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RITUALIZATION AND APOTHEOSIS - THE ARCHAIC FACE OF THE SOVIET UNION

"In this age the chief moral and intellectual challenge for our studies of non-American and non-Western cultures lies in fathoming the legitimacy of the incomprehensible and the outrageous."

(von Laue 1983, 389)

On the 25th of September 1984, the Union of Writers of the USSR celebrated its 50th anniversary. The Union was awarded the order 'Friendship of the Peoples' from the hand of the Secretary General of the CPSU and the Head of State of the USSR, Konstantin Cernenko. Three days before, Cernenko himself had been presented with the Lenin order and the gold medal 'Hammer and Sickle'. (Literaturnaja Gazeta 1984, 1).

The two ceremonies may indeed seem to be incomprehensible from a Western point of view. They are expressions of the ritualization of Soviet public life and of its self adoration.

Cernenko was praised for having furthered the development of the economy and culture of the USSR and for having strengthened the defence of the Soviet Union and the peace and security of nations. The Union of Writers was praised by Cernenko for having portrayed in full measure the outstanding figures of Lenin and his comrades-in-arms, the heroes of the Civil War and of the first Five-year plans and the immortal fighters of the Great Patriotic War. (Cernenko 1984, 1).

The most notable features of Cernenko's speech to the Union of Writers are the emphasis on militarism and on the struggle against the evil, imperialist West. Cernenko evoked the legacy of the Stalinist 1930s, when the Union of Writers was founded, and underlined that the tasks of the Union had remained the same. Literature, he said, must be guided by partijnost' and narodnost'. was especially important today because of 'the precarious foreign policy situation'. Soviet writers had to take a stand in the struggle between the forces of life and those of destruction. There was no 'Golden Middle Way'. It was the duty of the Soviet writers to educate the Soviet people, and especially its youth, in the spirit of class vigilance and preparation to defend the great Fatherland. Special attention should be paid to military-patriotic themes. Writers who slandered the Soviet order should not expect favours or recognition, and those who took the side of the ideological adversaries should never be forgiven (Cernenko 1984, 1 f.).

Cernenko's speech was followed by one by the first Secretary of the Union of Writers, G. M. Markov. After having praised the CPSU and its Secretary General, Markov went out of his way to eulogise what had happened to the country and its writers in the 1930s, i.e. at the time of Stalin's 'cultural revolution'. Speaking of today's conditions, Markov observed the 'uniting role' of the Russian language and literature in bringing the 'fraternal literatures' together. The most important theme in contemporary Soviet literature was that of defending the Fatherland, of the 'hero with a sword in his hands'. The word must be used as a weapon of attack. There was no place for a pause or an armistice in the struggle against bourgeois ideology.

Markov underlined the intimate relations between the Soviet writers and the armed forces of the country:

'Works about the life and military service of today's Soviet warriors are becoming increasingly common. From this tribune we express our sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Defence of the USSR, the Central Political Direction of the Soviet Army and Navy, the Committee of State Security of the USSR and the command and political organs of all parts of the Armed Forces for their active help to the Union of Writers of the USSR in its endeavour to create military-patriotic literature'.

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this was a break with Russian traditions. With the advantage of hindsight, one can state that the Soviet Union of today is the 20th century embodiment of Great Russia, of the Russian great power.

Russia had experienced upheavals of the same order as that of 1917 and the Civil War without anyone's denying that it had remained Russia: the opričnina of Ivan IV in the 1560s, the Time of Troubles in the early 17th century and the rule of Peter I at the turn of the 17th and the 18th century. A further upheaval occured under Stalin in the 1930s. Viewed from a macro-perspective, the point does not consist in demonstrating that the Soviet Union is the Russia of today, but in explaining how it became so.

To be able to explain the 'Russification' of Bolshevik - Soviet-rule, one has to treat the revolution of 1917 as a temporal process; the opričning and Peter's reforms were processes as well. Although it seems reasonable to regard the events of 1917 as the point of departure, the termination of this specific process is not equally evident. One encounters a range of views among researchers who have approached this problem. Sheila Fitzpatrick offers the following judgment:

'The institutional and social structure and the cultural norms that were to last throughout the Stalin period had been established before the Great Purge, and did not change as a result of it. By the mid 1930s, Russia's new regime had already settled into its mould'. (Fitzpatrick 1982, 3).

