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FROM MOSCOW 160800Z FEBRUARY

TO IMMEDIATE F C O

TELEGRAM NUMBER 227 OF 16 FEBRUARY

INFO IMMEDIATE WASHINGTON, UKDEL NATO, BONN AND PARIS

MY TELNO 223 : VICE PRESIDENT BUSH'S MEETING ON 14 FEBRUARY WITH
 CHERNENKO.

1. ACCORDING TO MY U S COLLEAGUE, AT HIS MEETING WITH THE VICE PRESIDENT IN THE KREMLIN ON THE AFTERNOON OF 14 FEBRUARY CHERNENKO READ OUT A 2 - 3 PAGE PREPARED PAPER . THIS OPENED BY EMPHASISING THE CONTINUITY OF SOVIET POLICY IN ITS OBJECTIVE OF SEEKING TO PRESERVE PEACE ON THE BASIS OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE. THE SOVIET UNION, HOWEVER, MUST SAFEGUARD ITS OWN SECURITY AND THAT OF ITS FRIENDS AND THE U S GOVERNMENT MUST UNDERSTAND THAT IT WAS NECESSARY TO PRESERVE THE EXISTING EQUILIBRIUM IN BOTH CONVENTIONAL AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND NOT TAKE ANY UNILATERAL ADVANTAGE. BOTH THE SOVIET UNION AND THE UNITED STATES VIEWED THE PRESENT SITUATION WITH CONCERN. (I AGREE WITH HARTMAN IN SEEING THIS RECOGNITION OF SHARED CONCERN AS NOVEL AND SIGNIFICANT). THE TWO GOVERNMENTS MUST SEE IF THEY COULD NOT IMPROVE THE RELATIONSHIP BY " INTER - ACTION ". (ACCORDING TO HARTMAN, THIS TERM WAS USED SEVERAL TIMES BY CHERNENKO). THE NEW GENERAL SECRETARY ASKED BUSH TO TELL THE PRESIDENT THAT THE SOVIET UNION SOUGHT BALANCED , INDEED BETTER RELATIONS. A BALANCED RELATIONSHIP WAS ESSENTIAL FOR THE PEACE OF THE WORLD.

2. CONTINUING TO READ FROM HIS PAPER , CHERNENKO NOTED THAT, IN HIS SPEECH ON JANUARY 16, PRESIDENT REAGAN HAD CALLED FOR CO-OPERATION . THE SOVIET UNION WOULD WORK TOWARDS THIS. BUT THE PRESIDENT SHOULD KNOW THAT THREE PRINCIPLES MUST BE RESPECTED - RESPECT FOR NATIONAL INTEREST , NO INTERFERENCE IN INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND RECOGNITION THAT IDEOLOGY SHOULD NOT PLAY A ROLE IN INTERSTATE RELATIONS.

3. THERE WAS A NEED FOR PRACTICAL STEPS TO CHECK THE NUCLEAR ARMS RACE. SUCH STEPS WOULD NOT HARM EITHER PARTY. WHY HAD THE UNITED STATES REJECTED THE SOVIET " NO-FIRST-USE " PROPOSALS ? MANY QUESTIONS AWAITED A JOINT US/SOVIET APPROACH AND THERE WAS THEREFORE NEED FOR MORE CONTACTS - CONTACTS TO CONSIDER ARMS CONTROL, COMPETITION IN ARMAMENTS AND POLITICAL SOLUTIONS TO REGIONAL CONFLICTS.

4. AFTER A PASSAGE ON THE SOVIET APPROACH TO " INCREASINGLY CONSTRAINED " BILATERAL RELATIONS WHICH HARTMAN SKIPPED BUT WHICH , I THINK, INCLUDED A REFERENCE TO TRADE , CHERNENKO CALLED FOR A PROCESS TO CORRECT THIS LACK OF " INTER-ACTION " BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION. THE TWO COUNTRIES, THE STATEMENT CONCLUDED , WERE NOT DOOMED TO A FATAL CONFRONTATION.

THE STATEMENT CONCLUDED, WERE NOT DOOMED TO A FATAL CONFRONTATION.

