

THE SOVIET TRAGEDY

*A History of Socialism
in Russia, 1917-1991*

MARTIN MALIA



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PREFACE

For much of its history Communist Russia was perceived by the outside world to be, in Winston Churchill's famous characterization, a "riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." This verdict was later moderated by an American ambassador to Moscow to yield the judgment that "Soviet Russia is not a mystery; it is only a secret." With the collapse of 1989-1991, the world that Lenin and Stalin built was no longer even a secret. The intimate record of seventy-four years of utopian experimentation is an open book for all to read.

Soviet history is now for the first time really history, and this closure permits us to see the pattern or "logic" of its life course. The present study is an effort to delineate this pattern and to probe the dynamic driving it.

What follows, therefore, is first of all a survey narrative of the evolution of Sovietism over seventy-four years as the system moved from its origins to its end. But even more, this study is an extended essay in analysis and interpretation of the Soviet phenomenon. For we did not perceive that phenomenon directly, but only as through a glass darkly. This was so in part because until almost the end Soviet reality was indeed a well-kept secret, and in part because its universalistic socialist pretensions made it an object of perturbing attraction or repulsion to the rest of the planet.

Thus, Western observers in talking about Communist Russia were almost always talking, if only indirectly, about Western problems and

politics as well, a circumstance that made Soviet studies the most impassioned field of the social sciences. This passion focused on the issue of whether the Soviet Union was a unique "totalitarianism," and therefore beyond democratic redemption, or instead was a variant of universal "modernity," and therefore capable of true civilization. Nor did the application of the purportedly value-free categories of social science make the task of resolving this issue any easier. For the very use of such categories constituted a value judgment since they necessarily presupposed the Soviet system to be a social mechanism like any other.

The present book, therefore, is above all an effort to come to terms with the concepts and categories with which the West has attempted to decode the late Soviet enigma. In this sense, it is not only a chronicle of the Soviet tragedy, but also a commentary on much of twentieth-century intellectual history and on the contemporary world's quest for the just society. Given the worldwide role of Soviet socialism, however, the historical autopsy of the experiment and this ideological commentary cannot be disentangled. Yet, given also that the experiment is now a closed historical episode, it should at last be possible to conduct the two inquiries with greater realism than in the past. The task of this book is to effect this conceptual transvaluation.*

* The system of transliteration of Russian terms used here is that of the Library of Congress with a few modifications: "Ya" and "Ye" at the beginning of such now familiar names as Yakovlev and Yeltsin, and "y" at the end of such older familiar names as Dostoevsky or Trotsky. The soft sign is omitted.

In this magisterial, long-awaited book, Martin Malia forcefully challenges forty years of Sovietology and generations of conventional wisdom that saw the Communist state primarily as an effort to overcome Russia's historic "backwardness" through necessary "modernization" and "development." This long-dominant view, which softened totalitarianism into a necessary authoritarianism, falsely cast the regime's criminal brutality as part of a gradual evolution toward democracy. History has already proved this view wrong — and Malia's book explains why the effort was doomed — and a criminal undertaking — from the start.

Malia's approach is to take the Soviets at their ideological word: they were out to "build socialism" — a socialism in the strongest sense of noncapitalism — through the heavy handed suppression of private property, profit, and the market. Such a utopian program could only be achieved by force, and entailed an ideology of ceaseless class struggle supported by an unending dictatorship of the Party. For a time under Stalin, this program generated fairly impressive economic growth, but eventually its inhuman cost overburdened the system's performance and revealed its ideology as a lie; the will to coerce waned and the whole system imploded under Gorbachev, leaving only rubble. This is the perverse logic that drove the Soviet tragedy.

Malia vigorously takes the inverted image of the Soviet Union projected by the social-science Sovietology and sets it squarely on its feet, the totalitarian model. Only by returning to the model of Marxist ideology and Leninist politics can one account for the "surreal" world of Soviet society now fading into the past.

This profound analysis of the Soviet Union originated in Malia's essay "To the

(continued on back flap)

"In Martin Malia, the Soviet Union had one of its most acute observers. With this book, it may well have found the cornerstone of its history."

— FRANÇOIS FURET, author of *Interpreting the French Revolution*

From the Preface to

THE SOVIET TRAGEDY

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HISTORY