Alain Besançon comes to the following conclusion:

'The party-state ... would not be completed until the whole of the Soviet population had been brought under its control, through collectivization; until the party itself had been entirely renewed, which was the object of the purges of the 1930s; and until Stalin's succession had been settled, which would take ten years more, from 1953 until the fall of Khrushchev. So it was only in 1964 that one could say that the Bolshevik Revolution had been completed and that the process begun on 7 November 1917 had come to an end and established itself as stable and lasting'. (Besançon 1981, 274 f.).

One notes that the views of Fitzpatrick and Besançon are compatible: while the early 1930s saw the final consolidation of Bolshevik rule, the mid 1960s saw the eventual stabilization of the whole Soviet system. However, neither Fitzpatrick nor Besançon

speaks of Russia proper. It remains to be shown that the consolidation and stabilization in question are genuinely Russian phenomena.

Although the October revolution was declared by the Bolsheviks to be the inauguration of the new, socialist era, and although it was hailed as a radical break with the past, the leading Bolsheviks regarded themselves as the heirs not only to the revolutionaries of the 19th century but also to the great tsars of earlier centuries. Lenin is reported, by a contemporary observer, to have viewed in Peter I the 'first revolutionary on the Russian throne' and to have been against the idea of renaming Peter's capital. Peter, Lenin reportedly declared, was his (Lenin's) 'political forefather'. (Fülöp-Miller 1928, 54) 1). It is well known that Stalin consciously emulated both Ivan IV and Peter I. (Yanov 81, 213; Tucker 1977, 95, 98 f.).

However, to invoke Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great would not in itself have been sufficient to 'russianise' Bolshevik rule. To be of historical significance, the Russianisation must be supported from below.

The Russia of Lenin as well as that of Stalin's early rule was a peasant country. The Bolsheviks organized the political revolution in 1917. The peasants carried out the social revolution. It is the merger of Bolshevik ideology and Russian culture that is the essence of the Russianisation of the October revolution.

The Bolsheviks as well as the other anti-tsarist members of the educated classes were the heirs to ideological traditions that took root in Russia in the early 19th century. As has been underlined by Besançon, not only the 'Westernisers' but also the Slavophiles were influenced by Western and Central European ideological currents. In the former case the principal influence was that of the enlightenment while in the latter, Romantic philosophy, with its stress on the national heritage of the people, exerted a major influence. (Besançon 1981, 220 ff., 37 ff.). In the course of the century, adaptions of these currents became part of Russian culture.

The people who took power in October 1917 belonged to that part of the 19th century Russian intellectual tradition which Besançon calls gnosticism. Central to classical gnosticism as well as to Marxism-Leninism is the notion that a chosen few have gained true knowledge and that the world is divided between the forces of good

and the forces of evil. This is the world-view commonly known as Manicheism (Besançon 1981, 9 f.).

In gnosticism, the knowledge of the initiated few is contained in a certain set of holy scriptures. It is well known how the Marxist-Leninist 'classics' have been treated as repositories of truth in the Soviet Union. It is significant that this is far from accidental or ephemeral. On the contrary. Lenin's corpse had hardly been embalmed when the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided - on 9 February 1924 - to saturate the people with Leninism. It is an instance of gnosticism right from the outset, or as Nina Tumarkin, in her comprehensive analysis of the development of the Lenin cult, expresses it:

'Straight away the Commissariat of Enlightenment declared that Leninism should provide the basis of all study: "We must use Lenin's works extensively when studying every problem (independent of the 'topic' concerned) in order to formulate our view".... "In every endeavor the individual should remember that there is no sphere of work about which Ilich has not thought, about which he did not leave clear and comprehensive words and beheats." It was up to party members to communicate those words and beheats to the population at large.' (Tumarkin 1983, 214).2)

This monistic view of knowledge must have been perfectly compatible with the beliefs of an illiterate or semi-illiterate population brought up with the teachings of the far from pluralistically inclined Russian orthodox church. More important, probably, for the forging of the link between the Bolsheviks and the bulk of the peasant population was, however, the personalisation of this 'superior knowledge' in the figure of Lenin. The Bolshevik propaganda at the time of the revolution skilfully adapted the basic tenets of the ideology - the principle of superior knowledge and the Manichean world-view - to orthodox and popular Russian tradition, and Lenin was portrayed as the incarnation of these tenets.