5. AFTER CONDOLENCES ON THE DEATH OF ANDROPOV, BUSH HANDED OVER A PERSONAL LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT, WHICH, ACCORDING TO HARTMAN WENT OVER MUCH THE SAME GROUND AS HIS SPEECH OF JANUARY 16 AND IN SIMILAR TERMS. THERE WAS NOT TIME TO READ THE LETTER AT THE MEETING. PRESIDENT REAGAN WOULD PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO MR CHERNENKO'S RESPONSE. THE VICE PRESIDENT AGREED THAT THE TWO COUNTRIES WERE NOT DOOMED TO FATAL CONFLICT. IN HIS JANUARY 16 SPEECH THE PRESIDENT HAD INDEED LOOKED FOR BETTER RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION. THE DIFFERENCES WITH THE UNITED STATES WERE FUNDAMENTAL AND THE U S WAS DETERMINED TO DEFEND ITS INTERESTS AND THOSE OF ITS ALLIES. BUT THEY DID NOT CHALLENGE SOVIET INTERESTS SEMICLN AND AS MR SHULTZ HAD TOLD GROMYKO IN STOCKHOLM THE U S WISHED TO MOVE ON FROM WORDS TO DEEDS AND TO MAKE PROGRESS IN VARIOUS AREAS. IF PROGRESS WERE MADE, THE PRESIDENT REMAINED INTERESTED IN A SUMMIT MEETING.

6. BUSH WENT ON TO ENUMERATE SOME SPECIFIC AREAS WHERE THE UNITED STATES WISHED TO SEE PROGRESS.

(A) REGIONAL CONFLICTS. THE UNITED STATES DID NOT SEEK CONFLICT IN THE LEBANON OR A PERMANENT PRESENCE THERE.

(B) ARMS CONTROL. THE UNITED STATES WISHED TO RESUME THE START NEGOTIATIONS. THEY CONSIDERED CERTAIN CONCRETE STEPS WERE POSSIBLE AND WOULD WELCOME SOVIET IDEAS. THERE WAS NEED FOR A "COMMON FRAMEWORK" AND THERE COULD BE "TRADE-OFFS". (HARTMAN INDICATED THAT THIS, INCLUDING THE INVITATION TO COME FORWARD WITH IDEAS, WAS COVERED IN THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER - BUT DID NOT ELABORATE).

(C) THE VICE PRESIDENT ACKNOWLEDGED WHAT CHERHENKO HAD SAID ON REFRAINING FROM INTERFERENCE IN INTERNAL AFFAIRS. BUT THE U S GOVERNMENT AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC HAD AN INTEREST IN ISSUES AFFECTING HUMAN RIGHTS WHICH, AS THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT MUST RECOGNISE, HAD A PRACTICAL EFFECT ON RELATIONS. BUSH INSTANCED THE CONCERN FELT OVER SAKHAROV, SHCHARANSKY AND ORLOV. HE SUGGESTED THAT THERE SHOULD BE SOME SPECIAL UNPUBLICISED DIPLOMATIC MECHANISM FOR DISCUSSING SUCH IDEAS.

THE VICE PRESIDENT CONCLUDED BY EMPHASISING THAT THE U S GOVERNMENT GENUINELY WISHED TO SEE AN IMPROVEMENT IN RELATIONS.

7. CHERNENKO, NOW SPEAKING EXTEMPORE, SAID THAT HE WOULD CERTAINLY STUDY AND ANSWER THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER. GROMYKO, IN HIS SOLE INTERVENTION THROUGHOUT THE MEETING, INTERJECTED "IF THERE IS SOMETHING IN THE LETTER WHICH REQUIRES A REPLY". CHERNENKO WENT ON TO REQUEST BUSH TO CONVEY HIS APPRECIATION OF MR REAGAN'S HUMAN RESPONSE TO THE DEATH OF MR ANDROPOV BY SENDING A DELEGATION LED BY THE VICE PRESIDENT TO THE FUNERAL AND ALSO HIS WISH FOR MORE CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONS. THE MEETING HAD SHOWN THAT THERE WERE MANY MORE PROBLEMS AWAITING SOLUTION. THE SOVIET UNION AND THE UNITED STATES WERE TWO GREAT NATIONS WHICH SHOULD CHART A COURSE TOGETHER AND WHICH BOTH NEEDED WISE AND KIND LEADERS WHO COULD BE REMEMBERED AS SUCH. OPPORTUNITIES TO SOLVE OUTSTANDING PROBLEMS SHOULD THEREFORE NOT BE MISSED.

