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MADRID : CON OR CONFERENCE ?

On 11 November the United States, Canada and every European country (except Albania) will be sending representatives to the second Helsinki review conference in Madrid. Every nation in Europe, large and small will be attending, including micro states like Monaco and Lichtenstein. One nation, a member of the United Nations, one of the largest countries in Europe and with a population of over 50 million, will be conspicuous by its absence.

Ukraine, while not directly represented at the conference has, more than any other nation, a deep interest in the outcome of the Madrid gathering, especially in the field of national and human rights. Ukraine, in proportion to its size produces more political prisoners and witnesses more human rights violations than any other nation on this continent, her people comprise 18% of the U.S.S.R.'s population yet over half of concentration camp inmates are Ukrainians.

Ukraine is a nation with a seat at the United Nations, and has the right to:-

"...enter into relations with other states, conclude treaties with them, exchange diplomatic and consular representatives, and take part in the work of international organisations."

Article 74, Constitution of the Ukrainian SSR.

According to the paper Constitution of the Ukrainian SSR., Ukraine also has the right to her own army, and to secede from the U.S.S.R.; yet her people have been persecuted and hounded since 1921 for seeking those very rights, enshrined even in the Soviet constitution.

Many people could be tempted to ask themselves whether, in the light of recent events in Poland and Afghanistan, the human rights issue ought not to take a back seat. That human rights violations have to some extent been overshadowed by the dramatic rise in international tension, caused by the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the brave struggle of the Polish workers. However, to concentrate on these issues and ignore their causes, the economic, social, political and moral rot which has gripped the Soviet Union since its conception, would be dangerous in the extreme.

The internal socio-economic organisation of any nation invariably effects its political structure and its relations with the outside world. The basic weakness of the Russian economic and political system is inextricably entwined with its treatment of dissidents and its perception of its foreign interests.

The Soviet economy, in common with many similar economies is an oppressive, centralised, bureaucratic monolith. In such a structure there is no room for self-improvement. Initiative is frowned upon and industrial efficiency virtually unknown. The only items the Soviet system seems adept at producing are tanks and dissidents.

Unable to develop and adapt, the Soviet economy has become less and less efficient compared with the West. Depending on the West for technological innovations and hard currency (used to buy the goods the U.S.S.R., cannot produce in sufficient quantities) the U.S.S.R., has adopted the role of a parasite, feeding off the West and in return attempts to undermine the countries on which it depends.

Russia is not new to this situation. Russia proper has been feeding off more advanced nations for a long time. Since 1921 she has been sucking the life blood from Ukraine, and since 1939 from Western Ukraine and the Baltic republics. In this lies one of the basic paradoxes of the Soviet position. In order to survive she needs to feed off more advanced nations. However the totalitarian political system operated by the Russians cannot function in a liberal society, and it is the political and economic freedom of the West which enables it to remain efficient.

This economic stagnation inevitably leads to social instability. When promotion is dependent on political reliability rather than on effort and ability, frustration inevitably results. Where initiative is a dirty word and there is no relationship between effort and reward, the results are predictable; lethargy and one of the worst alcoholic problems in Europe.

The political structure cannot be seen in isolation from the economic and social system. The political system, a vast bureaucratic, oppressive, totalitarian structure, basically unchanged since the days of Stalin is a direct reflection of the socio-economic system. It is marred by inefficiency, lack of initiative and an absolute terror of any form of criticism. Nevertheless the Soviet system presents to the world a solid, stable exterior, a facade, hiding a gangrenous interior.

Ethnically most of the population of the Russian Empire is non-Russian, unwilling members of the U.S.S.R. In this lies the Soviet Union's most important political weakness. To keep its colonies under control, Russia must continually convince them of her strength. An aggressive foreign policy in this way serves two purposes; Moscow arms dominating large parts of the world, Moscow influence spreading through surrogates acts as a continual reminder that any attempts to undermine the political system are doomed to failure. At the same time the classic method of using external 'bogey men' to cover up internal weaknesses is used to rally what support still exists for the system.