According to Tumarkin, the attempt at Lenin's life on August 30 1918 was the first instance of the emerging Lenin cult. Already on 6 September, Zinov'ev depicted Lenin as 'a saint, an apostle, and a prophet' and Lenin's work What is to be done? as the gospel of the Iskraists. Lenin was inscribed in the Russian tradition of princes who were canonized because of their suffering and martyr death - that Lenin happened to survive the shot did not matter. Parallel to this sanctifiation of Lenin, the party leaders distributed a popular biography of him, where he was depicted as a

son of the people, of peasant stock and so to speak a twentieth century reincarnation of Stenka Razin and Emilian Pugačev. The attempts met with popular response. According to a Soviet scholar of the subject, "unknown poets and bards" from the depth of the people portrayed Lenin, during his life-time, as а (bogatyr'), a protector of the people, a brave warrior (voitel') and a wise man. The writer N. Kljuev even described Lenin as a follower of Avvakum and 'the Red Lord of the Commune' (krasny) Gosudar' kommuny). (Tumarkin 1983, 89, 108; Zajcev 1980, 6, 25). Some members of Christian sects among the peasants saw in Lenin the bearer of the righteous holy wrath, the fulfiller of the prophesies of Isaiah. (Fülöp-Miller 1928, 38). Many also regarded Lenin as Anti-Christ (ibid.). However, the point is that Lenin was inscribed in Russian tradition. In his time his great predecessor Peter I was also regarded by some as Anti-Christ (Uspenskij 1977, 113), without this diminishing his 'Russianness' in the eyes of the subjects.

In some cases, the Communist Party's treatment of Lenin drev directly on Russian traditions. The 'Lenin Corner' (Leninskij ugolok), which was introduced at an exhibition in Moscov in August 1923 and subsequently established in public buildings all over the country, 'was directed toward the peasant and was undoubtedly derived from the krasnyj ugolok, the icon corner of the Russian home'. (Tumarkin 1983, 127). In the film 'Ego prizyv' by Ja. Protazanov, which according to a Soviet scholar was one of the first Soviet films to carry 'the truth about revolutionary Russia and Lenin' abroad and which was produced in 1925, the young worker Katja was shown putting the portraits of Lenin and his forerunner Marx alongside the icons in the room of her babuška - with the approval of the latter. (Zajcev 1980, 32 f.). These examples show that although the emergence of the Lenin cult can be said to have been a 'natural' continuation of Russian traditions, it was Bolshevik leaders such as Lunačarskij, Zinov'ev, Krasin and Trockij who chose to make Lenin a Russian saint and a bogatyr'. Or. in the words of Tumarkin:

'This seems to have been a deliberate attempt to use a religious form to arouse political allegiance in the common people. ... As a relic, he /Lenin in the mausoleum/ was to continue to legitimize Soviet power and mobilize the population'. (Tumarkin 1983, 168 ff., 179).

Lenin's ideological success was not, however, merely the result of peasant reactions and skilful Bolshevik propaganda. Also non-Communist intellectuals saw in Lenin and the Bolsheviks the

saviours of Russia and of mankind. The October revolution was regarded, in such quarters, as an apocalyptic event, announcing the coming of mankind's Messias - Russia. Using Church slavonic expressions, poets such as Esenin, Mariengof, Majakovskij Belyj depicted the revolution as a 'new Easter'. The revolution was 'the thunderstorm of Christ', 'the poetic translation of the idea that the Russian people has the vocation of a supreme mission: they want the Kingdom hic et nunc'. (Nivat 1982, Even a Soviet researcher who plays down the transcendental 78). religious meaning of Blok's famous poem 'The Twelve', cannot avoid admitting the apocalyptic interpretation in Blok. The poet Blok, D. Orlov says, compared his own time with the epoch of early Christianity, the dissolution of the Roman imperial structure with the fall of tearist Russia, and used the figure of Christ as a symbol for the new world, in the name of which the heroes of the poem are seeking their righteous revenge on the old world. (Zajcev 1980, 193 f.).³⁾

In the Civil War, even staunch conservatives found it natural to support the Bolshevik cause, because they saw in the Bolsheviks the legitimate defenders of a Russia which was encircled by a hostile world. (Agurskij 1980, 103 f., 135).