8. HARTMAN PROVIDED THIS ACCOUNT OF THE MEETING ON A PERSONAL BASIS ON 15 FEBRUARY. MY FRENCH AND GERMAN COLLEAGUES WERE ALSO PRESENT. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE WAS NOT TIME TO PUT QUESTIONS AS HARTMAN HAD TO LEAVE FOR A LUNCH WITH DOBRYNIN SEMICLN ! TO A LUNCH WITH YURI BREZHNEV WHO SOBBERED WHEN I SPOKE OF THE PREVIOUS DAY'S FUNERAL. I HAD NOT THE HEART TO ASK HIM WITH THE LAST TWO SENTENCES OF PARA 7 ABOVE IN MIND, WHETHER HE DID NOT THINK THAT IN THE NEW GENERAL SECRETARY THERE WERE HINTS OF HIS FATHER RESURRECTED.

9. ADVANCE COPIES TO PRIVATE SECRETARY AND PS TO PRIME MINISTER.

GEORGE WALDEN

Russia and the West

World Power by Jonathan Steele

Michael Joseph, £14.95

All Stalin's Men by Roy Medvedev

Basil Blackwell, £8.95

Life in Russia by Michael Binyon

Hamish Hamilton, £8.95

Among the Russians by Colin Thubron

Heinemann, £8.95

Behind Russian Lines by Sandy Gall

Sidgwick & Jackson, £8.95

A Hitch or Two in Afghanistan

by Nigel Ryan *Weidenfeld, £8.95*

AS A POSTGRADUATE student at Moscow University, I heard my share of Soviet political humour. During the Berlin crisis the anxious question was asked: would there be a war? The answer was no, no war, but such a fight for peace that not a single stone would be left upon another.

More than 20 years later, we are still fighting. But there have been two major changes. One is the growth of Soviet military power. The other is the decline of Western interest in and knowledge about the Russians. Pretty well every famous general or strategist, from Sun Tze to Robert E. Lee, has had some wise words to say about knowing your adversary. And yet we can't bring ourselves to muster more curiosity about Moscow, despite current tensions.

One reason, I suspect, is that Soviet society exudes, as it decays, a colossal cultural tedium. Who wants to chart the political and economic inertia of the system, or follow the careers of those grey, elderly gentlemen? Popular interest has also waned dramatically. In Britain there is a potential streak of generosity towards the Russians, but it hasn't been seen for years, not perhaps since Khrushchev jollied things up a bit.

This vast indifference can have curious consequences. In discussions of international affairs, the Soviet Union is sometimes elided from the argument, simply because people literally don't want to know. We have seen some of this over Cruise: many protestors are not so much pro-Soviet, as convinced that the problem is between us and the Americans. By not being present at all in people's minds, Moscow itself is sometimes silently discounted, just as one might overlook some huge, gloomy structure on a familiar route. I know of no better reason for resuming contacts with the Soviet Union at all levels.

So it is consoling to see a new batch of books about Russia. Jonathan Steele's book on Soviet foreign policy under Brezhnev and Andropov is the most ambitious. The main problem lies in the self-consciousness of its revisionism. We have had so much harsh, one-sided commentary on Soviet policies, that it was horribly predictable that someone would try to correct the balance. The danger of revisionism

is that it often simply leaves you stranded with an antithesis, but no hard synthesis. That basically is what we are left with after reading Mr Steele's book.

Swings in opinion on the Soviet Union are inevitable, and result from Soviet actions themselves, from changes in our own perceptions and priorities, and from the very state of our knowledge. It has been a bad time for all three recently, and we are in a dangerously volatile state of mind about the Soviet threat. By helping us to understand how the Soviet Union sees the West, Mr Steele contributes to a more balanced view. But he does not entirely avoid the danger of getting carried away with his corrective function. There is not much future in impaling oneself on a pendulum.

