Stability and Order in Russia

by Richard Sakwa

The Soviet system can be understood within the framework of the tension between stability and order. A political order is based on hegemony, whereas a stability regime veers between mobilisation and stagnation and is based on administrative rather than political order. The transformatory mission of revolutionary Russia meant that the 'management of stability' took on emergency forms for both theoretical and practical reasons. Indeed, the instability at the heart of the social order is its defining feature, veering from extremes of violence to periods of stability corroded by inherent stagnatory tendencies. While the eight-month long Provisional Government in 1917 was explicitly provisional, the system born in October was in certain respects a seventy-four year long transitional regime, lost in the wilderness looking for the promised land of communism and unable to root itself in the national community.

Following the dissolution of the communist regime in 1991 the problem of establishing a political order re-emerged, marked once again by the tension between stability and order as the system sought, finally, to shake off the legacy of provisionality and to ground itself in an expanding consensus based on the political and national community. In contrast to the Bolshevik regime, the new system was marked by a twofold project: transformation *and* adaption. The transformative element was intended to overcome the Bolshevik legacy and to introduce the elements of market rationality. In certain respects it recalled the earlier attempt at grandiose social engineering, perpetuating some of the behavioural codes of the old regime, and giving rise to the condemnation of the Yeltsin regime as no more than inverted Bolshevism stamped by a new form of authoritarianism.

The adaptive element, however, mitigated the Bolshevist features of the new system. Rather than ignore patterns of subjectivity, the regime began to adapt. The adaptation regime does not necessarily adapt itself to everything in the pre-existing society, but its overall tendency is to make peace with the underlying social reality. While the transformatory project is ideologised, processes of adaptation are deideologised. The tendency of Gorbachev's reforms in their last phase was to move beyond instrumental policies of 'inclusion' in *glasnost'*, towards adaptation in freedom of speech. It could be argued with some justice that this would have allowed the country to avoid another revolutionary transformatory storm. On the other hand, a premature adaptation could have condemned the country to continued stagnation. Yeltsin came to power committed to a new transformatory project but achieved only modest successes before domestic pressure for adaptation blunted the campaign. The overall tendency is for a shift to take place from the politics of stability (inherent in a transformatory project) to the politics of order (characteristic of adaptation). Stability politics is associated with directive 'regime' forms of rule, whereas a political order shifts to rule-bound 'system' forms of governance.

The transition from regime to system is inhibited by transformatory programmes. The founding process of a new order is its defining moment. Thus, the transformative aspect of the transition comes into conflict with the adaptive. This is one reason for the profound ambiguity of the political character of Russia today. This is reflected both at the level of high politics, where a regime system of government has emerged in which one-party rule has given way to non-party government, and at the level of daily life and the highly ambiguous popular perceptions of the post-communist regime. The attempt to avoid a premature adaptation by maintaining the transformatory impulse perpetuates the regime system, while adaptive processes gradually give rise to systemic forms of rule within the framework of a structured political order.

Adaptation itself, therefore, is an ambiguous process. The absence of a generally recognised 'normalcy' to which the country could return following the long Bolshevik 'emergency' has given a disturbing edge to debates in Russia today. It is not clear what can be rejected or adapted from the past or abroad. The past in Russia is itself a deeply unsettling category, marked not, for example, by a prevalent 'Whig' mythology of the rise of an ordered parliamentary state. Instead, Russian history is stamped by the titanic struggle for the survival of the state itself. The international system in which Russia has sought to survive has been traditionally hostile, and the politics of order at the inter-state level has been traditionally accompanied by stability regimes in domestic affairs.

If political and economic systems require a necessary 'spirit' - in the Weberian sense - to work effectively, the central problem in post-communist Russia can no longer be seen in terms of a unilinear transition from one system to another but the shift from one type of subjectivity to another. This is mediated by the dialectic between transformation and adaptation. The emergence of a regime system of government indicates only a partial reconstitution of politics, and the perpetuation of stability-managing responses indicates just how hard it will be to create a new political order. Politics itself remains gelatinous and unformed, and the articulation of social and political forces is amorphous. There is much in the Russian tradition that can support the emergence of democracy as a cultural project, but its institutionalisation in a *system* of government will be determined by numerous conjunctural factors which by their very nature cannot be predicted.

This is an abstract of a paper presented to the CSD Seminar on 6 December 1994. Dr. Sakwa is Reader in Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent at Canterbury.