Criticism and any form of dissent spreads panic through the system. The fact that anybody has the courage and dignity to stand up and to tell their political masters they are wrong is a sign of the system failing to intimidate its victims. This carefully built image of strength and power would not long survive if dissent were allowed to be freely voiced. Once the hard outer shell is cracked, the rotten interior would ensure the ultimate destruction of the system.

As far as Russia is concerned the three 'baskets' are closely linked. Moscow's aims at Madrid are twofold; to increase economic co-operation in order to feed off the Western economies in order to make up domestic shortages, while using detente to secure the western borders and distract the West from Russian adventures in other parts of the world. Detente, if successful, would also serve as a reminder to her own people that the West is in retreat, that even after Afghanistan the western world is still not prepared to stand up to Moscow.

At the review conference at Belgrade Moscow was taken to task over her human rights record. Dissidents and many other ordinary people in the Russian Empire took courage from this western support; it is essential that this start be built upon.

Afghanistan and Poland are undeniably important and these issues could dominate the conference. Human rights, however, must not be allowed to be swept under the carpet. The whole issue of Moscow treatment of dissidents and

human rights in the U.S.S.R., is closely tied up with the basic weakness of the whole system. These people are living witnesses to the internal rot which has long gripped the system, proof that the facade of power and strength so carefully built up by the Russian authorities is just that, a facade. Afghanistan and Poland are external expressions of the social, economic and political degenerations of the Russian Empire. While not actually intervening in Poland (yet) Russian leaders are watching the development of the 'Polish disease' with an attention little short of panic. Fear that if the Polish workers 'get away with it' others in the Russian Empire will follow, and the general inability to take criticism is on the other side of the coin.

How is it that in the eighth decade of the twentieth century, surrounded as we are by proof of mankind's innate genius, we allow these insults to basic human dignity to continue? Numerous brave people are suffering daily merely because they sought the rights guaranteed them by international law, enshrined in the Soviet constitution and reaffirmed at Helsinki in 1975. Of the founding members of the Ukrainian Monitoring Group, only three are still at liberty in Ukraine. The remainder are either under arrest or in exile.

During the Madrid conference it is essential that the West presses Moscow into implementing both the spirit of and the word of the Helsinki act. If the West shirks its duty, this and future conferences will degenerate into farce. Daily, people in the Russian Empire are arrested and persecuted for attempting to exercise their rights. The act, for example, specifically states that, "The participating states intend to facilitate wider travel for their citizens for personal or professional reasons..." Yet only recently a Ukrainian builder, Arkady Stepanchuk, was committed to a mental hospital simply because he sought aid from the British Embassy in emigrating. Is the treatment of Arkady Stepanchuk consistent with the Moscow declarations at Helsinki? A week later a well known Ukrainian freedom fighter and member of the Ukrainian Helsinki group, Vasyl Stus, was sentenced to ten years in a labour camp under the all-embracing article 70-2 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR., the famous anti-Soviet agitation charge.

These are just two examples of the many, Shabatura, Kandyba, Romaniuk, Krasivsky, Shukhevych, Sverstiuk, Zhornovil. Hel, Tykhy and hundreds of others all brave people who suffer mental and physical torment every day in order to defend those basic rights we all take so much for granted.

The Helsinki declarations have, since their signing in 1975, acted as a beacon to those who sought to improve the lot of mankind. It has acted as a light of hope to those who suffer daily humiliation and oppression at the hands of rulers who do not care about the rights of their subjects. Those many brave people who stood up in the cause of national and human rights deserve the support of the western world. It is not only their own rights that they are fighting for, but the basic dignity of men everywhere. If we allow a system which regards human beings as mere economic units to get away with trampling on those basic dignities which raise men above animals, our own humanity and dignity will inevitably suffer.

They have not betrayed our trust in them. Can we afford to betray theirs in us?

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