The Soviet Union

Amid the ups and downs of Soviet-American relations since Stalin's death, there has been a steady growth in the study of the Soviet Union by Americans in academic centers. And, more remarkably, an unprecedented surge in studies of the United States by Russian specialists. In each country, during the 1970s, popular accounts of everyday life in the other have become best sellers. Here, two young American scholars, S. Frederick Starr and William Zimmerman, analyze in turn what the Russians have been writing about the Americans, and vice versa.

THE RUSSIAN VIEW OF AMERICA

by S. Frederick Starr

Rare is the American over 35 who cannot dredge up some anecdote connected with Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to the United States. In the course of two weeks, the ebullient Soviet premier succeeded in posing vividly the possibilities and challenges of dealing with his country in a post-Sputnik era, and adding several salty phrases to our language besides. Less well known is the impact that Khrushchev's trip had within the U.S.S.R. A decade earlier, Moscow audiences were being bombarded with books and lectures on *The American Gestapo* and *The Fascization of American Political Life.* Now, the top Soviet leader was exhorting his countrymen to come *Face to Face with America,* in the words of the title of the commemorative volume on his trip, issued in an edition of a quarter-million.

In retrospect, the Khrushchev visit can be seen as one of several important steps opening the way for the development of American studies, or *Amerikanistika,* in the Soviet Union. Since the death of Stalin, in 1953, the means by which Russians gain

knowledge of this country have grown considerably. A trickle of doctoral dissertations and monographs in the early 1960s had swelled into a flood of books by 1970. An Institute of the U.S.A. was established under Grigorii Arbatov in 1968 to serve as a new governmental "think tank." A new semi-popular journal, *USA*, appeared in 1970, devoted to the analysis of American politics, economics, and foreign policy; its circulation has now reached 33,000.

Today, Soviet specialists on the United States can be found in Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi, Tomsk, and other cities, in addition to Moscow, with its numerous academic centers and governmental institutes and agencies. Though far less numerous than American students of Soviet affairs, devotees of *beldomologiia*, or White-House-ology, constitute an industry capable of mounting frequent conferences on American topics, producing articles for the press, and providing confidential advice to senior government policy-makers.

The American Enigma

Why has "America-watching" achieved such prominence in the U.S.S.R.? The reasons do not differ greatly from those underlying the spread of Soviet studies in this country. There is genuine curiosity, to be sure. But with so much of their national budget tied up in the military, Russians too consider it important to "know their enemy," or, more politely put, to understand their partner in détente. Beyond this, there is a crucially important factor not present in American study of the U.S.S.R., namely the desire to study carefully a nation whose experience offers much that can be adopted or adapted in the U.S.S.R. Like the Japanese, the Russians are past masters at such international borrowing. This process has gone on since before Peter the Great, and will continue regardless of the fear of some Americans that the Soviet Union will, as it were, steal the raisins from their cake. *What Does America Have to Teach Us?*, asked a book published in Moscow in 1908. Along with their other tasks, the Soviet *Amerikanisty* are charged with finding today's answers to this question.

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This new "knowledge industry" requires solid information. This has always been a problem for Russians interested in America. The first detailed information on North America did not reach Russian leaders until nearly a century after Columbus. For the next 200 years Russians had to learn about this continent through the works of West European writers, rather than at first hand. In spite of a number of engaging travel accounts on America written by Russians in the 19th century, the United States remained, for most educated subjects of the Tsars, more the embodiment of one or another abstract principle than a real country inhabited by real people. Interest in the United States reached something of a peak in the first years after the 1917 revolution, but it was hard data on American industrial methods rather than broader information on American society that Russians were seeking and getting. And amidst the general paranoia of the Stalin years, broad scholarly inquiry was severely hampered.

Listening to the VOA

During the last 15 years this situation has changed dramatically for the better, at least for the specialist. Leading Soviet officials, journalists, and scholars feel obliged to be better informed than in the past, and have good access to American publications not otherwise available to the public at large. They use them extensively, if selectively, in their writings on this country.* The now unjammed Voice of America is never cited as a source, but any serious Soviet Americanist will expect to log several hours a week in front of his short-wave radio.

