic or are we deluding ourselves? Whom are we fooling with all our talk (in industry, in business, in government, in educational institutions) about superiority of brains, methods, results?

Is it becoming necessary for the United States and the American people to create and market massive myths? Could it be that we fear failure? Why do we constantly have to reassure ourselves that we are doing just fine, or flagellate ourselves with the fear that we are losing ground? Actually we are not in much danger of getting into a Soviet-type bind. But it would be worth our while to avoid even a single step in that direction. At the moment one of the best moves we could make in the right direction would be to start looking at the Soviet Union—our Number One Bugaboo—somewhat more realistically, and with an eye to avoiding make-believe of our own.