Population Politics in the USSR *

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s, there was a dramatic decline in birthrates in the USSR and the European socialist states. This decline brought in its train agonizing reappraisals of population policies and doctrines in virtually all the countries concerned. Albania alone has continued to adhere to pristine anti-Malthusianism. Elsewhere national birth rates have fallen so low that high fertility seems little more than a nostalgic memory. And like the villainous Malthusians portrayed in erstwhile Soviet critiques of Western demography, Soviet observers are now apt at times to view rapid population growth and countries or peoples engaged in it with suspicion and disapproval. From regarding population development with total unconcern or untroubled confidence, the governments of Eastern Europe are now passing over to attitudes ranging from active involvement, or at least the recognition that such involvement may become necessary in the near future, to a morbid preoccupation with how to reproduce, similar to that of the centipede who stopped to reflect on his ability to walk.

Much of the public anxiety is focused on the socio-economic problems presented by fluctuations, imbalances, shortages, and local or temporary superfluities of supply of manpower, either currently experienced or seen as in prospect. Most of the rest is expanded on the apocalyptic prospect that at some point in the future, this or that country, republic or region might pass into a phase of "narrowed reproduction" (i.e., population decline) of indefinite duration. In this respect, the East European countries seem to be experiencing something similar to the extinction scare touched off by the intemperate extrapolation of trends in net reproduction rates in Western Europe in the 1930s. That population decline or stagnation is disastrous both economically and in general seems to be regarded as self-evident. On the other hand, since the mid-1960s, fertility decline has been accepted as a worthy objective for Third World countries, if coupled with appropriate socio-economic policies in other directions. But for the socialist countries themselves, the time when population might have to be restricted has yet to come.

While the spectre of depopulation is obviously a strong emotional stimulant in itself, one suspects that it frequently serves consciously or subconsciously as a symbolic surrogate for potential transformations in relative ethnic or national strength. The emotion may not be wholly irrational. Existing trends of differential fertility would suggest that major changes may be in the making.

*This article is the first of three projected articles on the politics of population in the USSR and socialist Eastern Europe. To some extent they are intended to be complementary. Hence the occasional references to forthcoming articles that will appear elsewhere.
2. POPULATION TRENDS IN THE USSR AND EASTERN EUROPE

Before proceeding to a discussion of the main political issues raised by demographic trends in the Soviet bloc, it may be useful briefly to recall the main features of the trends themselves.

2.1 The Soviet Union before 1945

The Soviet Union is a vast country of great ethno-cultural, and hence, demographic diversity, which its political uniformism has not eliminated, but rather, enhanced. It is also a country which has seen more demographic disturbances and disasters in the last fifty years than almost any other in the world. These two circumstances make generalization difficult. But the overall figures for the USSR, though they are misleading as regards the non-European peoples, do nonetheless give some picture of the developments that have taken place in the numerically dominant European populations.

Just before World War I, both birth and death rates in Russia were very high, oscillating around 46 and 28 per thousand respectively, and having been at even higher levels only a decade or so earlier. In recent years, these same two measures for the USSR as a whole have been hovering around 17 and 8 per thousand. Imperfect as they are statistically, these figures speak for themselves. East Slavic fertility was undoubtedly higher than was known anywhere in Western Europe. Now it ranks among the lowest in Western or Eastern Europe. A good deal of this decline had already occurred by the outbreak of World War II, though this was to some extent masked by the temporary fertility revival achieved by the restoration of restrictive abortion legislation in 1936. The birth and death rates per thousand for 1935, the only ones available for the years just preceding the policy change, were 28.6 and 16.3. Fertility appears to have been declining in this period faster than mortality, so that before the pronatalist measures of 1936, natural increase must have been diminishing. Far more important