

Soviet Historiography and the Concept of Man

The Vicissitudes of Historiography

FEW IDEAS HAD A MORE agitated and dramatic history in Soviet Russia than the idea of history itself. This may come as a surprise and disappointment to those who believe that K. Marx laid the concept of history on sound materialistic foundations, and that as a result of this he offered an unambiguous solution to the entangled problem concerning the relation between man and history. The wanderings of Soviet historiography can be regarded not only as a reflex of a genuine war of ideas, or of a ceaseless contest of power between opposing groups and personalities, but also as a symptom of the crisis of growth of Soviet civilization in which the concept of human personality was deeply involved. As the present writer is not a historian the outline of the development of Soviet historiography following below is meant to serve an illustrative rather than an informative purpose. His present task is to reveal the psychosociological significance of the vicissitudes of Soviet historiography.

N. N. Pokrovsky, the much venerated and, at the same time, denigrated father of Soviet historiography, regarded class antagonism and class conflict as archetypal forms of historical

development. The history of Russia is in his view determined entirely by the struggle of the proletarian class against its archenemy, capitalism. Even the Kiev insurrection of 1136 is described in terms of a modern proletarian revolution. Lacking suitable terms of reference for the feudal period in Russia, when no capitalism existed, Pokrovsky coined the term, and according to some of his Communist critics, invented the phenomenon of "Merchant Capitalism". This enabled him to describe also this period in terms of class struggle in the narrowest sense of the word, i. e., conflict of economic interests.

Though the concept of class conflict should, logically speaking, connote a certain type of conscious attitude held by well-defined social groups, Pokrovsky is in his approach to history an economic mechanist; he explains historical events in terms of economic systems with little if any reference to institutions — the State, for instance — ideologies, or great personalities. Obviously, in such a conception of history there is little scope for human purposeful action, for history creates itself in the laboratory of material forces.

Pokrovsky dominated the scene of Soviet historiography for fifteen years after the October Revolution. The first reaction against him was motivated by educational needs. However, it soon became apparent that such a reaction had deeper roots and wider implications. The main points of criticism put forward by the Party in the early thirties can be summarised as follows: 1. Pokrovsky suffered from retrojection: he saw the national past in terms applicable mainly to the October Revolution. 2. He impoverished Russian history by applying to it "empty sociological categories". 3. He neglected the part played in human history by personalities and ideas. Considering the political and cultural climate of the period one can say that the last point occupies a central position. Terms such as "revolutionary romanticism" which confines the historian's interest to "the small deeds of small men", or a "vulgarised" conception of the individual in history were obviously aimed at Pokrovsky and his school.

To describe in detail the implication which such criticism had on the later development of Soviet historiography lies beyond my competence. On the other hand, my present concern is to investigate the possible meaning of this, and a series of other changes of perspective in the field of historiography which may easily appear to a historian as leaps in the dark. I hasten to say that the Party's criticism of Pokrovsky was in a way a leap in the dark, for it led gradually to a sort of chronic crisis concerning both the explanation of historical events, and the theory of historical change. Both, an old

generation of historians represented by Petrushevsky, Lyubomirov, and Tarlé, and a young generation headed by Grekov came now to the forefront. On the whole, they showed more freedom from Marxian dogma of the class struggle in their dealings with historical events. But there was also a strong revival of a traditionalist nationalist interpretation of history. Historians, and particularly those belonging to the Regional Republics, began to glorify the struggle of their peoples, and even of the great personalities of the past, while paying little attention to the class content and the progressive element of such struggle (1). This tendency reached a climax during the World War II when the "embellishment" of the heroic past became a dominant note in Soviet historiography. The first number of "Voprosii Historii" inspired by a decision of the Party's Central Committee formulates the situation as follows:

"On these occasions the distortion of history resulted in petit bourgeois nationalism, leading to the idealisation of the history of the people in question, including an indiscriminately negative evaluation of the Russian state and its representatives. But during the last year mistakes of the opposite type were also found in our historiography: in the in the direction of Great Power chauvinism there appeared tendencies towards an equally indiscriminating rehabilitation of the colonising and expansive policies of Tsarism, towards a restoration of bourgeois concepts in the presentation of the growth of the Russian state, a denial of the revolutionary importance of the peasant movements...

and a departure from class analysis of historical events" (2).