The discussion of the Soviet view of national security contains much that is worth restating. The sense of encirclement; past invasions; and the awareness that any new war would be the last. The cliché I have always found most persuasive is the Soviet desire for Western respect. This Mr Steele illustrates and argues effectively. The Russians wish to be seen as a state with a legitimate interest in their own security. It is a simple point, too often forgotten by some of our more excitable commentators. If we are to regard the Soviet Union as a thoroughly illegitimate state, certain stark consequences follow. If it is a legitimate state (however much we dislike its ideology or foreign policy) then we must expect it to try to exert its power and influence beyond its frontiers in the way that any state of its size is likely to do, only more so because of the ideological component. We must deal with it as we would with any other state, only more so too.

Mr Steele tends to suggest that every Soviet action which has been disapproved of by the West - the arms build up, Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, is a reaction to Western forward policy; a result of fear; or a proof of weakness. The cumulative picture is of, if not an innocent, a misunderstood Russia. And where the Russians are not misunderstood, they are inefficient. It is easy to finish the book feeling rather sorry for them.

The book is also pervaded by a curiously dated reluctance to make what used to be called in the Sixties "value judgements", (i.e. common sense assumptions); and by over-anxiety to balance the books. We have phrases like "While the West has made much of the so-called Brezhnev doctrine..." Surely the Poles and Afghans must ponder the implications for themselves of this doctrine too? And worst of all we have a value-free comparison between Soviet ideological expansionism and Western notions of human rights. Both, says Mr Steele, override national boundaries. Yes, but Western concepts of individual human rights, liberty, democracy and justice are simply *superior* to the crude, dangerous and old-fashioned Soviet world view of international class conflict. Unless we make that highly defensible "value judgement", hard policy analysis is paralysed, and we are left swinging in a moralistic mist.

Medvedev's book is the real thing. It is a brilliant illustration of the ordinariness of evil. It consists quite simply of six short biographies (Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Suslov, Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov). Karl Kraus once said "when I think of Hitler, nothing occurs to me". The same is true of this sextet (with the possible exception of Mikoyan). Medvedev mostly avoids commentary in these essays, allowing the full brutal force of the biographies of these hideously banal men to speak for themselves. The flat, sober tone highlights the horror. The subjects are selected because they spanned the whole period from Lenin, through Stalin to

Krushchev. All (though not Molotov) were of humble birth. All were men of the utmost mediocrity, despite their administrative abilities, without culture or any nobility of soul – again with the exception of Mikoyan. One is constantly reminded of Ortega Y Gasset's warnings about mass-men, and the danger of politics absorbing life.

Voroshilov, the courageous, but rather dense Marshal who tended to agree with people because he was not very clever, did not play a central role in the massacre of the military cadres in 1937. But he didn't disagree with that either, and added to the atmosphere of spymania. Nicely judged human touches offset the inhumanity. The Marshal was once embarrassed at his inability to dance at receptions abroad, and so ordered his officers to be instructed in the latest European dances.

Medvedev confirms our suspicions that Suslov was the ultimate bore. As chief ideologist of the Communist Party, he would have made a good provincial teacher of social sciences. As anyone who has had the misfortune to read his speeches will confirm, he too is a paragon of sheer ordinariness. His academic preoccupations at least spared him direct involvement in the murders of the late thirties. But he is a symbol of the mournful continuity of the system, and its inability to innovate. Yet even he had a human side: he once fell in love with a young girl, and only the "Boss's" reprimand saved his marriage.

Molotov is perhaps the nastiest of the bunch. His habit of adding obscene abuse to his signature on the blacklists of those condemned is particularly repellent. It is that same signature, incidentally, that appears on the Charter of the United Nations on behalf of the Soviet Union. . . . The Soviet purges ate up not only their own, but their wives too. Molotov's was arrested before the war, but given back to him as a birthday present on Stalin's death. Medvedev recounts a revealing scene after his disgrace: "On another occasion, Molotov joined a queue for tomatoes that had formed in a shop at Zhukovka. A woman immediately left the line and loudly announced that she would not stand in any line with an executioner." Executions, the persistence of some spirit of decency, the lack of tomatoes, the queues, everything is there. . . .

