Political Culture and Soviet Politics

Also by Stephen White

The USSR: Portrait of a Super-power

**Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution: a Study in
the Politics of Diplomacy, 1920–1924**

Political Culture and Soviet Politics

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Preface

This is a relatively short book about a large subject. It has, I believe, two principal justifications. The first stems from what I have felt for some time to be a serious shortcoming in much of the existing literature on Soviet government and politics, its lack of an historical perspective. Most of the general textbooks begin with an account of the ideology; they include a chapter or two about political developments since 1917; and then they go on to discuss institutions, groups and processes, the staple of the study of Soviet politics as of that of most other countries. Important though such topics are, the result is that historical continuities of longer standing are, as it were, defined out of existence. Soviet political institutions are seen as emanating from the doctrines of Marx and Lenin rather than, in part at least, from the country's centuries of previous political experience; and Soviet political beliefs and behaviour patterns, where they conform to the precepts of Marxism–Leninism, are taken to be the product of a successful process of political socialisation rather than a tribute to the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices which, in many important respects at least, anticipated those the Bolsheviks were subsequently to attempt to propagate. The result is an account of Soviet politics which is historically foreshortened and, in my view, seriously deficient, obscuring as it does important elements of continuity between the pre- and post-revolutionary systems.

It is the contention of this volume that the concept of political culture may help to redress some of this imbalance by allowing a greater degree of attention to be paid to the historical and national specificity of Soviet politics as well as to the similarities it shares with political systems elsewhere. Patterns of previous political ex-

perience are, of course, but one of the factors which combine to shape a nation's politics; and it would be historically unfounded as well as insulting to suggest that Russia's experience of autocracy left no other prospect than the continuation of some form of authoritarian rule, whatever government was established by the revolution of 1917. History knows probabilities but not certainties; and as I hope to make clear in this account, alternative patterns of development were always possible, right up to the experiment in limited government which took place during the final decade of Tsarist rule. It is also important not to confuse the theory of autocracy with what might, for a variety of reasons, be its very imperfect practice, and to allow for a wide range of regional and other variations. These considerations notwithstanding, there nonetheless was something which was distinctive about the politics of Tsarist Russia in the pre-war European context, and in this volume I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which an examination of that inheritance may help towards a better understanding of contemporary Soviet politics and of the manner in which those politics may evolve in future decades.

The concept of political culture, secondly and perhaps less novelly, allows a greater degree of attention to be paid to the dimensions of political life which extend beyond formal institutional boundaries than traditional categories of analysis have normally permitted. There has, of course, been no lack of interest in the informal aspects of politics in studies of western-type political systems in recent years. In Communist-ruled states, however, the examination of formal institutions has normally bulked larger, in part at least because of the paucity of survey and other data upon which an alternative approach might be based. The problems associated with the empirical examination of politics, in the USSR as in the other Communist-ruled states, do of course remain considerable. I hope to show in this volume, however, that difficulties of this kind may easily be exaggerated. Methodologically deficient and evasive though they may often be, the range and variety of Soviet sociological investigations into many of the informal aspects of politics has not, I think, been sufficiently appreciated in the west, and it is one of the purposes of this volume to ensure that such findings should become more widely known. The political-cultural approach, as conceived in this volume, is not in any sense a substitute for the close analysis of institutions and their workings. But it

does, I think, help to supplement such analyses by directing attention towards the network of belief and behaviour patterns within which political institutions are located and by which their operation is in part determined; and more generally it may make a modest contribution towards the attempts which are presently in train to construct an adequate political sociology of the USSR and of the other state socialist countries.

This volume has been in gestation for a number of years, and in the course of its preparation I have incurred a number of debts to people and institutions which it is now my pleasant duty to discharge. My greatest debt is to Archie Brown of St Antony's College, Oxford, who first alerted me to the possibilities of the concept of political culture in the Soviet context and whose invitation to join a group of scholars preparing chapters on the political cultures of various Communist nations was the starting-point of this study. This book would have been different if he had written it himself, but without him it might not have been written at all. I am also indebted to Rene Beerman, David Lane, Mary McAuley and Bill Mackenzie for their comments upon various versions of earlier chapters; to Bernard Aspinwall, Robert A. Lewis and Warren Miller for advice and information on specific points; and to seminar and conference audiences in Cambridge, Birmingham, Liverpool and Oxford for many helpful observations and suggestions. The research upon which this study is based was made possible by the University of Glasgow and the British Council, who enabled me to make a number of extended visits to the USSR, and by the Nuffield Foundation, whose generous grant enabled me to carry out a programme of interviewing in Israel in the summer of 1976. I am grateful, finally, to the Master and Fellows of Balliol College, Oxford, for making it possible for me to spend the Michaelmas term of 1977 in their stimulating company. Many of the chapters which follow bear the marks of the opportunities for reading and discussion (though not, I hope, of the abundant hospitality) which I was able to enjoy at that time. For the errors and misjudgements that remain I am, of course, alone responsible.

August 1978

STEPHEN WHITE

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