

Changing Face of Russia

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THE great transformation which the U S S R has undergone since the death of Stalin extends beyond the country's political and cultural life to its external relations." While the outside world is primarily concerned with developments in Soviet foreign policy, it is no less important to understand the changes in the domestic sphere since in the ultimate analysis the former may be seen to follow from the latter. The developments in the domestic affairs of the U S S R are not fully appreciated yet, partly because not many have detailed information about life in the Soviet Union immediately before the Khrushchev era, and partly because these changes have materialised without any apparent break in the country's political system.

The first major indication of the impending changes came soon after Stalin's death when the Soviet Communist Party's "theses" commemorating the fiftieth anniversary celebration were published in the middle of 1953. It was the first important official Party document in which Stalin was not depicted as the supreme-leader. The significance of the shift in theoretical emphasis for economic policies was made clear soon after in Khrushchev's report on agriculture, in which the First Secretary of the C P S U laid bare the weaknesses afflicting Soviet agriculture. In 1953 livestock was less than in 1928 or even in 1916, in respect of cattle, Of 350,000 agricultural specialists only 18,500 (5 per cent) were working in the *kolkhozes* (collective farms) and another 14 per cent in *soukhozes* (state farms) the remaining 81 per cent being employed in various offices and administrative agencies. The Agricultural Ministry considered its duty done mainly by issuing directives and circulars. In a period of eleven months 3,846

* *Inside the Khrushchev Era* by Guiseppa Boffa. Translated into English from Italian by Carl Marzani. George Allen and Unwin Limited. London, 1960, pp. 227. 25s.

Face to Face with Khrushchev by Khwaia Ahmad Abbas. Rajpal and Sons. Delhi. 1960, pp 220. Rs 12.

directive, 2,330 circulars, 856,000 letters and 67,000 telegrams were sent out by the Ministry to the country. Some regional Party committees used to send 30 directives a day.

Feet of Clay

for the first time. then, the Soviet citizen was officially informed by the Party that its leaders had been pursuing wrong policies. How did he react to this? "The debate", writes Mr Boffa, "was a rough political shaking up for the soul and mind of the Soviet people. The session of the Central Committee in September 1953. when the agricultural situation was analysed, had the same disorienting effect on public opinion as a block-buster unexpectedly exploding" (p 22). Khrushchev made another speech on agriculture in February 1954. Of this Mr Boffa writes. "If the first had contained a bare analysis of facts figures, and documents, the second already contained a sober judgment on individuals, on methods of work, on certain political and economic errors. To find a speech directed to the country at large which used such frank language, one had to go back to the war period. Now the Party told the entire truth without equivocations. The result was a real sensation, one of the most telling proofs of a profound change taking place. The enormous impression that this change made in the country was never erased" (p 22)

Soon after came the reconciliation with the Yugoslav Communists. By 1055 the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party felt that conditions in the country were secure enough to permit them to undertake an overseas tour. Meanwhile Ehrenburg's novel. *Thaw*, appeared. Then came the Twentieth Congress of the C P S U in February 1956.

Twentieth Congress

The Congress was a memorable event in many ways. For internal politics Its most Important aspect was the unequivocal denunciation of the misdeeds of the Stalin era. The Soviet people were, of course,

not unaware of these acts of injustice, but few knew that they had been perpetrated with the complicity of the highest executive in the country. While the people were told this the Government, and the Party kept a strict watch over the maintenance of discipline. The people were terribly excited, but they had no means of exhibiting it. The roused emotions, therefore, found release in work. Mr Boffa writes : ".....the country was extremely clam and seemed not to have altered its daily rhythm of life. There was a violent fever that no thermometer registered. Plans were being fulfilled. factory production went up. Party work in no way slackened. People reacted to their disorientation with work. There has always been a climate in the Soviet Union, a climate of action, a habit of work which in this smash-up protected people from more serious difficulties.....there was a new productive spurt, a new fervour of personal initiative". (p 41).

