8 Perceptions of Soviet Power and Influence

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Concepts like power and influence, however precisely they might be defined, have many intangible elements. I hope therefore you will be tolerant of my imprecisions and impressionistic judgments. Moreover, the notion of perceptions has become a fashionable way to describe any problem or inconsistency – one simply says: ‘that’s my perception and somebody else may have a different perception’. Nothing is what it really is; it is only a perception. Thus that part of my topic, too, lends itself to a certain amount of vagueness.

Let me nonetheless make some comments about Soviet power and Soviet influence as I see them. Inevitably, I must cast my vision backward a bit because I think the present circumstances and any prognostication for the future are bound to be influenced by one’s view of the past. In the early period after the Bolshevik Revolution, the power and influence of Russia as it came to be the Soviet Union were due far less to physical strength than to its reputation, for better or worse, as a revolutionary power. For some, what had happened in Leningrad, Moscow and then Russia as a whole between 1917 and the early 1920s was the wave of the future. Someone – the Webbs reputedly – said they had seen the future and it worked.

This was the inspiration for similar movements in other countries, mostly Western, European, in the post-First World War era. Obviously, for the same reason, to some, what had happened in Russia was the source of subversion and political upheaval and was seen as a threat rather than an inspiration and a hope. Yet it was basically a weak country in a military sense, although huge and clearly capable of absorbing enormous physical hardship as it had demonstrated during the war.

The view of Bolshevik Russia as a source of revolution and a guide-post to the reorganisation of society, whether one saw it as a

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hope or a source of subversion, was exaggerated. It was neither as much of a model for a better life nor as serious a source of subversion as many people in those days thought. Indeed, the Soviets themselves, even when Lenin was still alive and certainly afterwards, with all their ebullience at having won what they chose to think of as a revolution, soon felt encircled by the outside world. And well they should have, since they were challenging the status quo and represented themselves as prophets of a new order in the desolate circumstances of the post-First World War scene. But as time went on, their power, weight and strength did not become such that Hitler, even allowing for his irrationality, could not feel capable by 1940–41 of making a run at destroying the Soviet Union. And there were not a few in the West, who thought that he might just do so; or that at the very least both Germany and Russia would exhaust each other to the benefit of the rest of the world.

The failure of the Hitlerian adventure – the Russian–Soviet capacity to dip deeply into some physical as well as non-physical resources, and the coincidence that others were also fighting Hitlerian Germany, did turn the Soviet Union into a victor power at the end of the Second World War after enormous exertions and sacrifices and suffering. Although severely damaged, and set back in the programme of forced industrialisation which Stalin had initiated in the 1930s, Soviet Russia emerged as the most powerful land power in Eurasia after the Second World War. It sought in both the de jure and the de facto peace arrangements after 1945, to buttress its security through zones of control and influence around the periphery, as well as the maintenance of massive military power. The Soviets early in the post-war period and perhaps even during the war, unlike the United States which was the other power that had the real option, decided not to demobilise and dismantle its military establishment but to maintain it.

In the process of surrounding itself with a satellite empire and other zones of influence or control and in the process of maintaining a massive military establishment, Stalin sowed the seeds of many later difficulties, not least in Eastern Europe and with China. And, of course, the policies of seeking from the outcome of the Second World War the maximum feasible security guarantees beyond the border of Soviet Russia provoked Western reactions. Above all, they helped to bring about a fundamental change in the traditional American aloofness from international affairs which was at best episodic and produced American involvement in Europe and the indefinite presence of American military power on the Eurasian land mass.