The flood of direct impressions taken home by travelers to this country is perhaps even more important. With some 12,000 Soviet visitors to the United States each year, there are now Russians in nearly every profession who have followed Khrushchev's call. The most fortunate among them have been able to study here, thanks to the various cultural exchanges that have flourished since 1958. True, there are those who, like Louis XVIII, have learned nothing and forgotten nothing, and, equally true, the pages of such leading publications as the Union of Soviet Writers' *Literary Gazette* are open to such people. But the expanding fund of direct impressions makes it more difficult to pass off the most egregious

*Examination of the footnotes of the journal *USA* indicates that the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* far outstrip all other papers in popularity, while among weeklies it is *U.S. News and World Report* rather than *Newsweek* or *Time* to which Soviet students of American affairs turn. Notwithstanding their lingering suspicion that Wall Street runs the country, the *Wall Street Journal* is all but ignored as a source for articles on the United States. So are most counter-culture publications.

distortions as fact. Writing on the United States has grown more sophisticated, if only to satisfy the rising expectations of better educated Russians.

No amount of information, of course, can by itself enable a person from one culture to decipher accurately the signs and symbols of another. In the end, the underlying assumptions and predilections of the observer will come into play, whether through the choice of subjects to which he is drawn or through the manner in which he chooses to treat them. At the deepest level, such assumptions are built into language itself. To take but one example, how can one expect Russians to take seriously the recent American debate over the Privacy Act when their language contains no precise word for "privacy"? Language aside, such assumptions have become crystallized in specific attitudes toward America, some of which have long recurred in Russian accounts.

A fairly representative compendium of such notions is the volume *Stars and Stripes*, published by a well-traveled Russian nobleman, Ivan Golovin, in 1856. Borrowing a phrase from Diderot, Golovin charged that America's distinction was to be like a fruit which begins rotting even before it has ripened. Diderot, in fact, had been speaking of Russia, and not America, but the notion of a United States both youthful and decadent held great appeal for both conservative and radical writers before 1917 and for Communist writers down to the present. As recently as June 15, 1976, readers of *Pravda* were treated to an article on America in this vein entitled "A Society Without a Future."

A Contradictory Approach

No less curious than the sustained, almost Wagnerian, decline ascribed to America is the way in which that image has been able to coexist with the equally persistent acknowledgment—even awe—of American scientific and technological progress. The founder of Russian publicist writing on the United States, Pavel Svinin, spoke warmly of American machines in his *Picturesque United States of America, 1811–1813,* and his heirs have never begrudged praise in this area. As Stalin put it, "Soviet power and American technique will build socialism." Such a view assumes that technology is culturally neutral, a point that was implied by N. N. Inozemtsev, the director of Moscow's Institute for International Economics and International Relations, in the first number of the monthly *USA.* While affirming that the American system "deforms" its own scientific and technological achievements, Inozemtsev argued that such matters as the combination of central-

ization and decentralization in American corporations, the American method of wholesaling, and the system of decision-making in the area of research and development "are all of interest to us, since concrete general principles relating to the scientific and technological revolution are coming to light through the American experience."

Without even acknowledging the apparent contradiction, Soviet commentators simultaneously elaborate both images. One reason they have not rejected the age-old idea of American decline is that it has proven useful in analyzing various current issues. It enabled Soviet observers to deal relatively calmly with the United States amid the furor of Vietnam, and to accept Watergate without surprise. Similarly, 75 years ago it underpinned the research of the brilliant Russian Americanist, Moisei Ostrogorsky, in whose eyes the United States had even then ceased to possess a Constitutional government in the strict sense. Writing for an audience that eventually included thousands of Americans, Ostrogorsky was the first scholar anywhere to analyze the combined impact of wealth, political parties, and a mass public on America's Constitutional heritage. His gloomy but profound insights justify his being ranked after Alexis de Tocqueville and Sir James Bryce as the most astute foreign observer of this country.*

An Extension of Europe

Confronted with a civilization so different from their own, some Russian scholars have avoided coming to grips with its distinctive aspects by declaring categorically that America is "nothing else but a continuation of European development." These words, by the 19th-century socialist, Alexander Herzen, could have been uttered by countless recent Russian writers. This view has two important corollaries: first, it has led Russian observers to neglect until recently the study of American culture and social psychology; and, second, it has served to justify the mechanical application to America of categories of analysis derived from the study of Western Europe.

A Russian nurse, A. N. Paevskaia, returning from her studies in Boston in the 1890s, asked, "What have [the Americans] given the world? What noble, honest, great human idea has been borne by them?" Assuming the answer to be "nothing," Russians have long neglected all but those few American writers and artists

*Ostrogorsky's best-known work is *Democracy and the Party System in the United States, A Study in Extra Constitutional Government* (1910). The latest edition in English was published by Arno Press in 1974.

deemed by them to be "progressive"—Theodore Dreiser, Mark Twain, Jack London, Sinclair Lewis. Many other American authors whose works would give Russians a more multi-dimensional impression were for long untranslated.

