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IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE
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GERMANY AND RUSSIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

This paper, prepared by the National Council, summarizes the report of a conference comparing the historical processes of Germany and Russia/USSR in the 20th Century. That report, written by Professor Moshe Lewin of the University of Pennsylvania, is a 150 page digest and interpretation of the conference, and is available from the Council upon request, at (202) 387-0168.

There were a great variety of themes and interpretations presented in the papers and in the discussion at the Conference that could not be conveniently fit into Professor Lewin’s report, which makes no claim to be exhaustive or comprehensive. The report gives only a modest view of the intellectual richness, excitement, and inspiration for future research that was produced in the space of the four day conference.

The structure of the report rests on four supports: the problem of comparative study and the case for comparing Germany and Russia; common problem areas explored in detail by the conference; an synthetic essay developing the broader aspects of comparison in terms of processes at work in both Germany and Russia; questions of interpreting the past of both countries and a conclusion.

A. The Problem of Comparative Study: the Case for Russia and Germany.

The interpretive power of a comparative analysis of historical phenomena derives from the existence of a third dimension, that is a level from which to compare the developments of two or more societies that have certain common features that encourage compari-
son. Comparative history is based on several epistemological assumptions. First, that historical knowledge is both ideographic and nomothetic; that is that it encompasses unique, non-repetitive events and repetitive, mass phenomena that can be molded into a conceptual construct. Societies could not exist without discernable patterns or regularities that allow for a degree of predictability. Otherwise life would consist of random events having no greater meaning than their own existence. Second, that comparison is intrinsic to studies of complex and broad phenomena like capitalism or socialism or nationalism. But it is important to keep in mind that the comparison will be more valid if suitable problems or historical periods or stages in the development of several societies are selected and analyzed. Third, that the advantages and disadvantages be weighed at the outset of comparing two or more societies that are either rarely treated in a comparative method (G.F. Frederikson) or lie in the same geo-historical area (Marc Bloch). Either may serve so long as the analysis avoids the trap of seeking only sameness or similarity. By seeking differences as well, it is possible to illuminate the degree or intensity of the similarities.

The case for comparing Germany and Russia leans more toward the approach taken by Marc Bloch. Each of the two societies has been treated in the historical literature as lying on the margins of the West; though one must be careful here to admit that this presumes a monolithic or cohesive "west" as a model. The difficulty with that presumption is its ethnocentric character and as P. Clastre suggests, may have the effect of ignoring the more important question of what these societies actually were in their own terms. However, there is no way of avoiding altogether comparisons with "the west" and these may be instructive so long as the dangers are openly acknowledged.
The histories of Russia and Germany suggest a number of problem areas that may be identified as fruitfully comparable. They are: 1) the national debate over identity often couched by the indigenous intelligentsia in terms of comparison with "the West" and thus not simply as point of comparison imposed from the outside, 2) the process of state building or the gathering of lands and power that had at its center Muscovy in Russia and Prussia in Germany followed by the creation of multicultural empires, more pronounced in Russia but also present in the German case, 3) a conscious striving toward modernization, or to be more precise, the phenomena of "late industrialization" against in comparison with developments in Great Britain, the U.S. and the margins of Atlantic continental Europe, 4) their involvement in and reaction to twentieth century wars in which they were antagonists; specifically in terms of a pattern of defeat, revolution and compromise regimes in the case of World War I and short term differences but possibly long term similarities in the case of World War II. (Is the current crisis in Russia a long delayed reaction to the Pyrrhic victory in 1945?), 5) the emergence of two personal dictatorships and "pathological" leaders in the period of Stalin-Hitler where the similarities have been emphasized at the expense of differences.