M. Agurskij, in his analysis of national Bolshevism, argues that the popular and intellectual identification of the Bolsheviks with the fate of Russia was the effect of a dual process. Intellectually influential people outside the Party, not least smenoveroucy, supported Bolshevik rule because they saw in it a restoration of Russian state power and might, and leading Bolsheviks - Trockij, Radek and even Lenin (in connection with the internationally important occasion of the Genua conference in - greeted the smena ver movement and velcomed its support. The ethnic Russification of both the Party at large and of its central apparatus in 1924-27, which was inaugurated with the leninskij prizyv immediately after Lenin's death in 1924. viewed by Agurskij as an expression of the triumph of national Bolshevism. (Agurskij 1980, 159 ff., 164, 185, 194, 260).

In the cultural realm, the ideology of national Bolshevism succeeded in occupying a strategic position. On 5 October 1926 Moscow's famous MXAT theatre staged a new play by Mixail Bulgakov. It was called 'The Days of Turbins' and was an adaption for the stage of the novel 'The White Guard'. As the latter title reveals, the novel and the play are about the Civil War. According to a contemporary observer, the play was an extraordinary success, unprecedented since the revolution. What is of special interest is

the alleged reason of the success:

'Das Publikum empfand es eben als Erlösung, dass hier endlich wieder ein ehrliches und nicht parteipolitisch borniertes Gefühl zu Worte kam, welches sogar den Gegnern die Achtung nicht versagte'. (Fülöp-Miller 1928, 469).

The point is that 'The Days of the Turbins' was not regarded as being partisan. It was simply pro-Russian. At the end of the play, the white officer Myšlaevskij argues that it is necessary to join the Bolsheviks:

'Myšlaevskij: I am for the Bolshevike and only against the Communists. At least I know that I will serve in the Russian army. The people are not with us. The people are against us.

Studzinskij: We have had Russia - a Great Power (Velikaja deržava)!

Myšlaevskij: And we will have it again! We will have it again!

As Agurskij, from whom the quotation is taken, points out, Myšlaevskij's arguments are an expression of national Bolshevism. Agurskij mentions that the wording was a little too strong for some communist critics, who condemned the play. However, it was defended by the Commissar of Enlightenment, Lunačarskij, and continued for another 15 years for a total of 987 performances. Stalin is reported to have been at 15 of them. Stalin was obviously pleased with the message of the play. According to Agurskij, the ideological impact of it cannot be overestimated. The role of the theatre in the USSR of those days was so important that one single performance of the 'The Days of the Turbins' was more significant than all the political literature of the time. (Agurskij 1980, 218).

With the ascendancy of Stalin, the Lenin cult was eclipsed by the Stalin cult (Tumarkin 1983, 252 f.), but the elaboration of the former was a necessary condition of the success of the latter. The Lenin cult had made the Party leader a Russian vożd' and transformed Bolshevik rule into something genuinely Russian.

Stalin's 'cultural revolution' in the 1930s was a continuation and a cementation of the national Bolshevik tradition. (Agurskij 1980, 262).4) But it was more than that and more than a mere continuation of the Lenin cult. Stalin's rule meant a conscious

and deliberate revival of the Russian autocratic tradition. Especially Ivan IV and Peter I were invoked by Stalin as his forerunners. Their ruling methods were emulated, their foreign policy objectives revived.

The new class of Communist Party cadres which emerged in the wake of the purges constituted a modern counterpart to both the opričniki of Ivan IV and the činovniki of Peter I. It was no coincidence that Stalinist historians extolled the terror and the growing enserfment of the peasantry under Ivan IV as historically inevitable and 'progressive', not least at a time when terror struck Russia again and the peasants became subject to forced collectivization. It was not by chance that these historians put the interests of the state and the Russian empire above the fate of those who had to suffer and die in the name of these interests. (Lewin 1977, 130; Yanov 1981, 254, 280). In literature, especially that which hailed the staranovcy, Stalin was described as the stern but benign father-tsar, while the staxanoucy themselves were being modelled on the bogatyri of the Russian folk tales. The traditional hierarchical relationship between the ruler and his subjects was described as ideal. (Clark 1977, 180 ff.).

