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COMMENT ON 'THE LESSONS OF HISTORY' BY ZVI GITELMAN, AIRLIE
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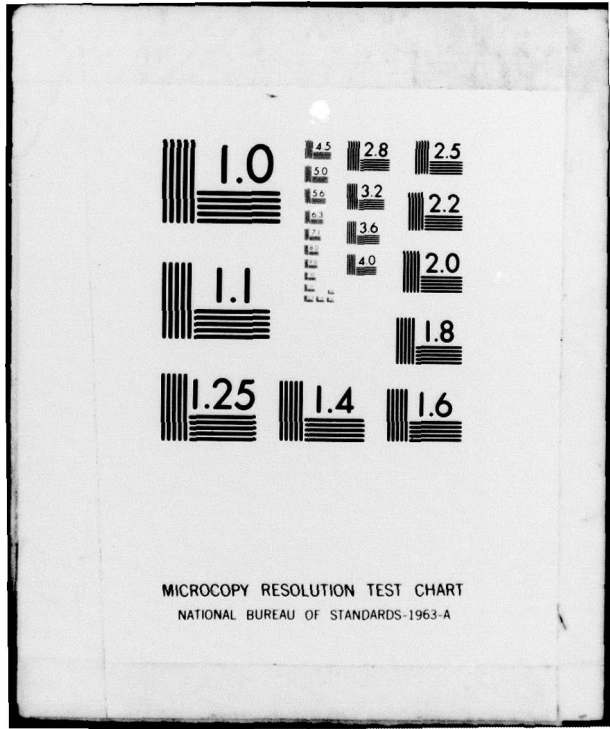
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Comment on "The Lessons of History" by Zvi Gitelman, A

House # 13 November 1975

House, FEB 25 1980

10 Richard Burks

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In considering the history of Communist Eastern Europe it occurs to me that there exist two forms of manifest instability. The first I prefer to refer to as the political landslide, what Zvi calls system destabilization, i.e., a precipitous devolution of the Soviet-imposed political system produced by a revulsion against the system on the part of the elites which have benefited from it and characterized by elite dismantling of the system's typical institutions while the masses of the population fervently applaud.

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So far we have witnessed three cases of political landslide: Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Croatia in 1971. But there have also been cases of incipient landslide in which spontaneous strikes or riots have threatened to set off a landslide; here I would list the GDR in 1953 and Poland in 1970.

In addition to the political landslide, which is really at the center of Zvi's analysis, I would argue the existence of a second form of manifest instability, namely, the national deviation. This, it seems to me, implies an attempt, not to dismantle the system but rather, at the risk of open defiance of Mother Moscow, to accommodate it in some significant way to the interests of the East European Party or country concerned. The ideal type here is represented by the case of Yugoslavia; but we should remember that Albania also defied her Yugoslav hegemon in 1948 and that her second, or Chinese, deviation in 1959 was

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a by-product of a reconciliation between Belgrade and Moscow. The Romanian deviation is now also well understood, but I have argued that the Bulgarian version of the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) was an incipient Chinese-type deviation of which the Soviets recovered control only by abandoning their opposition to the construction of the great steel combine at Kremikovtsi.

The listener will by now have become aware no doubt that the danger of political landslide seems to be concentrated in the northern tier, where considerable industry already existed before the Communists came to power; whereas the national deviation is characteristic of the less-developed Balkan area. This comes about in part, I think, because forced-draft industrialization of the Marxist-Leninist type makes much greater sense in a country like Romania than in one like Czechoslovakia. The pockets of local support available to the Communists tend to be much more numerous in the Balkan Peninsula than in Central Europe, and it is therefore less risky for Balkan Communists to launch forth upon a policy of defiance. It could be argued that such states as North Vietnam or Communist China constitute part of this same continuum, their regimes enjoying an even broader base of support than those in the Balkans. It seems safe to state that the greater the domestic base, the more pronounced the tendency to national deviation. Indeed, it could be argued that the first national deviation was produced by that Communist Party which attempted to build Socialism in one country.