Kaganovich, who took an active part in the collectivisation in the Ukraine, and the deportations, comes a close second to Molotov. He spoke in the language of the gutter, and is said to have resorted to physical violence against his own assistants. Responsible for the demolition of many Moscow churches, he once justified one piece of vandalism near Red Square by insisting that "my aesthetics demands that the demonstration processions from the six districts of Moscow should all pour into Red Square at the same time". (Comparisons with some of the little philistines who wield local power in this country today are unfair, but irresistible). As a Jew, his position was threatened during the "Doctor's Plot". But he stood by while his own brother was hounded to suicide in 1941.

Malenkov was physically as well as morally unappealing. It is nice to know there was enough wit around to call him "matryenka" because of his soft, effeminate appearance. But according to Medvedev, he was active in the wings during the Terror, and present when party leaders were tortured. Again the boorishness and lack of minimal culture comes out strongly: Malenkov once asked what the difference was between a "thick" journal (i.e. a serious literary periodical) and a "thin" one – a good sign of ignorance in Russia.

Mikoyan arouses more wonder than revulsion. How did he survive? There is no real answer, except that he seems to have been extraordinarily clever and useful. His earlier uses had included the publication of the first Soviet cookery book whose opening words by Stalin were: "life has become better, life has become merrier". That was in the early 1930s. Obviously he was not untainted by the Terror. But we have to ask ourselves the interesting moral question: would we have preferred him to sacrifice himself by protecting, or preserve himself, if only for his role in heading off the Cuba

crisis? Perhaps we are fortunate that, unlike Voroshilov, Mikoyan could dance.

Medvedev's book is by far the most powerful of this group, simply because it is true and written by an insider who himself has shown extraordinary courage. There is very little argumentative commentary. It is all too serious and awful for that. Instead we have a brilliant evocation of the mass-men of totalitarianism. This book tells us more about the mechanisms that produced the Korean airline incident than any amount of contemporary commentary.

I confess to a mysterious prejudice against travel books. The best description I know of the United States is by Franz Kafka, who never went there. But in the present low ebb in Soviet studies, any travel helps. Michael Binyon's and Colin Thubron's books rediscover different aspects of Soviet reality. One deals with the surface of Soviet life; the other with its soul.

Mr Binyon produces few insights, and no sense of the deep melancholy of Soviet existence. It is a measure of where we have got to that it becomes necessary to say that "the Russians are people", but I suppose somebody has to do it. Mr Binyon, who was *Times* correspondent in Moscow for several years, does it as well as anyone, and the facts that he has collected tell their own tale. We all know about abortion, for example, but the figures are startling: every woman has six to eight abortions during her lifetime. The statistics on drink fail to make their full impact: "escapism is a strong motive for drinking. . . ." is true around the globe. It is what the Russians are escaping from that needs description.

Mr Binyon's chapter on the arts is the least satisfactory. He talks of a "somewhat old-fashioned respect for culture", and notes that all schoolchildren are taught Pushkin and Tolstoy. I would gladly settle for a system in this country where children read their own classics. Apart from anything else, understanding of our own culture would



Freedom fighters in Afghanistan with a captured Russian AGS17 (automatic grenade launcher). From *Behind Russian Lines*.

gives us a better perspective on that of other countries, including the Soviet Union. The "old-fashionedness" of the Soviet educational system has been one of its few successes. Reading Dostoevsky in modern Russia must do a lot to keep the spirit alive.

There is a good deal of information here, and some amusing anecdotes: "What is a musical trio - a Soviet quartet that has been to the West". Commenting on the dullness of Soviet television news programmes, one woman told the author that she always knew when the evening news came on, because all the toilets in her block started flushing, doors began to bang and people began moving about. But the book as a whole is rather like a painting by Frith: accurate, rather than inspiring.

If Mr Binyon is strong on fact, Colin Thubron's *Among the Russians* is equally strong on feeling. He brings a writer's eye to the country (though occasionally *il se regard écrire*), and captures the mood of spiritual desolation well.