Thus the end of the war constituted a new turning point in Soviet historiography the central motif of which was home talk about it in the period conception of history. As shown above, the historians were taken to task by the Party for their petit bourgeois ideas which led to the idealization of the past, to chauvinism, and finally to a departure from the concept of social class in their interpretation of historical events. This new stage seemed to lead to the revival of Pokrovsky's ideas, and indeed there was some talk about it in the period immediately following the death of Stalin. But this proved to be no more than a sign of the confusion created in the field of historiography by a series of radical changes initiated in 1946. In fact the "new line" had soon crystallised round Zdanov's concept of "Partisanship" announced in 1946.

To realise the implication of the development of Soviet culture in general it would be enough to mention that Zdanov's primary aim was to introduce a radical change in the Marxian idea of social dynamics by replacing the concept of class conflict — no longer applicable to Soviet society — with that of the conflict between the new and the old. This was to a great extent a leap in the dark which shook from its foundation any previous systematic thinking in the field of social sciences. While the contents of the concept of class struggle were determined by objective, primarily economic factors, the contents of the concepts of what is new and of what is old were matters of political decisions made by the central organs of the Party. As

different from the old materialistic dialectics, the new one had a purely political voluntaristic content, for obviously the Party decided what was progressive, and what was regressive in Soviet Society.

The bearings of the political voluntaristic dialectics on the development of historiography were many, but they can conveniently be summed up as follows: History should be seen and construed through the perspective of the Party. The archenemys of such a conception is "objectivism", that is, the conviction that the meaning of historical events and of historical process are revealed in the analysis of the events themselves and of their structure. According to the new line the historical truth can be arrived at only by the analysis of facts from the Party's point of view. In other words, the new historian is neither a patriotic nor a Marxian ideologist, like Pokrovsky, but a Party-man.

The Legacy of Marx. Any attempt to account for the vicissitudes of Soviet historiography has to consider two sets of determining factors: The first set is rooted in Marx's ideas on the nature of human history, while the second is closely associated with the evolution of the concept of man within Soviet civilization.

Admittedly, the legacy of Marx is not very clear. Though terms such as "social class", "class conflict" and "class consciousness" occupy key positions in his conception of history, Marx does not manage to say what he means by them. It is significant that his main book, "Capital" ends with a frustrating attempt to define the notion of social

class. The nearest he ever gets the definition of such term is in his "The Eighteenth of Brumaire" of Louis Bonaparte", when he regretfully realises that the French peasants of that period did not constitute a social class. On this point Marx writes: "The millions of peasant families in France form a social class only to the extent to which they live in economic conditions which separate them, and oppose their way of life, their interests and their culture to those of other classes of society. But, they do not constitute a social class as long as the ties between them are of purely local character, and as long as the similarity of their interests does not bring them together into a community, a nation-wide unity and a political organisation. That is why, at the present, they are unable to fight for themselves, and defend their own interests by the intermediary of a Parliament or of an Assembly. They cannot represent themselves, they have to be represented." (3). This statement allows, not without a certain effort of interpretation, to identify the main constituents of a social class as consisting of, (a) a set of specific economic conditions; (b) a common way of life; (c) common interests, and (d) the consciousness which a number of individuals forming a group within society have of themselves as possessing such common conditions of life. It is important to note that, though class consciousness has a derivative character being the reflection at the mental level of the objective material conditions of a social group, Marx invests it with specific powers. In his views, class consciousness implies willingness in those who possess it to be represented

as a class in opposition to other classes of society. In other words class consciousness implies political action as a result of which it becomes a dynamic historical factor.

This does not, however, mean that Marx held precise views with regards to the manner in which class consciousness operates within history, or that he has a clear picture in his mind about the historical process in general, and particularly about the specific relation between man and history. It would be only too easy to join those of his followers who suffer from an excess of interpretation, and construe his basic position from the following points which he, admittedly, made at various stages in his intellectual development: (4). 1. The distinctive mark of man is self-consciousness; 2. Man becomes conscious of himself as a class, therefore, he realises his own nature as a member of a class; 3. In this capacity, he becomes creator of history, that is, master of his own destiny. But, this broad scheme allows for a great variety of nuances of which Marx certainly took full advantage. Thus, it seems obvious that with regard to the nature of history, and particularly, with regard to the dynamics of the historical process, Marx went through three main stages. In his early period — in "The German Ideology", for instance — he maintained that consciousness, i.e., the subjective expression of the basic economic forces, is an important factor in the dialectics of society. People act basically according to their economic interests, but they can act too — and they can change their history — according to their ideas, according to what they think about