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As Communist states are subject to two basic kinds of manifest instability, depending on the breadth of their local base, so, I would argue, Communists have at their disposition two forms of what Zvi has called manifest stability, depending on the relationship they assume toward the populations which they govern. In the one case the regime is openly at war with the population and maintains control by the systematic application of political terror. This produces a universal and even frenetic conformity but turns out to be counterproductive once an advanced stage of industrialization is reached.

The second form of manifest stability results from a Communist effort to secure the positive cooperation of the population through resort to material incentives, the security police meanwhile remaining patently visible in the background. The appeal to material incentives automatically involves the Communist governments in an effort to close somewhat the evident gap between East and West European living standards. To my mind the comparison with the situation in Western Europe is of overriding importance in East European politics. The Easterners regard themselves as very much possessed of a European entitlement so that some visible improvement in living standards is a minimum requirement if the policy of material incentives is to succeed. I would agree with Zvi that over the next twenty years the primary danger to the manifest stability of the Socialist system will arise if there is stagnation of living standards in the area under that system's control.

Such stagnation seems to me to be more than likely. To raise living standards while maintaining high rates of growth and an improved defense posture, the Communists must improve the overall economic performance of the system. Yet better economic performance requires (among other things) a massive injection of advanced Western technology. Communists are not in a position to buy this technology in anything like adequate amounts because they have little to sell in the world market place. For the most part their manufactured wares are not competitive there. Eloquent evidence of this deficiency is of course provided by the mounting hard-currency debts with which all regimes have burdened themselves. The obvious way out of the dilemma is economic reform, the decentralization of the Socialist economies so as to give some play to market forces. The Communist leaders have experimented extensively with economic reform and they have found that any pluralization of the economy is likely to spill over into the polity, as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Croatia in 1971. As a substitute for economic reform these leaders have therefore turned to industrial cooperation. In the end they may find that this practice also will act as a solvent of the existing Marxist-Leninist social order. In short, I see little danger that consumerism will become a counter-ideology in Eastern Europe; for I don't think there will be enough in the way of goods and services to make that possible, nor do I believe that the distinction between capitalist and Socialist societies will become blurred by consumerism during the next

generation.

If this is true, that is, if the Socialist system will more than likely be faced over the next twenty years with sputterings of crisis and (perhaps) an occasional landslide, it might be well to consider for a moment the actual sources of that manifest stability which is the usual face the system presents to the outside world. Given its egregious failings, what keeps the system upright?

The usual answer to this question is institutional. There is the security police. And there is the army, East European or Soviet. To this short list I would be tempted to add the central planning mechanism, for this is the principal device by means of which the East European economies are prevented from integrating with the world market. I would argue, however, that all these institutions, security police, army and planning mechanism, are in fondo organizational manifestations of more basic relationships.

One such relationship is the enserfment of the East European masses by the Communist elites. I recognize that I am using strong language, but enserfment is surely not without precedent in this area. The introduction of serfdom in the northern tier during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries served to provide large quantities of cheap labor for a new commercial agriculture that, while being made economically possible by the increasing urbanization of the West, permitted the East European aristocracy to imitate the living standards of their West European counterparts. The key event in the enserfment of Eastern Europe under

the Communists did not take place in the area itself but rather in the Soviet Union: that was the forcible collectivization of the peasantry.

Now the enserfment of the East European populations binds the elites to the system for both negative and positive reasons. The negative reason is the physical danger to the elites represented by any process of de-Communization. The lynching of AV0 men in the streets of Budapest in 1956 was a lesson not yet forgotten. More positive is the realization among the elites that the existing system makes possible a living standard for them which is comparable, if by no means equal, to that prevailing in Western Europe.

This touches again on the problem of political landslide. For a landslide to occur the elite must somehow come to believe a) that abandonment of the Marxist-Leninist system is politically feasible; and b) that the system has become morally intolerable. With respect to the moral issue the literary activity of a small section of the intelligentsia plays a major role, as witness the opus of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or the writings of Leszek Kolakowski.

