

Russia, China, and the West 1953-1966

By Isaac Deutscher¹

Book Review by Eric A. Belgrad

This book represents a collection of essays and newspaper articles dealing with Russia during the period of de-Stalinization and published posthumously, some three years after Deutscher's death in 1967.

Penguin's backleaf description of the book hints at both the strengths and weaknesses of the book. These can be best summarized as "the immediacy of contemporary journalism" and "an attempt to present the texts in a narrative sequence so that they form, in as far as is possible, a continuous commentary."

The journalistic immediacy is indeed evident in every page of Deutscher's text; the episodes of Russian internal and external policies are told with a startling bravado, since Deutscher claims knowledge of the deepest motives underlying the policy-making leadership in the Kremlin. The feeling of the book is of a chatty, frothy newspaper column, in which Khrushchev, Beria, Molotov, Kaganovich, Mao, Malenkov, Zhukov, and other Communist leaders cheerfully flit about, pirouetting this way and that, like so many marionettes on an historic string of Deutscher's devising. No attempt is made to place Soviet policy in a serious historical or doctrinal framework. Instead, cheerfully confident tautological generalities leap at the reader from practically every page, striking an equal balance of astonishment and delight at the author's courage. Early in an article dated 5 March 1954, Deutscher confidently tells us

Contrary to popular belief, the spectre of a rearmed Germany does not cause a single sleepless night to the men in the Kremlin, who know perfectly well how many sleepless nights that spectre must cause to Germany's Western European neighbors. (p. 15)

Not very much later, (10 February 1955) he explains the dismissal of the "consumptionists" led by Malenkov, by invoking the spectre of a rearmed Germany, which immediately causes the Kremlin to abandon its ideas of economic liberalization in favor of a massive armaments increase. He concludes that

Molotov apparently had this counter-coup to the armament of Western Germany in mind when he said at the last session of the Supreme Soviet that the 'Western Imperialists' would adopt a different language *vis-à-vis* Russia once they saw what were the Soviet counter-measures. (p. 33)

A similar ambivalence may be found in Deutscher's description of the roles of individual members of the Politburo. In an article dated 26 February 1956, he described Mikoyan's role at the Twentieth Party Congress, which was devoted to the denunciation of the personality cult, as that of chief architect of a movement to re-establish collective leadership. Here Mikoyan is pictured "as the mouthpiece of militant anti-Stalinism" (p. 58), demolishing the person and the doctrine of his erstwhile master in a speech where "he consciously borrowed... terms, as well as many other ideas and formulas, from none other than Trotsky, who coined them." (p. 59) Yet at

¹ Isaac Deutscher, *Russia, China, and the West 1953-1966*, ed. Fred Halliday (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970).

the end of the book, Mikoyan, who is described as the architect of Khrushchev's downfall, finds himself forced out of the Politburo "without even a vote of thanks for his forty years service." (p. 325) This dismissal is then characterized as giving much satisfaction to "crypto-Stalinists," who, in the same article, are shown to have been cast aside permanently: "The Congress did not rehabilitate Molotov and Kaganovich, the Stalinist die-hards whom Khrushchev had expelled from the Party." (p. 324) The Twenty-Third Congress thus seems to cast aside the Stalinists and anti-Stalinists at the same time, and Mikoyan's role in forty years of Party leadership is left in a miasma of contradictions.

The intrinsic problem of the book is that it is nothing more than a collection of articles written by Deutscher over a period of thirteen years, which have no unifying idea or principle to hold them together. This episodic treatment is further aggravated by the fact that the editor of this collection was not sensitive to the all too obvious contradictions and confusions of these articles, so that the general chronological framework which is provided in no way alters the fact that the book is very confusing and quite unsatisfactory as a serious analytical work. Beyond this, Deutscher's avowed Marxism, though framed in the guise of anti-Stalinism and anti-Khrushchevism, makes a number of so-called insights in the role of such Western Marxist as Thorez and Togliatti highly suspect, from an ideological and historical viewpoint.

The book does contain a chronology of events which may be helpful to the reader who is not acquainted with the major events of the last two decades, but this chronology is not keyed to specific articles describing the events listed. A rather extensive index is also available, but there is no bibliography, and no authorities are cited by way of verification of Deutscher's numerous controversial assertions. On balance, then, the book is of no intrinsic value to the serious student of Soviet affairs; but rather, it must be considered at best as a collection of dated articles suitable for casual bedtime reading.

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