B. The Problem Areas and Their Comparability.

The conference mapped out a set of problems that bear on the larger questions listed above. The following is an attempt to draw some general observations out of the papers, to make comparisons where these may have been only implicit in the papers and to highlight questions that need additional research.
I. Integration of Potential Opponents of the Regime. This is a question that testifies to the vitality and stability of any political system. In both Imperial Russia and Imperial Germany there were elements of positive and negative integration. Both governments were fundamentally authoritarian but they possessed different potential for absorbing or neutralizing the "menacing" elements in their respective populations. Germany was before 1914 a Rechtsstaat in principle and in practice; it possessed a vibrant civil society and the integrative mechanisms were strong. In Russia, by contrast, there was no rule of law, weakly developed autonomous cultural and social organizations and a feeble integrative mechanism, feeble but not entirely absent. In these beginnings of a civil society even organized political parties were appearing. Both governments attempted to block democratization with indifferent success.

In fostering economic development (industrialization), both states created a serious potential opposition in the working class population. Germany was more successful in integrating these elements particularly in the electoral game. The Russian government reacted differently by seeking to prevent the autonomous organization of workers and students who unlike their German counterparts were also a source of powerful opposition to the regime. By its political tactics the Russian government created the conditions in which a broad constituency for the radical left could flourish. (This tendency also showed up later in Soviet history during the Khrushchev period when the government also during a period of political ferment blocked the development of autonomous organizations and paid with stagnation. The history of perestroika has been up until now an important departure from this pattern.)
2. Modernization, Economic Development and Social Fragmentation. One of the key concepts in understanding the impact of modernization-industrialization on German and Russian societies is the idea of "combined development" that is transformation of different areas of the societies at different rates with all the contradictions this imposes. At the center of one of the big debates in German historiography lies the controversy over the effects of modernization or industrialization on traditional German values. On one side there is the thesis that "modernity thwarted or diseased" led to the breakdown of Weimar and triumph of Hitler. This belief in the persistence of pre-industrial attitudes and structures in Germany is the basis for the Sonderweg (special path) thesis that has long held sway in German historiography. On the other side there is the thesis that Germany was actually a highly developed capitalist society that was a victim of profound internal contradictions in the modernizing process. The second thesis received a good deal of support at the conference. It also was shown to have some comparative value in exploring developments in post-revolutionary Russia. For example, in response to a "massive social reproduction crisis" (D. Crews) in Weimar (and in Russia several times over after 1917) certain areas of social work were pervaded by social controls, that is snooping, meddling and imposition of values. Sometimes this is portrayed (D. Peukert) as the" medievalization" of social problems. The forms of social control intensified and took more pernicious turn in both Hitler's Reich and Stalinist Russia.

Another aspect of the debate over the impact of industrialization or capitalism upon German and Russian societies is the question of social fragmentation. There is evidence in both the Imperial German and Russian cases that running parallel to the development of a
strong state was a relatively weaker development of class structures and the persistence of legal and status distinctions based on pre-industrial "estates" (Stand or soslovie). The case for the persistence of pre-industrial attitudes appears stronger in the case of Russia where the trauma of the civil war imposed upon the existing fragile class structure produced a throw-back to even earlier social forms in the countryside, leading to the process of "archaization" (M. Lewin).