In this respect too the last few years mark a sharp break with all previous Russian experience. The first Russian translation of *Moby Dick* came in 1961—after a century of neglect. Then, in rapid succession, came works by William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. D. Salinger, Thomas Wolfe, William Styron, and even Kurt Vonnegut. Henry James, who acknowledged his debt to the Russian writer Turgenev, was also hauled from oblivion. But authors like Henry Miller and William Burroughs, whose works Russians judge to be pornographic, remain beyond the pale of acceptability, as do the writings of certain Black Nationalists, "reactionary" writers such as Herman Wouk, "fascists" like Ezra Pound, and writers known for their critical views on the Soviet Union, such as Saul Bellow.

By comparison with any other time in the last half-century, the situation has dramatically improved, and with important results. Reviewing the recent burst of translations, one American critic has noted that "Soviet translations of American literature belie the image of America as a cultural desert. Indeed, it projects an image of a culture that is both varied and vibrant. . . ."

With the gradual acceptance of America as a country possessing its own rich and diverse culture, the tendency automatically to impose on it the categories of analysis developed for the societies of Western Europe has come under scrutiny. One of the peculiarities of Soviet writing on America has always been its use of terminology not normally used by Americans themselves. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, of course, provided that the analysis succeeds in bringing greater clarity to the problem at hand. Endless polemical allusions to the American "proletariat," to the "reactionary manipulators of Wall Street," and to unspecified "progressive forces" have not had this effect, however.

Gone Is the Proletariat

This too is changing, at least among specialists. A. N. Melnikov's 1974 volume *Contemporary Class Structure of the USA* succeeds in getting to the real groups and strata that comprise American society today. Basing his analysis on an exhaustive study of U.S. census returns, Melnikov divides and subdivides his subject into ever more refined units, reveling in the specific at the expense of the hackneyed general categories of "capitalist," "worker," and

so forth. American labor, he finds, is no "solid, undifferentiated mass," any more than it is uniform in world view, work, or wealth. Nor, significantly, is labor seen on the verge of revolt—no great revelation, perhaps, but not an observation quite in line with the old Soviet faith.

The politics of détente have hastened the abandonment of the polemical vocabulary. It was well and good for *Pravda* to rail against the evils of American "monopolies" so long as the Soviet government was not entering into contracts with them. Nowadays, the more discrete term "firm" has become *de rigeur*. In a recent article, the Control Data Corporation was described as simply a "problem-solving organization," in spite of its excellent standing on the New York Stock Exchange. And what has become of the much-maligned capitalist, with his top hat, cigar, and jowls? Presto! He has been transformed into a "businessman," an "entrepreneur" (*delovoi chelovek*), or even a "manager," i.e., the sort of person one can do business with. Meanwhile, "bankers" are now "financial circles" and the "proletariat" has dropped from the scene entirely.

This shift has its parallel in the manner in which Soviet writers describe the American political process. Here again, the Stalin era bequeathed to the present Soviet generation of leaders a dangerously simplified notion of how American politics works. America being a capitalist country, it followed that businessmen could bring about whatever legislation they considered to be in their interests. On this doctrinal assumption, the Soviet campaign in favor of the U.S.–Soviet trade bill was directed almost entirely towards sympathetic leaders of American industry. The unanticipated passage of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment linking trade with Jewish emigration threw Moscow's White-House-ologists into confusion. Congress, it turned out, *did* count, and the successful Congressional drive against the illegal acts of the Nixon administration only confirmed it. In 1974, the Moscow leadership sent to Washington a prestigious group of parliamentary experts to see how the separation of powers actually functions.

The absence of contending political parties in the U.S.S.R., the Russian tradition of centralized authority, and the Soviet legal system's stress on duties to the State rather than rights against it present real barriers to Russian perceptions. Even when they have mastered the facts of a given case, Soviet observers will frequently misread American motives—not just because they are inhibited by ideological blinders, but because they honestly cannot conceive of people basing their actions on the abstract principles which sometimes impel us. This is particularly true in the case of

Americans who criticize the U.S.S.R. on civil libertarian grounds. "Like young harlots (although many of these people are quite gray-haired), they swing from one modish political current to the next. . . ." Thus one prominent Soviet Americanist characterized liberal critics of détente.

Nonetheless, sustained contact with American affairs has led a good number of Soviet analysts to a quite realistic understanding of American political processes. Whatever their ideology tells them about the structure of power in capitalist societies, they have come to appreciate the might of press and public opinion in America. And while Marxism-Leninism requires that they consider every Western government to be a conspiracy against "the people," the new wave of Americanists are fairly united in viewing American politics as relatively open and relatively adaptable to changing conditions.