The author made an immense trip, on his own - ten thousand miles between the Baltic and the Caucasus - and an enormous range of contacts with minimal harassment from the KGB. Indeed, by an act of bureaucratic insouciance or arbitrariness, they spared him the notebooks on which this work is based.

There are some fine descriptive passages (though Mr Thubron never quite gets over the size of the place), and his sensitive ear catches the curious mixture of ancient and modern English talked by some Russians, which reflects so poignantly their cultural isolation: "It is not allowed to guides to tittle alone with foreigners... there is a game reserve where I have a certain buddy. I do not wish to press my insistences upon you, but you are a sportsman are you not?" The same guide, Misha, personifies the moral disintegration of the regime. He is a flabby, drunken and repellent petty KGB informer, given to boasting about

imaginary conquests of women. In fact he reminds one, in an odd way, of Malenkov, in a different age and a different career.

This is a good, and above all intellectually honest book. If there is a flaw, it lies in a certain strain of sentimentalism, and the implied dissociation of the Russian people from their regime. An acquaintance says "if only I were head of the Politburo and you were President of America, we'd sign eternal peace at once and go mushroom picking together". The author's comment is troubling: "I never again equated the Russian system with the Russian people". After a similar conversation later in the book, he says "in him I heard the Russian people".

Now this will not do. There is a direct link between Rousseau and totalitarianism, and in Russia, sentimentalism and totalitarianism seem to be endemic. The suspect sweetness is there in the wine; it is there in a good deal of the literature; it is there in the poignant appeals to peace and brotherhood of the slogans; and it is there in the occasional tears of Soviet leaders. Let us remember Rousseau's own phrase: "I was, if not virtuous, at least intoxicated with virtue".

But Mr Thubron avoids the worst, and leaves Russia a more contemplative person than when he went there. We should be grateful that he went at all. More people of his imaginative powers, intellect and - yes - sensibility - should go there more often.

From contemplation to action. In the summer of 1982, the familiar features of Sandy Gall could be seen through Soviet binoculars scrambling up the hillsides in central Afghanistan. With him was his friend, Nigel Ryan. They produced parallel books. It is naturally exhilarating, after the arguing, description and worried reflection, to come across some straightforward action.

For a host of reasons it is important that the Russians should not get away with Afghanistan. There are three means to ensure that they do not. The first is to arrange for the freedom fighters to be well armed; the second is to ensure that there is permanent diplomatic pressure on the Russians to withdraw; and the third is that the war should be publicised. The modern sensibility is visual; if something ceases to be seen, it ceases to exist. Sandy Gall explains this in somewhat incongruous language to the splendid guerilla leader, Commander Masud: "We have come to make a major one hour documentary for British independent television... It's a big budget documentary..." Masud agrees, but remarks poignantly that weapons would be welcome too.

The Russians have fewer material problems and no inhibitions. The vicious, anti-personnel mines that they drop from aircraft for children to pick up are heart-shaped (Mr Thubron please note). There seems no obvious end to the war in sight. Nigel Ryan "if the Mujahedin were displaying a lamentable lack of professional competence, the Russians and Afghan Government forces were happily matching it". That dreadful diplomatic phrase "the long haul" springs to mind. Unless, that is, the world keeps the struggle to the forefront of its concerns, and gives it the diplomatic, military and propaganda support it deserves. Messrs Gall and Ryan have done their bit.

If, like me, you believe in giants, you will be a trifle disappointed by most of these books. We are a long way from the magnificent polemics of Nicolas Berdyayev against the Soviet regime; from the brilliant and passionate debates about communism recounted in Raymond Aron's memoirs; or from George Kennan, who a year or two ago made a most acute comment on East/West relations when he warned against our tendency "to see in the Soviet Union only a mirror in which we look for the reflection of our own virtue".

But, as the Russians say, when the fishing is bad even a crayfish is a catch. There is an overwhelming need for a sober, informed and consistent Western policy towards the Soviet Union. Some of these books lay some of the groundwork for a revival of critical interest. But I am not optimistic.



Pallbearers at Stalin's funeral, Kaganovich (left), Molotov (middle) and Malenkov (right): "A brilliant illustration of the ordinariness of evil." From *All Stalin's Men*.