It is thus possible to discern three stages in the Bolsheviks' 'Russification' of the allegedly 'socialist' October revolution. Elements of the Russian tradition were both consciously used and spontaneously contributed to rally both peasants and intellectuals behind the new regime which, ironically, presented itself as a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', a workers' government. The regime's appeal to the overwhelming majority of the population who were not industrial workers was the key to its ultimate success. Terror helped to establish and confirm Bolshevik rule, but it was far from sufficient to secure broad support, active co-operation from the people and lasting political stability.

The three stages of 'Russification' were the period of the original, active Lenin cult from 1918 onwards, the period of national Bolshevism in the 1920s, and Stalin's cultural revolution of the 1930s. On the ideological level, the development meant the triumph of the Manichean world-view, which before the revolution had been an intellectual sub-culture. In the course of the Civil War, the black-and-white Manichean view of both politics and international relations became enhanced, and by 1927, ten years after the revolution, 'the "country in danger" mentality was ... firmly embedded in Soviet political culture'. (Fitzpatrick 1982, 111 f.). In that year Buxarin, who was still an ideological spokesman for the Party, declared that the regime was not willing to

allow the masses to become 'infected' by the enemy. Bourgeois influences from the West should be fought by all possible means. (Fülöp-Miller 1928, 477 f.).

While the Bolshevik regime was definitely settled with Stalin, the system did not find its ultimate form until after the death of the autocrat. While the cult of the leader and national Bolshevism meant a return to the traditional dominant Russian political culture, and the triumph of Bolshevik Manicheism its enrichment by a former subculture, Xruščev's reign really was an aberration, a kind of relapse into Marxism and socialist ideology. Xruščev was defeated, however, and the post-Xruščev period meant a definite confirmation of the 'otherness' - in a Western perspective - of the 'incomprehensible' and 'outrageous' Russian political system in its Soviet form. The speeches by Cernenko and Markov at the 50th anniversary of the Union of Writers of the USSR on 25 September 1984 were symbolic expressions of the fact that the latest major upheavals in Russian history, the October revolution with the Civil War and Stalin's revolution from above, have become a routine part of official life.

During both the revolution and Stalin's era, however, the Russian people was being mobilized behind the Bolshevik regime with the help of promises of and appeals to a brilliant future. This utopianism was also stressed under Xruščev, i.e., in the Party programme of 1961 with its declaration that the Soviet Union would overtake the most developed capitalist country, the United States, by 1980. It is the accomplishment of Brežnev and his immediate successors that they have succeeded in cementing Communist rule and, at the same time, dismantling this utopia. They have turned ideology backwards by glorifying not only the Russian but also the Soviet Russian past. To achieve this end they have used a non-dynamic counterpart to the original Lenin cult and to the Stalin cult. They have brought about the almost complete ritualization of Soviet public life.

The ritualization began in earnest at the time of Xruščev's demise in 1964. Under the auspices of the Central Committee, principles for the introduction of new holidays and rituals were worked out. The process has been thoroughly analyzed by Christel Lane, who has also summarized its original stipulations:

'(a) an organic connection of the new holidays and rituals with the whole system and way of life (obraz zhizni) of the Soviet people at the present stage of communist construction

- (b) the expression in every new custom of a definite progressive idea and of the principles of communist morality in combination with the specifities and forms of every custom
- (c) a synthesis of the logical and the emotional in every holiday and ritual. The utilization of varied means of aesthetic and emotional influence
- (d) an atheist direction, counterposing new to old religious rituals
- (e) the principle of the internationalism of the new rituals and holidays. Maximum utilization of everything progressive in national or popular traditions. Struggle against survivals of bourgeois nationalism
- (f) universality and systematic character of the new holidays and rituals, continuous and ubiquitous introduction of them into the daily life of the Soviet people.' (Lane 1981, 46 f.).