their interests. At this stage he almost admitted duality in the determination of historical events: objective economic forces, on the one hand, and the ideological and institutional expressions of these forces, on the other. In his second period — between 1845-1852 — Marx still maintains the idea of duality, but reducing considerably the part played by consciousness in the historical process (5). In the third period, that of the writing of "Capital", Marx had great difficulty in seeing consciousness — ideas and beliefs — as a genuine historical factor. He was no longer sure whether consciousness was capable to represent the economic process; it could easily err and become "false consciousness", therefore, a distorting and hindering factor in the historical development. At this stage, Marx certainly favoured causal monism in history by considering the economic forces as the only genuine determinants of historical development. Man is entirely the product of these forces. "My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of *natural history*, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains". (6). This can certainly be considered as Marx's will regarding the problem of the relationship between man and history.

This complex ideological legacy which illustrates so well Marx's odd proclivity to adjust his theoretical orientation to many and varied historical circumstances, has certainly much to do with the vicissitudes of Soviet historiography. However, one aspect of this complex situation deserves

special attention, namely, the development in the theoretical framework of Soviet historiography — to the extent to which this can be discerned — follows Marx's own development, but in reverse. Pokrovsky's school leans heavily and exclusively on Marx's position as expressed in "Capital"; it is in fact a simplified and rough version of Marx's economic materialist conception of history. From this first stage on, Soviet historiography develops approximately in the direction of the early Marx by making more and more room for the intervention of man in the unfolding of the historical process. Does this mean a better, more comprehensive understanding of Marx? This might be so, but it is not the whole truth. In order to understand this type of development in the theoretical framework of Soviet historiography one has to take into account certain conditions characteristic of the psycho-cultural evolution of Soviet society, and particularly those conditions which throw light on the evolution of the concept of man within Soviet society.

Models of Man. It has been often remarked that, during the last thirty or so, Soviet culture has developed away from a purely mechanistic conception of the universe. Though the direction of this development is far from being clear, one normally distinguishes two main stages in the development of Soviet culture and society. In general philosophical terms this can be described as a process of transition from what has been called "mechanicist Marxism", or sometimes, "vulgar Marxism" to "dialectical Marxism", a process which became obvious in the early thirties.

To make a clear cut distinction between these two stages is not easy. It would, however, be safe to say that the "mechanicist Marxism" stresses the causal deterministic factors in the development of Soviet society, i. e., the inevitability of the historical process based on the eternal laws of the economic infrastructure. On the other hand, "dialectical Marxism" emphasises purposive processes, and as such allows, and even makes necessary conscious deliberate intervention in the development of society. In the economic field, the former position was occupied by Bucharinists, "the opportunists of the right", with their concepts of "equilibrium" and "spontaneity" both pointing to the intrinsic dynamics of the economic process, and thus regarding social and cultural development as a simple matter of scientific necessity. Against this, there were the "dialecticians". Stalin at their head, with their central idea of "revolutionary action". "Our task is not to study economics, but to change it. We are bound to no laws. There are no fortresses which Bolsheviks cannot storm. The question of *tempos* is subject to decisions by human beings". (7). For reasons which are not altogether clear, the former trend was characterised by a "genetic" approach, while the latter by a "teleological" approach.

There is hardly need to mention that this type of development expressed itself also in the political field. In fact, the term "teleological" applied mainly to this field, for it was the Party itself which embodied both the goals and the achievement of such goals. The development of Soviet society could no