Important developments followed the Twentieth Congress in the organization of industry and agriculture. All the new measures adopted aimed at a greater decentralization of initiative and responsibility. A number of Central Ministries were abolished including the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Machine and Tractor Stations. The Central Ministry of Justice was also done away with. To quote Mr Boffa. "In 1952 the various republics controlled at the most thirty per cent of industrial production; by 1956 this percentage had increased to fiftyfive per cent., and by a year later the republics' management and control had climbed to ninetyfour per cent of the total. In 1952 the specific weight of expenses controlled by republican legislatures were twenty five per cent, of all the expenses in the Union budget; by 1958 the figure was fifty-one per cent. The Council of Ministers and Supreme Soviet of the republics acquired real governmental authority, and the Presidents sat in the Central Government and in the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U S S R (P 132).

The reorganization of the *kolkhozes* was the most important econo-

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OUR CHRISTMAS CAROL

*Peace on earth
Joy for all
Love to you
At Christmas and throughout the coming year!*

*Happy flights in the skies
Bonny Boeings for all
And for you
At Christmas and throughout the coming years!*

AIR-INDIA



mic decision that marked the post-Stalin era. During the Nineteenth Congress of the C P S U in October 1952 Stalin had indicated a line of development which envisaged the ultimate supersession of the collective farms (which were described as the collective property of a number of people) by the *sovkhozes* (which were described as the collective property of the entire people). In 1958 the Machine and Tractor Stations (MTS) were abolished and the agricultural machines were given to the *kolkhozes*. As Mr Boffa puts it, "It was the greatest reform in the Soviet countryside since the collectivization itself" (p 163).

This has, however, left unsolved the problem posed by Stalin of ensuring the socialization of agriculture, since *kolkhozes* are not fully socialist institutions. Mr Boffa avoids the question and merely says, "With the growing participation of people in management even state property today is in a state of evolution. Why couldn't something similar take place in the countryside? A tendency for the *kolkhoz* and the *sovkhoz* to approach each other is already evident. In the first the 'indivisible funds' are increasing, particularly with the acquisition of machinery. These funds represent an advanced state of socialization. Also the methods of payments in the collectives are changing. On the other hand in the *sovkhozes* 'assemblies of production' are being set up and wages are being tied in some degree to the harvest. The progress towards communism implies a gradual transformation of both forms of property. Both are vital, both need to be strengthened and improved. By their number and their specific weight, however, the *kolkhozes* represent the vast majority of the farmers. The evolution of the countryside as a whole depends, therefore, primarily on the evolution of the *kolkhozes*", (p 164)

Concession to Peasant Psychology

Following the abolition of the M T S, another change affecting gram deliveries was introduced, since the State was thereby deprived of the agricultural products which came to it in the form of payments by the *kolkhozes* to the M T S and which accounted for fifty per cent of the cereals accumulated by the State. The State now buys food-

grains from various regions in fixed quotas and at a fixed price which varies from region to region. This has also widened the area of commercial relationship which Stalin wanted to be abolished in a socialist system. The peasant psychology which Lenin warned the Communists against is apparently still a factor to be reckoned with.

The measures for decentralization notwithstanding, the Central Government retains a powerful economic lever, besides possessing the instruments of financial and statistical control, Mr Boffa describes the processes of planning thus: "At each level there is a differing degree of autonomy and of responsibility. First, the method of preparing the central plan has changed. In the past it was conceived from the top and sent down to the local factory; now the process is exactly reversed. The factory estimates what it will do in the given period, and the figures go up through the regional administration, the *sovnarkhoz* to the *Cosplan* of the U S S R, which combines, changes, makes the decisive choices and then sends the plan back to the factory in shape to be executed. The work of the planning organs has been modified: they must work with the local proposals although with an overall plan. They don't have to accept local proposals, but then they have to explain why not", (pp 142-143)