Never Say "Never Again"

by Livio Hughes

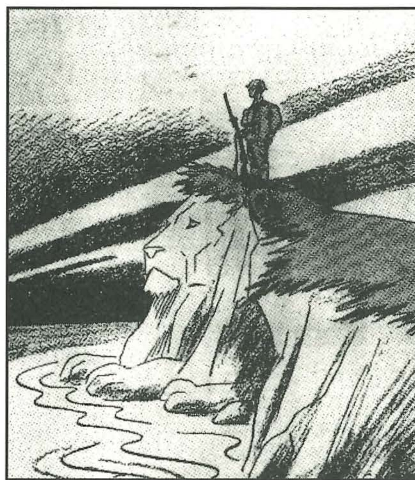
Fifty years on from the conclusion of World War II, the spectres of fascism and racial persecution have returned to haunt Europe. From the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims to the attacks on asylum seekers in sophisticated capitals; from the adoption of racist immigration restrictions to Italian 'tele-fascism' (Bernhard-Henri Levy) and the destruction of Jewish sacred sites, the signs are unmistakable.

As in the 1930s, economic uncertainties and cultural anxieties provide fertile ground for an ideology which sustains its supporters with comforting certainty. Neo-fascist groups can offer what the tired old western democracies, and the fragile new constitutional arrangements of Eastern Europe, cannot: a simplified version of events, in which 'friends' and 'enemies' (Schmitt) are clearly identified, and where leadership through the turbulent realities of the post-Cold War period is readily provided and thankfully accepted.

European liberal democracies have a poor record in standing up to this threat. Before World War II, fascist parties came to power through legitimate representative structures; they are doing so again. Even when confronted with barefaced realities of racial persecution and aggressive expansionism, European democracies preferred to do nothing and hope that it would all go away; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they are doing so again. Appeasement rather than intervention was our chosen course in the 1930s. Our involvement in the war that followed was dictated by the threat that fascism eventually posed to our own survival. Never, ever, was it motivated by a willingness to stand up to fascism *per se*.

Our democracies' shameful record in that period finds many parallels with current British attitudes. The re-creation of latter-day Chamberlains is at least partially due to the influence of skillfully-crafted myths concerning our role and involvement in World War II. Under cover of the Cold War, generations of British children were presented with the anti-fascist character of the conflict (the liberation of Nazi concentration camps), and the prevention and punishment of racial persecution and war crimes (the tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo), as reasons for British participation in that war. As Josef Goebbels knew well, if a big enough lie is repeated often enough, it will be accepted as truth.

Historians such as Martin Gilbert have done much to dispel



such myths, exposing British reluctance to upset Nazi Germany despite the human cost. The British wartime record also includes covering up reliable reports of Nazi atrocities; the refusal to bomb and destroy the extermination complex at Auschwitz-Birkenau (known to the British, among others, since 1942); and allowing thousands of Jewish refugees to perish (either in occupied Europe or on the high seas) by withholding entry visas to Palestine and other British-controlled territories. Yet, the influence of Gilbert's research has been overshadowed by the glorification of the British people's wartime sacrifice.

In a largely self-serving move by the British media, always on the lookout for new 'angles' on old stories, 1995 is the year in which the end of World War II and its consequences (such as the creation of the United Nations) will alternatively be celebrated, commemorated, or critically appraised. There is some value in this exercise because the survivors of that war, and of the Holocaust, are disappearing. It is particularly important to present an accurate historical picture of those events because most of the current British knowledge of the threat posed by fascism is based on folk memory (such as the London 'Blitz'), war movies and pulp fiction. To the present generation of schoolchildren, fed on a constant diet of televisual violence and sanitised news reports of human tragedies abroad, the Holocaust could appear as just another foreign detail of wartime history.

But despite this need for accurate collective remembrance, the myth of the anti-fascist character of British involvement in World War II lives on. Jonathan Dimbleby's introduction to his father David's famous broadcast from Belsen-Bergen (screened recently on BBC2), as well as the original broadcast itself (played against the background of British Army footage of the camp's liberation), are symptomatic of our inability to assess honestly the British wartime record *vis-à-vis* the Holocaust. A righteous horror is displayed by the father and son virtual team, but one which is accompanied by the relief that the nightmare is over, thanks to the victorious Allies.

From this perspective, Belsen's inmates (at this stage, mainly East European Jews and Roma) pale into individual insignificance, except as skeletal symbols of the horror; and they only acquire some collective meaning as piles of rotting corpses bulldozed into hastily-dug mass graves. What helps the viewer to make sense of this spectacle is the report's emphasis on the Nazi's evil nature, and the wholesomeness of the plucky British medics (some filmed having their hands kissed by desperate victims). Against all the evidence, a military operation which was purely incidental to the war's progress (the British medics' had been sent to Belsen to investigate German reports of an outbreak of typhus in a 'prisoner of war' camp, in an attempt to contain it) suddenly provides the moral justification for the war.