The Soviet Union and its Geographical Problems

Also by Roy E. H. Mellor

Geography of the USSR

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To H. K. M.

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Introduction

This review of the geography of the Soviet Union is designed for students and others seeking an introduction to this, the world's largest compact political territory, encompassing one-sixth of the land surface of our planet. In assessing the achievements or failures of the USSR or in making comparisons between it and other powers, it is essential to appreciate the real nature of the environment, both in terms of its physical setting and its time—space matrix, in which Soviet citizens live out their lives. In so many respects the Soviet *milieu* is bedevilled by the harshness of the physical world around it and by the sheer 'embarrassment of space'.

The study is built around nine chapters, each devoted to a specific thematic topic in the geography of the country as a whole. In the contemporary setting it is felt important to concentrate attention on an overview of the territory as a whole rather than follow the conventional and perhaps now rather dated plan of a brief general review and then a region-by-region survey. For the majority of people seeking a general overview of the Soviet Union, the coherence of the whole is most meaningful.

The Soviet Union lies upon a threshold of rapid change. The pre-war and early post-war economy was built along lines that resembled nineteenth-century industrialisation in Western Europe. Now, having increasingly entered the arena of world trade and technology, a new sophistication is being added by the turbulent effort to keep abreast of the accelerating technological change brought about by the age of the silicon chip that has dawned in the Western world. At the same time, patterns of demographic change pose challenges in the supply of labour and in internal political forces through the shift in balance between the major ethnic groups. As a new 'window on the West'

has opened, consumer pressures for a bigger slice of the national cake have also developed.

There has also been the relaxation of the tight encapsulation of Stalinist days, not only in the attitude to the world at large, but also as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (*Comecon*) has evolved. It is now unreal to consider the geography of the Soviet Union without reference to the country's role as the core of this group of socialist nations acting in concert for mutual economic advantage. This is examined in particular in the final chapter, where an assessment of the world position of the Soviet Union is attempted. Such a review represents one 'model' of the world scene; readers may care to construct others for themselves.

The text owes much to the useful comments made by my colleague, E. Alistair Smith. The manuscript was typed by Jane Calder, the maps prepared by Laurie McLean and Philip Glennie, while Sheila Bain helped in the collection of material. My wife read the proofs, prepared the index and kept the 'inner man' in good fettle while writing. To everybody I am most grateful. I must also record the pleasure of working with Derick Mirfin, John Winckler, Keith Povey and Steven Kennedy, 'Macmillan's men'.

Old Aberdeen
June 1981

Roy E. H. Mellor

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