Socialist Legality

The strong pressure for more freedom within the U S S R is very much in evidence today. Mr Boffa's observations on the working of the Supreme Soviet of the U S S R are interesting. Referring to the brief duration of its sessions, he writes: "It remains to be seen whether the pressure of legislative work will lengthen their sessions or require more frequent meetings. Already there are suggestions for enlarging the parliamentary commission, creating new ones, and coordinating their work. It is true that the Supreme Soviet is seen as a deliberative body, and its work is facilitated by the legislative activity of the various republics. Also, its decisions are always the final step in a long elaboration through the various organisms of the country. So perhaps longer sessions are not necessary, although one could wish for a more intense activity to close gaps which have

come to light in Soviet law. Socialist legality means not only scrupulous observance of the law but a constant enrichment of the law itself." (p 204)

Equally interesting are his views on the Soviet elections. After a paragraph to show the "democratic character" of Soviet elections in refutation of critics, Mr Boffa writes: "The U S S R can now afford to discuss whether its elections should continue to have a unitary character or whether they cannot make a major contribution to internal debates . . . unity against an external enemy must remain, but is the single candidacy any longer necessary? There are electoral methods whereby the choice of a candidate or of a deputy permit a judgment and a debate on the issues before the country, facilitating solutions of problems by making more citizens conscious of them. What these methods would be more names, a longer examination of candidates offered from below etc — only the Soviets can decide. Meanwhile, there is a demand that the constitutional provision for the recall of deputies who are not doing their job should be implemented and regularized", (pp 204-205) He is also critical of the restricted area of choice of candidates and the indifferent reporting by the Soviet press. About the Soviet newspapers he writes "they are still edited in a heavy manner, they are not sufficiently interesting, and the news items are still comparatively scarce. Even in the best papers the reader does not find all he wants to know about the life around him". (pp 205-206)

Competitive Coexistence

The Twenty-first Congress of the C P S U confirmed all these internal changes and adopted two "theses" which have had far-reaching influence on Soviet Union's international relations. One of these admitted that the methods of arriving at socialism may differ in different countries. The other pronounced that war as an instrument of international policy had become outdated. The debate on the latter thesis is still on among the communist parties of the world. The iron grip of Moscow over the world communist movement since the early thirties is now relaxing. After the break with Yugoslavia and the emergence of China as a member of the socialist camp, it was no longer possible to main-

tain the infallibility of the Soviet Communists. No doubt. Communist still look to the Soviet Party for leadership but disagreement is NO longer a crime.

Mr Boffa's book provides the first comprehensive review of contemporary developments in the U S S R. A leading member of the Italian Communist Party; Boffa was in Moscow as correspondent of the Italian Communist daily, *L'Unita*, of which he is now the foreign editor. The book however falls far short of being an objective study of the U S S R — a task in which he must have been inhibited more by the dictates of the Italian Communist Party's strategy than by any inability or genuine unwillingness to be frank. The book is thus a cautious, partly outspoken, review of developments many of which have already met with universal acclaim. Much of the change taking place in the U S S R represents a recognition of empirical necessity. Stalin was incapable of bringing about these changes because he had identified himself far too much with the policies that called for major modifications. This close identification had created a situation where any significant move away from the *status* was bound to be interpreted as a reflection on his infallibility. But Stalin's death resolved the dilemma. The person who promptly seized the opportunity offered by Stalin's death was Nikita Sergievitch Khrushchev. Other leaders including Malenkov, Molotov and Kaganovitch, were openly sceptical, if not always hostile, of the domestic and international policies adopted by Khrushchev.

A Sentimental Essay

The volume by Mr K A Abbas is a rather sentimental account of the life of Khrushchev. But it is not without some information on post-Stalin Russia. The highly emotional vein of writing, however, prevents analysis except of a very superficial character.

The recent changes in the Soviet Union are significant and have profound implications. Nevertheless they do not mean that the basic economic policies followed by Stalin had been any more wrong than the policies now being followed are likely to prove a few years hence. The changes again, do not make the U S S R more or less peace-minded than it was under Stalin's leader-

ship, If there has been any change, it is the imprint of time rather than any basic reorientation of outlook. The fact that Soviet citizens are now better off is undoubtedly the result of past achievements. These facts cannot be ignored. The re-

organisation of the *Kolkhozes* may lead to fresh complications which may not be any the easier to resolve from the socialist or communist point of view since it involves all the complex problems of exchange relationship.-.