These discussions brought back the problem in integration in a different form. In Imperial Germany and Russia the state, while retaining its authoritarian control, made concessions to the middle classes (more in Germany than in Russia) that caused what may be called the embourgeoisement of the state. At the same time the state imposed upon the middle classes the values of aggressive nationalism and militarism that caused what may be called the feudalization of the bourgeoisie. This double process was probably more balanced in Germany and helps explain -- together with the integration of the working class -- the German success in surviving the shock of total war in 1914-18 and the threat of social revolution. But the postwar effects were more unsettling. The preservation of German militarism and an integrated but politically submissive working class weakened Weimar’s ability to resist the enemies of democracy. In Soviet Russia the reemergence of a strong state was even more pronounced because of the social levelling effect of the war and revolution and civil war 1914-1920. There were few if any social or institutional obstacles to the imposition of new values (Soviet or Stalinist) upon social strata that did not normally espouse them, that is the peasantry, and the imposition of a Stalinist dictatorship over the entire population.
3. The Relationship between Markets and the State. The central economic problem debated by the conference was the problem of markets versus the state in its historical development leading to the current debate in Eastern Europe. Endorsing the widely accepted notion that the state played a very large role in the economic development of Germany and Russia, the contributors to the discussion at the conference stressed a less well known aspect of this phenomenon, that is the emergence of a system of "imbalances." In both the Soviet, especially Stalinist, and German, especially Nazi periods, the statization of the economy predominated until it created imbalances that required correction of one sort or another. In the case of post-revolutionary Russia Lenin's original concept of state capitalism was forced to yield to the exigencies of civil war and the imposition of War Communism. That radical readjustment created in its turn imbalances that Lenin sought to correct by introducing the New Economic Policy in 1920-21. Subsequently, the high level of statization of the Soviet economy under Stalin reached its apogee during World War II when the economy became so seriously imbalanced that it was necessary to introduce corrections or reforms by demobilizing aspects of the economy through more flexible pricing and relaxing the rules in the agricultural sector where necessary (J. Sapir). The Soviet government continued to struggle with the problem in the post-Stalinist period, especially under Khrushchev, but only up to 1957 and again briefly under Kosygin's reforms in 1965. But these attempts were largely thwarted by the enormous growth of the state apparatus that proved to be the major obstacle to the system reforming itself.

In Germany the process of statization accelerated by World War II also threw the system into a state of considerable imbalance that approached chaotic proportions. But the
system retained the essential features of a capitalist economy that had been altogether
eliminated in Soviet Russia. These structures survived the devastation of the final defeat of
Nazi Germany and made possible, together with foreign investment, the rapid postwar
reconstruction. In other words, Germany retained its capacity for "self-sustained growth"
whereas Soviet Russia did not.

4. The Two Regimes and Their Dictators. This proved to be in many ways the most
intriguing part of the conferences. The general thrust of the papers here was to make clear
the distinctions rather than the similarities between the regimes of the Third Reich and
Stalinist Russia (Ian Kershaw). These distinctions were not just or even mainly personal,
though these existed, but reflected a number of other salient features of the two dictatorships:
the constraining social motivations of their followers, the character of the ideological driving
force, the nature of the political vanguard movement, the contrast between Hitler’s charis-
matic appeal and anti-administrative inclinations and Stalin’s lack of charisma and deep
immersion in bureaucratic detail, often distorted by capricious and often irrational elements,
the contrast too between Hitler’s emphasis on "mission" that implied both destruction of the
"racial enemy" and ultimately self-destruction (moral nihilism) and Stalin’s commitment to
national aims like industrialization and defense that were rational per se though also under
the shadow of pathological and non-legal tendencies. What emerged as a new picture was
that Hitler’s position within society and his own movement was much more secure than
Stalin’s. Hitler’s purges were limited in scope and clearly identified his political enemies but
except for Rohm and the Strassers did not involve cannibalizing his own movement. Stalin
did not trust his closest colleagues and eliminated most of them. The Hitler myth was
indispensable to Nazism; Stalin cult was superimposed upon a previous tradition of Marxism-Leninism and the system survived his death. The Soviet system exhibited an ability to reproduce itself, a crucial distinction in making the comparison with Nazism. This was accomplished not through the party per se still less through personal despotism and an anointed successor, but through the bureaucracy and the apparat. Hitler acted as promised; Stalin betrayed his movement once in power and turned the terror against the creators of the movement. The Nazi state comprised a set of feudal satrapies; the Stalinist state was more highly centralized and although it had its little Stalins as well, they were always in danger of being denounced and repressed.

In sum, the comparison goes far toward weakening the totalitarian model that seeks to illustrate the similarity between the regimes and suggests the need for more critical comparisons of superficially similar historical phenomena.

C. By Way of Conclusion.

It would be arbitrary to attempt to compress the great variety of strands of discussion into some artificial consensus. But a number of broad generalization may be hazarded in hopes of pointing to areas in need of further research and to suggest some achievements of the conference.