longer be entrusted to the objective eternal laws of matter, but rather do the conscious purposeful action of the Party. Thus, the early and mid thirties brought a new and stronger emphasis on Lenin's idea of the Party i. e., an organism which does not only place itself in the avant-garde of the working class, but digs according to its own plans and methods the tunnel of social progress. And to grasp the full psycho-sociological significance of this it would be enough to mention that it was not only Lenin's idea of the Party which was re-emphasised; Lenin's philosophical work as a whole underwent a process of re-valuation. This was the period in which Lenin's "The Philosophical Notebooks" — a commentary on Hegel — was taken from the shelf and studied with a new kind of curiosity. As different from the Lenin of "Empiriocriticism" who was a "naive materialist", the Lenin of "The Philosophical Notebooks" was a "dialectical realist". He attributes to human consciousness a certain active part in the process of knowledge, for the fact of its being related to matter introduces a qualitative difference in the latter. "The reflection of nature in the human mind — writes Lenin — occurs not in a dead or abstract manner, not without movement, not without *contradiction*, but through a permanent process in which contractions are produced and absorbed". (8). This is certainly a step away from the basic tenets of mechanicist Marxism which dominated the early stage of Soviet culture: it is an indication that man with this consciousness begins to occupy an honourable if not a central place in the universe.

Socio-cultural trends such as those mentioned above have been considered by certain psychological and sociological studies as indicative of a specific type of evolution in the concept of man in Soviet civilization. This is the manner in which this evolution is described by one of these studies: "From a view of man as a creature of the forces of the environment and therefore, of the historical process, there was evolved a new image of man capable of *self-initiative*, *responsible for his action*, neither controlled by the environment, nor by heredity — a picture of a man capable of being an activist and at the same time capable of being *the source of his own error and evil*. His freedom rests not in indeterminacy but in his capacity of recognising necessity. The early exorcisations of consciousness... has come full round: consciousness is now a central process in making man capable of forging his own destiny — or even committing punishable crimes against the state". (9).

What has just been said points to the transition from a *mechanicist model of man* to a model of man based on the idea of inner-motivation and self-determination. This is illustrated by the changes which took place in many aspects of Soviet life, and particularly in the field of psychology and education. Thus, for reflexology man was entirely a product, a reflection of his environment, a creature with an empty centre, growing from outside. In contrast to this, later Soviet psycholog — particularly after 1940 — became more and more interested in the analysis of the inner dynamics of the human personality, and in the process of

consciousness. Parallel to this, Soviet pedagogy had stressed more and more the concept of *self-training* as *opposed to* the formula of spontaneous development, of "withering away of the school" characteristic of the earlier stage. (10). All this should be taken as symptomatic of the fact that the "dominant conception of man became that of an increasingly purposeful being who was more and more the master of his own fate and less and less the creature of his environment". (11). But for a few minor details of formulation, this process might be described as a transition from a "other-oriented" to an "inner-oriented" type of personality, if D. Riesman's concepts can be stretched so far.

The Self of Soviet Man. Admittedly, there was a certain change in the Soviet conception of man which began to take place in the early thirties. However, this change was neither as pronounced nor as unilinear as the above remarks seem to suggest. Expressions such as "the inner dynamics of the human personality", "consciousness", "self-determination", or "man as a purposive actor" which have been more and more frequently used in Soviet Russia since 1930, have to be analysed carefully in their right context. Their anthropological significance may be other than that which they have in other civilization. It is on this point that the development of Soviet historiography might be revealing. The present writer is strongly convinced that man's views of the past, his conception of the people living in the past, is to a great extent a projection of his views of himself. That is why the development of historiography within a specific

civilization is particularly significant for the development of the concept of man.

In the evolution of the Soviet concept of man, as this has been reflected by Soviet historiography, one can distinguish three stages. The Pokrovsky period reveals an idea of man which has certain basic traits in common with the mechanistic model as outlined above. History is, according to this school, nothing else but the unfolding of material processes in accordance with objective pre-established laws; man is entirely the creature of a history thus conceived. Though the historical process is supposed to serve man's interests, no conscious purposeful activity, no spiritual force, in a word, no man-centred action enter into the making of history. The relation between man and history is a one-way relation, i. e. from history to man, for man has no centre of his own, no *self*, individual or collective. (For Pokrovsky, class consciousness, to the extent it exists, is confined to a reflection of objective material processes.) In essence Pokrovsky's period reveals a magic conception of man, which is, of course, wrapped up in a rationalistic ideology. According to such a conception, man's soul, individual and collective is spread out, projected on to the external forces of the universe. Man exists not in himself, he has no *self*, but in his ties with a universe mechanically conceived. Consequently, any human action is a manifestation of external forces. History is cosmogony in disguise.