A second basic relationship which helps hold the system in place involves the interests of the less developed states and regions. The more advanced are called upon to contribute to the development of those less fortunate. In Yugoslavia this was accomplished by a transfer of wealth from the northern to the southern republics. The transfer was largely terminated by the marketizing reform adopted in 1965-66, a fact which illustrates

the central role of the CPE in the maintenance of the Marxist-Leninist system. Within the Socialist Commonwealth as a whole, the Soviet Union dictates to the East European states a product-mix which depresses their own living standards in order to advantage Soviet industrialization. The clearest case is that of the GDR, where the living standard is now only two-thirds of that prevailing in West Germany, while the Gross National Product is such as to make of East Germany the eighth industrial power in the world, its exports going primarily to the USSR. Just as in Yugoslavia the Serbian center has an economic interest in the maintenance of Marxism-Leninism, so in the Socialist Commonwealth the Great Russian center has a comparable concern, although more recently this interest has become somewhat attenuated.

A third basic relationship which helps explain the sticking power of the system is to be found in a far-reaching interdependence of regimes, not only of each East European regime on the Soviet Union, but indeed of the Soviet on the East European and of the East European regimes on each other. The leaders of the Commonwealth must fear something which we may call domino destabilization. It seems clear that Gomulka, for example, was saved from deposition in 1968 not so much by his own clever footwork as by the landslide in neighboring Czechoslovakia, the Soviet center deeming it much too risky to permit a change of leadership in Poland in the midst of the Czech events. Moreover, Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia was in part determined by

the effect which the Prague thaw was having on the Ukraine. Piotr Shelest' was making (in public) the argument that the Ukraine could not be held unless the Czech reform were suppressed. Ulbrecht was (privately) pressing the same kind of case on behalf of the GDR. The Brezhnev doctrine was a Soviet admission that the loss of any single Marxist-Leninist regime would so threaten the stability of the others as to be unacceptable. In 1970 the Polish riots produced extensive security measures in both the GDR and Romania, and reportedly in Belorussia as well. Thus the regimes gather strength by clinging to each other; they will tend to stand or collapse more or less as a unit.

It should by now be apparent that, in my view, political legitimacy is the overwhelming problem faced by the Socialist system in Europe. Lack of legitimacy blocks the road to economic reform, goes far to explain the overweening Soviet interest in formal Western recognition of existing frontiers, and explains why the provisions of Helsinki calling for greater freedom of East-West contact at the level of the individual will remain dead letters. I would disagree with Zvi insofar as he contends that detente is an expression of Western disinterest in Eastern Europe, at least in the sense that detente is understood by East Europeans. On the contrary, the tightening of controls which are currently taking place in the area amounts to a recognition by the Communist leadership that the atmosphere and circumstance of detente are likely to arouse expectations among their populations which cannot be met if the regimes are to continue

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Zvi has devoted considerable effort to defining the term "instability". While I find his treatment of this problem helpful, I am rather inclined to the simple-minded position that what he calls latent stability is best defined as a function of the rule of law. The rule of law is incompatible with Marxism-Leninism in Eastern Europe precisely because the system lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the governed. What the Communists have to offer in its place, as part of the package of material incentives, is Socialist legality, a promise that the rule of law will prevail except where the security interests of the system are affected. These interests are far-reaching. Thus under Socialism there may be freedom of conversation but not freedom of speech, for the existence of the latter would at once open up the danger of political landslide. I would go so far as to assert that there is no inherent stability without the rule of law, and no rule of law without political legitimacy.

To this the response may be given that the number of states governed by the rule of law constitutes only a small proportion of the total membership of the United Nations. And that rule-of-law states typically manifest other traits which again set them aside from all the rest, traits such as high living standards, low net birth-rates, rapid rates of technological innovation, parliamentary government. I am (to be sure) aware of these congruencies. In asserting that the Socialist states of Eastern Europe have not achieved political legitimacy and

are not likely in the foreseeable future to acquire it, I am not implying that I can imagine for this area some political system which would achieve it within that same future. Indeed I cannot.