Analyzing the development of the rituals, Lane notes as a 'striking feature' 'the Russian chauvinist bias in the process of selecting a suitable cultural past'. (Lane 1981. 238). more, the existing order is treated as 'sacred' in this system of rituals, at the same time as 'the intrusion of military symbolism into the ritual of all three traditions (7 November, 1 May and 9 May) reflects the central position that the military-patriotic value complex has assumed in Soviet public consciousness'. (Lane 1984, 213, 215). The conclusion is borne out by the descriptions and recommendations in the Soviet manual on rites, which was published in 1977. Worship of war heroes there is indicated as an important part in 'patriotic upbringing', and the Victory Day (9 May) is declared to be celebrated in reverence for the unsurpassed heroism, courage and standfastness of the Soviet people, which saved all mankind from fascist slavery. (Naši prazdniki 1977. 8, 26, 110 ff.). The pervasiveness of militarism in Soviet society is evident not only in rituals, but also in peace propaganda. Thus a Soviet scholar stated in 1984 that "the military organization of real socialism is a specific form of peace guarantee" and that the Soviet armed forces are an active, peace-creating factor. (Kiršin 1984, 79).

The ritualization of Soviet public life is intimately related to a strong Manicheism. The sense of community to be fostered by the rituals is also upheld by a conscious demonisation of the surrounding world. In June 1983, the Central Committe of the CPSU decreed

that it was of paramount importance to bar all bourgeois ideology from the Soviet Union (the wording was reminiscent of what Buxarin declared back in 1927). Pacifist propaganda was especially harmful. (Borisov 1984, 48). Counterpropaganda among the Soviet population in general and the military personnel in particular is said to be especially important 'under the conditions of tense ideological struggle in military questions in connection with the growth in number of channels of intrusion of bourgeois views'. (Kiršin 1984, 87).

It is evident that this study is an argument in support of the thesis that there is a basic continuity between pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. The point I have been trying to make is that while a radical political and profound social revolution undoubtedly occured in 1917, culturally Russia remained very much the same. In the course of decades, a new dynasty - social, not biological - namely the Communist Nomenklatura (cf Voslensky 1982), established itself on the old tearist throne. The Russian people's attachment to the tear and to Orthodoxy was successfully redirected towards the new leaders Lenin and Stalin. With the help of national Bolshevism, Russian patriotism was remoulded into 'Soviet patriotism'.

Stalin's death in 1953 coincided in time with signs of fatigue in the Soviet economic and social fabric. Xruščev could capitalise on a widespread yearning for internal peace and security. However, basically his attempt to revitalise society failed. This was proof that the new political and social structure which had been completed under Stalin had become stable. It was time for Russia to reassert itself. A static polity, almost totally ritualized, emerged. The object of the apotheosis in Party propaganda is neither an individual leader nor the radiant future. The apotheosis is directed towards the past. The doctrine of socialist realism, promulgated under Stalin and evoked by both Cernenko and Markov in their speeches on the 50th anniversary of the Union of Writers of the USSR, has developed into a mixture of Russian and socialist nostalgism.

In 1917 the Bolsheviks declared that communism was imminent. They were greeted by sectarian peasants and slavophile intellectuals, expecting the coming of the righteous New Kingdom. In 1961 the new Programme of the CPSU declared that by 1980 the Soviet Union should be the most advanced country in the world.

In 1984 the Soviet Union is a military superpover, rivalled only by the United States. Its population is poor. The Head of State

and the General secretary of the CPSU has the following to say:

'Our experience has shown that before we can solve the problems directly connected with the building of communism, it is necessary to pass a historically long stage of developed socialism. Our country is standing at the beginning of this stage.' (Cernenko 1984, 2).

We discern in Cernenko's statement an acknowledgement of the fact that the communist utopia has dissolved and become something which the Soviet citizen will not experience in this worldly life. This is the outcome of almost 70 years of Bolshevik rule.

Incomprehensible? Outrageous? It is just the face of old Russia.

NOTES

- 1) Lenin apparently was prey to the popular notion that the city had been named after tear Peter. As Lotman and Uspenskij (1982, 239 f.) have shown, this was not the case. The new capital was named after Saint Peter, in order to substantiate tear Peter's claim to have founded the New Rome the original being that of the apostle Peter.
- 2) Tumarkin is quoting two articles in the Soviet journal Kommunističeskoe prosveščenie 1, 1924.
- Zajcev is quoting Orlov, D.: 1964, 'Ščast'e videt' Lenina', Sovetskaja Kul'tura, 4 May.
- 4) For the concept 'cultural revolution', see Fitzpatrick, S. (ed.), 1978.

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