The post-Pokrovskian period — between 1932 and 1945 — is psycho-sociologically diffuse and confuse, it includes too many elements of political tactics. One of its main traits consists

in a certain readiness to recognise the part played by purposeful human action in the making of history. But the question is whether is a genuine movement towards a conception of man as a self-centred being whose consciousness is in itself a creative factor in the historical process. Pokrovsky's critics objected that he ignored the part played in history by great personalities. However, it seems obvious that what these critics had in mind was not a Carlylian concept of "hero", that is a personality who moulds the historical process according to his inner life, according to his own feelings and ideas. The great personalities of the past to which Pokrovsky's critics referred as makers of history, were in fact "selfless" creatures. The extent to which they had a consciousness, they borrowed it from outside, from a social class, from a national group. And it was by this "borrowed consciousness", and often against their own consciousness, that they became makers of history. Stalin's remarks about Ivan the Terrible — one of the great personalities of the past — is revealing. Asked by actor N. Cherkasov and Eisenstein about the way in which he saw the personality of the famous Tsar he said: "Ivan failed to destroy the big remaining feudal families. God interfered with Ivan there.... Ivan would destroy one family of Boyars and would then waste a whole year repenting, while he should have acted more resolutely". While Pokrovsky's period depicts a soulless man submerged in the material forces of his environment, the post-Pokrovskian period offers the image of a man who is completely identified with a social group, or the idea of such a group, a

man who did not discover himself. This is a conception of human consciousness, and of man in general characteristic of a pre-individualised society and culture. In such a context, terms such as "self-centred action", "master of his own fate" and particularly "freedom", whatever their definition may be, make little sense.

One has, however, to stress again that the period comprised between 1932 and 1945 had a highly experimental character: it was after all the period of great crisis. The mechanistic model of man was found inadequate and the search of a new formula went, at least at the beginning, in more than one direction. What followed in the field of historiography can be described as a typical example of Stalinist dialectics, i.e. a short phase of relaxation, "a thaw" deliberately created for the purpose of identifying with even more accuracy the deviant and the heretic. The historians were encouraged, moreover, exhorted to consider history in terms different from those preconised by the up to then official school of Pokrovsky, and the result was that they fell in to "nationalist", or "objectivist" errors which were corrected during the third period.

But the third period came not only as a correction of the errors of the post-Pokrovskian period, but also as something new: it came with a clear formulation and vigorous imposition of the principle of "Partisanship". This implies more than a new criterion of writing history, or of seeing and understanding the people of the past; it implies in fact a re-definition of the

concept of man in Soviet Russia. The new man was the Party-man.

There is no need to go into details for the definition of the Party-man. The more specific question which the present study is concerned is whether this inscribes a new stage in the evolution of the concept of man in Soviet civilization. It is not difficult to answer this question in the affirmative, but this is merely begging many other questions regarding the sense of this evolution in the concept of man. However, whatever this evolution may be, one thing seems to be as clear as day light: The Party-man is no more self-centred than the types of man of the Pokrovsky, and post-Pokrovskian periods. Such a man has no consciousness of his own, and indeed no mind of his own; his consciousness is *manufactured* and implanted in him by the Party. As the first period created an image of a matter-centred man, and the second, the image of a nation-centred or group-centred man, the third period creates the concept of a Party-centred man. If there is a development this development is not towards self-determination and freedom. A development in the direction of self-centredness is not possible unless and until the Party's decisions are liable to a greater extent than laws of matter to be accepted and internalised by the individual in a rational deliberate manner.

Conclusions. Even if there has been no progress, there has been at least a change in the Soviet conception of man. Two sets of factors, one political the other psychological, may account for this change.

It has been often suggested that the

change in Soviet historiography which illustrates the change in the concept of man, has been largely a matter of political tactics, or even political opportunism. Thus the Pokrovsky school was not only tolerated, but consecrated as "official" in the first years of the Bolshevik regime, for the simple reason that it served the central purpose of this period which was that of liquidating the bourgeois capitalist class resisting the revolution. That capitalism was the eternal enemy of historical progress was the main tenet of Pokrovsky's school.