Awe Leads to Error

In their eagerness to avoid the exaggerated statements on America's impending doom that have given rise to so many Soviet jokes in the past, Moscow analysts at times have erred by overestimating American strengths. Thus, Soviet economists analyzing our economy on the eve of détente failed to anticipate the impact of inflation here—and hence found themselves later having to adjust their prognostications downward rather severely. More recently, inflation and unemployment in America have been treated extensively in such Soviet journals as *World Economics* and *International Relations*, but Moscow specialists insist that America's boldness in the scientific and industrial areas will sustain its lead over the other large Western countries for the foreseeable future and, by implication, over the Soviet Union as well.

How, then, can we summarize such new Soviet perceptions of the United States? At the least, one can say that the specialists' views are based upon more and better information than those of their predecessors, and that this information covers more diverse aspects of American life than ever before. Moreover, the establishment of an organized, officially sanctioned field of inquiry dealing with American affairs has created an environment which encourages Soviet writers to elaborate their conceptions of this country in greater detail and to engage in open debate with one another when differing lines of interpretation emerge. This dialogue, and the wealth of impressions on which it feeds, has weakened, though not destroyed, many of the shibboleths that have long formed Russian opinion on this country.

During the past year, for example, Soviet scholars have sought to come to grips with the Bicentennial. Some Russian authors have seen the ideology of the American Revolution as marking a watershed in mankind's liberation from tyranny; others have condemned that same ideology as a hypocritical mask hiding selfish interest; while still others have flatly denied that the Revolution produced much of an ideology in the first place; each writer supporting his case with ample citations of the works of American scholars. A Soviet synthesis on this or other American issues will in all likelihood emerge, and such syntheses will inevitably take on the colorations of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. But very diverse positions have been defended or rationalized in terms of Marxism-Leninism in the past, and there is reason to think that American interpretations could contribute to the formation of official Soviet views in the future.

The Gains Are Limited

The Soviet rediscovery of America has occurred not through a few dazzling leaps but through hundreds of small steps. No great works of synthesis have appeared, but one can cite literally hundreds of competently written studies on small—even minute—topics, each the result of some specialist fulfilling the plan of work set out for him by the council of his institute or university. Thanks to this effort, a country that was once seen as simply the embodiment of such abstractions as "capitalism," "imperialism," or "technocracy" is now recognized as being infinitely complex and, to the intelligent Soviet observer, endlessly intriguing.

Unlike Soviet studies in this country, which have floundered as the old cliché of "totalitarianism" and the newer clichés about "interest groups" have in turn lost their hold, Soviet interest in the United States has blossomed through contact with America's complexity. Competition for entrance to the English-language primary and secondary schools in major cities is intense, and the graduates of such institutions compete fiercely for places in the major institutes and universities that offer programs of American studies. The fact that American studies have attracted an inordinate number of the sons and daughters of Moscow's political elite both reflects and contributes to the intellectual and social prestige such studies now enjoy.

Even so, the more realistic perceptions of this country promoted by the U.S.S.R.'s better *Amerikanisty* remain largely confined to a small circle of specialists and enthusiasts, much like the Marlboros they smoke or the American cut of the suits they wear.

The newer and more subtle perceptions of the United States have yet really to penetrate the schools, for example, where both textbooks and standardized curricula remain firmly rooted in the frozen soil of the Cold War. Soviet mass journalism is often no better. Gennadii Vasiliev of *Pravda* recently reported from Washington that under the American system of free enterprise it is quite normal for babies to be sold like commodities; the same correspondent used the resignation of U.S. Commissioner of Education Bell last May as an opportunity to demonstrate to Soviet readers that Americans cannot send their children through college on the salary of $37,800 that Bell had been receiving. In both instances Mr. Vasiliev could base his story on evidence gleaned from the American press. Just as in the textbooks, however, the evidence was presented in a thoroughly distorted and, as the Soviets say, "one-sided" manner.

Mr. Vasiliev's heavy-gaited approach to the United States is not uncommon among Soviet journalists, TV newscasters, and film-makers, but it is by no means universal. Indeed, the same attitude of open-minded curiosity that informs some specialized studies on the United States is to be found among the staff of three of the Soviet Union's most authoritative mass newspapers: *Pravda*, the voice of the Communist Party; *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, the organ of the Communist youth movement; and *Izvestiia*, the government's mouthpiece. Within the last two years, three Soviet correspondents have produced accounts of their travels in America which are exceptionally revealing not only of the attitudes of the writers themselves but, equally important, of the interests of their mass audience.