One of the salient characteristics of Germany and Russia (and not so incidentally the states lying between them) is the repetitive pattern of transitions or switches from democracy or democratic trends to authoritarianism and back again. Scholars of both countries often follow the same path in attempting to interpret it. Russia was making slow and sporadic
movement toward democracy before the revolution and its economy was mostly pre-capitalist. Germany's economy was a highly developed form of capitalism before 1914 but its political life retained strong authoritarian elements. There was no simple one to one relationship between capitalism and democracy. In the postwar period, Russia's economy contained a modern industrial sector resting on an archaic agricultural system governed by a strong authoritarian government that was not a personal dictatorship; Germany was a weak democratic regime with a vibrant capitalist economy. In both case there was a dual process at work that was not synchronized. Variously called but generally recognized these periods of the pre and post World War I displayed the persistence of pre-capitalist or pre-modern social forms; that is elements of the most advanced and the most archaic social forms rubbed shoulders with one another. In Soviet Russia the stronger state finally launched an assault on the archaic structure in the countryside that displayed another variety of the most modern (industrialization) and the most barbaric (the terror). This was one instance of "combined development." Another instance manifested itself in Nazi Germany where the recreation of a strong state under the Nazis displayed contradictory elements of high productivity and technology side by side with powerful social controls and racist barbarisms.

The resolutions of these contradictions came for Germany only in the post 1945 period as a result of a crushing defeat for the authoritarian state and a discrediting of the racist-terroristic elements. With outside help the establishment of a democratic and capitalist society (with its own German mix of state and market, to be sure,) was accomplished. In the East German half, the authoritarian regime and command economy existed only with outside assistance and collapsed when that assistance was withdrawn. But the integration of the
remnants of that society into west Germany is accompanied by serious problems of dislocation, another form of combined development if you will.

The Soviet way out of the contradictions was more prolonged because of the victory in World War II. The modern state transformed the conservative, poor rural mass but at the cost of creating a full blown entrenched bureaucracy based on a plebeian social structure. The peasantry was gradually transformed in the postwar period into city dwellers, but the bureaucratic absolutism did not respond by adjusting to the shift and proved incapable of reforming itself from within. It also let slide its modernizing role of fostering technological and organizational innovation. The breakdown or imbalance in the system revealed a premodern streak with its resistance to autonomous elements in society, its repressive apparatus.

The new version of combined development -- once again the cohabitation in the same society of contradictory aspects of modernization -- created a crisis situation. The social evolution in the USSR toward an urban society required autonomous organizations and free access to information while the political structure was still rooted in the Stalinist origins of a rural society. The current efforts (since 1985) are attempts to bring about a resolution of the imbalances as already occurred in the western part of Germany after 1945; namely to create a parliamentary system and a market economy. But the international environment is vastly different than it was for Germany in 1945. The west itself is in the throes of powerful changes in economic terms. Another complicating factor is that the decomposition of the USSR has given rise to competing nationalisms which pose once more the question of combined development: as the world moves toward greater economic and political unity,
will the "archaic" impulses of aggressive nationalism run rough shod over the economic considerations and disrupt the process of social and political integration?

The conference participants provided no simple answers to the question. The papers and discussions suggest, however, the need in the light of changing circumstances to reexamine the models of historical development like the Sonderweg and totalitarianism as the first important step in revising our attitudes toward the nature of political and social change in Russia and Germany. On the basis of the intellectual exchanges that took place at the conference, it was generally recognized that this can only be accomplished by greater investment in comparative studies by groups of scholars who are rooted in empirical research but willing to and capable of engaging in large theoretical debates. The danger is that specialists will work in isolation and take the experience of "their country" as a norm or else that theorists will speculate upon abstract conceptual categories that take on a life of their own and prove difficult to dislodge in the absence of any larger historical scheme that has a sound evidential base.