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Soft Spots in the Hard Line

Professor Hellie surely is right to suggest that many historians today are impressed more by the continuities in modern Russian history and particularly by those between pre- and post-Revolutionary Russia, than they are by the discontinuities. This is not a new attitude but it does undoubtedly reflect a new concern for the long-range development in history as distinct from the climactic event. In the case of Russian history it also undoubtedly reflects certain quite contemporary considerations, external to the discipline itself but still pressing, and seeming to require from the historian the perspective afforded by his knowledge of the Russian past: these might be described as constituting at base an anxiety over the Soviet Union's continued failure to liberalize itself or in other ways to "converge," even while it grows awesomely in economic and especially military strength, and aims, as it is being said, at universal military supremacy. (The attribution of such global designs to Russian policy-makers itself has a long history, as a recent reconsideration of the "Testament of Peter the Great," tracing its origins to disappointed Hungarian and Ukrainian autonomists, reminds us.¹) This attitude might reflect moreover the scholar's unavoidable annoyance that the historical opinions of a famous outsider should be given unmerited prominence. Who is Solzhenitsyn to say that "there is no continuity in the transition from pre-revolutionary Russia to the USSR"?² On the contrary: "the caution, cunning, secrecy and toughness of Soviet political methods [may be] traced to triple roots in medieval village culture, the Muscovite court and the Russian imperial bureaucracy."³ The patrimonial old regime in Russia, with its omnipotent autocracy, naturally yielded by the 1880s to "a bureaucratic-police regime which in effect has been in power there ever since."⁴ Even "Stalinism became 'inevitable' because Marxist power first took root in a specific Russian environment," one "formed by an autocratic political tradition, intellectual frustration, and a strong propensity toward messianism."⁵

1. O. Subtelny, "Peter I's Testament: A Reassessment," *Slavic Review*, 33, No. 4 (Dec. 1974), 663-78.

2. "... There is instead a *fatal fracture of the spine* [italics in original], a break which nearly ended in complete national destruction. Soviet development is not an extension of Russia's, but rather its diversion in a completely new and unnatural direction": A. Solzhenitsyn, "Remarks at the Hoover Institution, 24 May 1976," *The Russian Review*, 36, No. 2 (April 1977), 188.

3. E. L. Keenan, "Russian Political Culture," a paper read at the U.S. State Department in July, 1976, as reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 1977, p. 40.

4. R. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. xxi.

5. Z. Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 126.

In this long-range, largely deterministic view of Russian history and its relation to current Soviet reality the Revolutionary era of the early twentieth century constituted no more of a dividing line than the Petrine era of the early eighteenth or the era of the Great Reforms; and none of these was the turning point they are frequently thought to have been. In 1917 a Bolshevik solution to the perennial problem of Russia's rulers was as good as inevitable: the problem of maintaining as a great power or indeed of preserving as a sovereign state (virtually identical goals since 1721) such a vast, poor, backward, unfortunately situated country against the pressures of a superior West, superior in at least every measurable respect save, periodically, the military; and the generally successful solution of this problem in previous centuries has decisively conditioned its solution in our own. The heritage of the autocratic service or garrison state, of bureaucratism, of mass peasant culture and of Orthodoxy, of serfdom and/or slavery, of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia (once so patiently studied by Western scholars, now so regularly dismissed), of some or all of these inter-related phenomena, more than the dictates of Marxism or the actions of Lenin or Stalin, or modern technology, or the world wars, or what have you, have made the Soviet Union and Soviet practice what they are today. And the chief casualty in the whole process, now as historically, has been the individual—the autonomous human being, his rights secure, prospering with a clear conscience in a society made up of other such individuals or at least decisively informed by individualist values.

The values of the hard-line approach to Russian and Soviet history are various, from the general to the particular, from the concrete to the intriguingly speculative, as Professor Hellie's paper indicates; and the commentator asked at fairly short notice to assess them can only be brief and selective. One such value is obviously to stress the sheer force of habit in human history (though what, then, of Stalinist "voluntarism"?). Another is to emphasize how very different Russia is, historically, and therefore really, from the West: so different, it seems necessary to add, that models or developmental lines forged from Western historical experience might be thought inapplicable *ab initio* in the study of the Russian past. A third is to imply that while the threat of Western invasion has been used by Russian rulers to help maintain their garrison state, the lack of determined action against Russia by the West has permitted that state to grow and to become, by definition, ever more repressive (the Tatar-Turkish threat of early modern times, and the Japanese or Chinese threats more recently, have not been of a similar magnitude). Or, to put this point in another way, historically the partial, cultural Westernization of Russia has only served simultaneously to enhance the coercive power of the state and to facilitate the enslavement of the masses (e.g., by increasing the psychological distance between Westernized master and Old-Russianist serf), but not, until perhaps very recently, to raise the general standard of living. Moreover if it is right to emphasize how dissimilar Russia has been,