Messages from the Sponsor

One of the writers is Boris Strelnikov, an old pro. A veteran of both World War II and many decades on the staff of *Pravda*, Strelnikov has turned out his share of anti-American boilerplate; his 1975 best seller, *The Land Beyond the Ocean*, is by no means free of thrice-told tales of American perfidy. Strelnikov's pages are punctuated from time to time with sermonets—messages, as it were, from the sponsor. But he has a capacity for presenting ambiguity as well, as when he describes his meeting with a family of hardy dirt farmers in Wisconsin. With unfeigned respect, he recounts Warren Miller's efforts to hold out against the expanding agro-businesses, and correctly identifies his hero as an heir to the Jeffersonian ideal. This "man from the land" will lose, however, and Strelnikov obviously feels for him. But wherein lies the am-

biguity? Both the author and his Soviet readers know that their own government has also opted for agro-business, just as they realize that literally millions of Russian Warren Millers were exterminated as *kulaks* [rich peasants] during Stalin's collectivization drive.

Why did *The Land Beyond the Ocean* sell 100,000 copies overnight after having already been serialized in some of the largest mass publications in the U.S.S.R.? Virtually any book on America will find a large Soviet audience, but the fact that Strelnikov had as his coauthor Vasilii Peskov surely did no harm. A popular writer on nature, Peskov was a leading figure in the effort to rescue Lake Baikal from polluting industries. Unlike most previous Russian writers on America, Peskov notices the land itself. The intensity of the scenery—dramatic rather than lyrical—is described with the freshness and enthusiasm that only a sensitive visitor can attain. And to readers who have heard only how Americans desecrate nature, Peskov's long passages on the popularity of bird-watching and on the system of National Parks could only come as an intriguing revelation.

California as Microcosm

The Soviet thirst for reliable descriptions of American life is strong but not indiscriminate, which makes for an increasingly competitive situation among those writers who choose to enter the field. As the U.S. correspondent of *Pravda* and his colleague from *Komsomolskaia Pravda* were producing their several volumes on this country, *Izvestiia*'s veteran Washington correspondent, Stanislav Kondrashov, also decided to get in on the act. Kondrashov could have written on many American themes. In the end he chose California, where, as he put it, "one can discern sharp and clear, as through a magnifying glass, the features of contemporary American society."

In *A Meeting with California* Kondrashov is a superior tour guide. He takes his readers—100,000 of them—to a few usual sights and many unusual ones. Even a familiar subject like the Los Angeles freeways assumes a new aspect as he compares the seemingly fused cars and drivers to mythic centaurs. More portraitist than social diagnostician, Kondrashov's talents are enhanced by an impressive capacity for sympathy. Whether he is introducing Russians to an anti-war clergyman or to the topless dancers of San Francisco, he manages to illuminate the personality of his subject. He grinds few axes.

Kondrashov visited California at the height of the post-Cam-

bodia agitation and returned again in 1973. His initial impressions were of a state—a country—that considered itself to be on intimate terms with the future. With uneasy fascination he compares the *vivace* tempo of Los Angeles life with the *allegro* of New York and the *moderato* of Moscow. He found the West to be inhabited by attractive and affable boosters, whom he treats with that peculiar blend of admiration, toleration, and condescension that the Old World has often reserved for the New. Concluding a chapter on the McCarthy campaign of 1968, he quotes James Reston:

> Maybe life will not be changed by this drive for self-analysis and self-perfection, but there is nonetheless something inspiring and even majestic in these debates. Whatever one might say about America today, she is taking up the great questions of human life. She is asking what is the sense of all this wealth? Is poverty inevitable or intolerable? What sort of America do we really want? And what should be its relations with the rest of the world?

Returning in 1973, Kondrashov reflects on a California that has become "more modest, more sober, and more frugal":

> No longer raging and having grown tame and settled, California looks to the future without bravado and with even a certain trepidation and humility, a future which it now sees as an inaccessible sphinx rather than a self-confident sharpster who smiles so that all will know how well his affairs are doing and how they could not be otherwise.

Is this Kondrashov's America? Yes, but not without reservations. Like many of the Soviet Union's more sophisticated observers of the United States, he is far less prone than his predecessors to leap to sweeping generalizations. No less important, he knows that his Russian public does not want them. Why, I asked him, has the lowly travel account flourished as the most popular genre for Soviet *Amerikanistika* while more ambitious monographs gain currency largely among specialists? Kondrashov answered bluntly: "In a travel account one is not obliged to reach any final conclusions." In a changing world, this approach is a promising alternative to dogmatism.