One of the more dismal scenes in English literature comes in Gissing's *Henry Ryecroft* (itself a pretty depressing book), where a labourer on a spree is driven out of a restaurant because he is intimidated by the formalities which go with the food. He ends by wrapping the lot in a newspaper and bolting.

Bevin completely lacked class-consciousness – in the crabbed sense of the term, though he took a natural pride in his humble origins. He once told his Private Secretary's wife that he used to collect washing from her mother's house. Nobody dreamt of disapproving of him, and the idea of patronising a man like Bevin did not arise. Only the Russians, with their old-world, Marxist preconceptions, found him not quite the thing: 'Eden is a gentleman, Bevin is not,' said the thoroughly ungentlemanly Molotov in a successful attempt to provoke him.

He seems to have been quite unflustered by the dignified element of office: the bold pin-striped suit, the morning coat and evening dress, were obviously just the togs of the trade to him. Bevin was uncomplicated as well as uncomplicated, and his instincts were as sound as a Bow bell. He could not find it in himself to dislike the upper classes: 'They may be an abuse, but they are often as like as not intelligent and amusing.' But he couldn't stand the middle classes.

This clarity of definition surrounds the man and his policies, as well as the challenges which faced him, and the West, at the time. Imagine for a moment the opposite. Think what it would have been like to have a post-war British Foreign Secretary who was a well-born, class-conscious, leftish intellectual, complete with inverted sartorial snobbery. Think how anxious he would have been for Left to talk unto Left, to see the best in Stalin, to put his faith in the frail infant of the United Nations and resist the 'return to power politics', while Russia secured herself in Eastern Europe and prepared for the next moves. Think of the effects on Europe, on the United States and on the Soviet Union of this specifically British form of social self-indulgence – and thank God for Bevin, and for Nato.

The expansiveness of the real Bevin is exhilarating, even in print. There is no trace here of foetid introversion. He saw foreigners as he did social classes: some of them were really all right, despite their origins – though he seems to have had the same problem about Jews as he did about the middle class. Inevitably it was said that he had been stifled by the embrace of the Foreign Office. The notion of Bevin being stifled by anyone is rather like that of his being patronised.

It is said that these men do not carry out my policies. I deny that. What the Civil Service likes is a minister who knows his mind and tells the officials what to do. They will then do it. If it is wrong, the minister must take responsibility and not blame the Civil Service.

No peevish scapegoatism here. Exposure to international reality had a strong educative effect on Bevin (it would have been alarming if it had not). But his policies bore the stamp of his personality. There was no sense of a man abandoning his own ideals, or being sucked under by the dictates of expediency. He sought to give a social and economic edge to foreign policy, and his experience in the War Cabinet, and his trade-union background, meant that he was well placed to do so. Above all, he knew that no foreign policy could work without stable economic underpinning. British policy must be an organic expression of the country's interests and potential, and not some wispy intellectual schema or moralistic spasm. He knew our strengths and limits, and translated his experience into a

Capability Bevin

George Walden

Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary 1945-1951

by Alan Bullock.

Heinemann, 896 pp., £30, 7 November 1983, 0 434 09452 8

concrete vision of world affairs. He saw immediately that the best way to fight Communism in the area between Turkey and Afghanistan, for example, was to raise the living standards of the hundred million people who lived there, and he pressed for the economic development of the Empire.

He was also unsentimental about industrial relations at home. He could tell the miners the truth about the importance of production for the independence of the country, as his putative middle-class-intellectual equivalent could never dare to do. His remarks on economics ('if you go on merely borrowing money and living in a fool's paradise you will never get your own economy right'), and allied subjects make him sound like a cross between Cobbett and Mrs Thatcher. The pragmatic nature of his idealism is nicely illustrated in his touching and prophetic concern for the educative effect of travel. Time and again, he harked back to his early connection with the Workers' Travel Association.