The transition to the second period was also inspired by a complex of political expediences. Stalin's formula "socialism within one country", the cult of personality inspired by this autocratic ruler, as well as the Party's need to stir the nationalistic patriotic feeling of the Russian citizen for the purpose of the war, are all points of political tactics which might explain the character of the second period in Soviet historiography.

The explanation in political terms of the third period is in a way simpler, for this period means the culmination of a permanent trend in Soviet civilization, namely, the creation and imposition of the Party as a model of society, and of the Party-man as a model of man. That this happened only towards the end of World War II can be taken as a proof that only at this stage, that is, in the circumstances of victory, the Party became strong enough for the realisation of this purpose.

What has just been said leads to the second explanatory hypothesis regarding

the changes taking place in the Soviet concept of man. As this is not place to work out in details a theory, I shall confine myself to a few remarks based on recent researches in the field of social psychology.

To start with, a mechanistic model of man, as that characteristic the first period of Soviet civilisation, can generally speaking, be taken as a cultural symptom of a collective adjustment to conditions of insecurity. There is little doubt that Soviet society, and particularly the Bolshevik Party passed through such a stage. The collective feeling of insecurity was created, in the first place, by the general state of chaos and social disintegration characteristic of the revolutionary period, by the doubts which the Party itself had about its strength and ability to construe a new society, and by the struggle within the Party. To this should be added the chronic insecurity characterising the whole modern proletarian group. In such circumstances the mechanistic conception of man fulfilled a psychological function: it was a compensation, or a reaction-formation to the feeling of insecurity. For, what such a conception suggests can be formulated as follows: man's inner life, his subjectivity have a derivative character; man is an expression of external material reality whose basic laws lead by necessity to a desired goal. Despite insecurity and doubt, nothing can go wrong, because the final victory of the proletariat, and the realisation of Communism are written in the objective laws of the social universe. This is just another way of saying that God, or

nature, are on the side of the weak and disinherited. (12).

This seems to me one of the basic reasons for which a mechanistic model of man was dominant in the first stage of Soviet civilization. It remains only to be said that a departure from such a conception came only to the extent to which the creator of Soviet society, the Party, gained security as a result of a series of victories over its enemy, and of a series of practical realisations. Reliance on external objective conditions became less and less psychologically necessary. Thus, the emphasis put on the importance of inner factors, such as, consciousness, will, self-training of character, became more and more obvious in the Soviet definition of man. But one has to stress again that the consciousness, the will, and the character which Communists assign to human nature are not individualised consciousness, will, or character: they are manufactured by the Party. Soviet man is not a self-centred man, but essentially a Party-man.

(1) These points had gradually found expression in a series of criticism formulated by the

Party in May, 1934, in a series of observations on some history textbooks made by Stalin, Kirov and Zdanov during the same year, being all of them finally incorporated in a Party resolution published in 1936.

(2) Quot. from R. Schlesinger: *Recent Historiography*. I. *Soviet Studies*. Vol. 1, 1949-50.

(3) Transl. from the French. Editions Sociales, Paris, 1928, p. 182.

(4) In his "Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society", London, 1959, R. Dahrendorf takes upon himself the task to write a full version of the chapter on "Social Class" which Marx hardly began in "Capital".

(5) He distinguishes between the historical function of "social classes" and that of "political parties". Class is identified with objective, while party with subjective reality; class is the embodiment of economic process, party is the class' conception of itself; class is the social, while party is the political agent of history. The position of a class in the historical process is revealed in the analysis of the productive forces, the position of the party is demonstrated by its programmes and policies (ideologies).

(6) Preface to the second edition of "Capital". Transl. from the French, Molitor Ed. Paris, p. LXXX. 1946. Italics mine.

(7) Yugow: *Russia's Economic Front*. Quot. from R. A. Bauer: *The New Man in Soviet Psychology*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1952.

(8) Lenin quot. by G. A. Wetter: *Il Materialismo Dialettico Sovietico*. Torino 1948 p. 342.

(9) From G. S. Bruner's Preface to R. A. Bauer's work, quot. p. 10.

(10) V. N. Shulgin was a typical representative of this trend. The belief of innate goodness of the child was a basic tenet of his school. This made external discipline, the school, unnecessary.

(11) A. Bauer, op. cit. p. 7.

(12) For a more detailed discussion of this point see Z. Barbu: *Democracy and Dictatorship*. London, 1956.