Bevin might not like to have been thought of as a barefoot philosopher, but in a way he was. He would have been surprised to learn that he was merely restating Kant's optimism when he said that 'there has never been a war yet which, if the facts had been put calmly before the ordinary folk, might not have been prevented.' But his optimism never got out of step with his realism, notably on the United Nations. Heidegger once remarked that 'nationalism is not overcome by mere internationalism; it is rather expanded and elevated thereby into a system.' Bevin's scepticism about the UN was more down to earth: 'it seems vital to me not to deceive the people of the world by leading them to believe that we are creating a United Nations Organisation which is going to protect them from future wars, in which we share our secrets, while we know, in fact, that nothing of the kind is happening.'

All of which leads us naturally to Bevin and the bomb. His attitude was just what you might have expected – a mixture of healthy moral impulse, tempered by common sense. He seized immediately on the key point: 'War is not caused by the invention of weapons. It is policy which makes war.' His first reaction to a suggestion that the West should give the bomb to the Russians was positive. Today that sounds slightly batty. But it would at least have made *some* sort of sense, in both idealistic and pragmatic terms, to have given the Russians the means of creating a nuclear balance. That is more than can be said for the notion of sacrificing our own bomb today and thereby upsetting a working balance. Within a week, Bevin's shrewdness got the better of him. The Russians, he decided, were likely to receive the offering with more suspicion than gratitude, and see it as a sign of weakness. The paradox of nuclear weapons dawned quickly on the Labour government of the time. Attlee rejected a suggestion that international control of nuclear weapons could be made effective by a threat of collective nuclear retaliation against the culprit: 'What British government would accept an obligation to embark on atomic warfare when this might mean the destruction of London?'

But there is another paradox too. The reason Bevin thought it indispensable for Britain to have atomic weapons had less to do

with deterrence than with his reluctance to leave the Americans in sole control: 'We could not afford to acquiesce in an American monopoly of this new development.'

This book illustrates the remarkable permanence of our foreign policy concerns. On the Middle East, 'Bevin never got over his indignation at the willingness of the President (and Congress) to let the Jewish vote and Jewish contributions to party funds influence their policy on Palestine – ignoring the complexities of the situation.' There was also a lurking fear of a Soviet/United States deal over the heads of Europe, especially with American diplomacy in the hands of Ambassador Byrnes in the early post-war years. And above all, Britain was preoccupied then, as now, with the strains of the defence budget: 'What shall it profit Britain to have even 1½ million men in the forces and supply, and to be spending nearly £1,000 million a year on them, if we come an economic and financial cropper two years hence?' In fact, the Government came a cropper over dollars within two weeks.

Professor Bullock reminds us how slow in coming was the confrontation between East and West. Bevin did nothing to hasten it. The detailed reconstruction of this period which is provided in the book reminds us, too, just how thin is the case of the post-Vietnam revisionists who accuse the West of responsibility for the Cold War. If one thing stands out from Bullock's account, it is the lengths to which the British and Americans went to try to make a go of it with Stalin. Indeed, their efforts were almost culpably persistent and sincere. At the first meeting in London in September 1945 of the Council of Foreign Ministers set up in Potsdam nothing at all had been done to concert a Western position. Another detail speaks volumes: two-thirds of UNRRA supplies after the war went to Eastern and Central Europe – including the Soviet Union and Byelorussia – without discrimination. Ninety-four per cent of the funds came from the UK, the US and Canada, at a time when Britain was introducing bread rationing.

And when the blocs were born, solidarity in the West came gift-wrapped from Moscow. The Russians did everything they could to drive us together. And yet there had been no lack of dialogue. It is awe-inspiring today, when the lines of communication have gone dead, to think just how many hours, days and weeks of talking went on between the Russians and the West. It could be argued that it was to little avail. But then it could equally be argued that the risk of war might have been even greater without the talk. There seems to have been none of the contemporary moral squeamishness about sitting down at the same table with those unappetising men, though enough was known or suspected about Stalin. Molotov was an exceedingly unpleasant customer too, as well as being a harsh negotiator. I wonder how Bevin would have reacted had he known that the hand that shook his own on many occasions, and signed the United Nations Charter at San Francisco for the USSR, was in the habit of adding obscene comments (according to Roy Medvedev) against the names of those condemned to die in Stalin's purges?

Fortunately for us, Bevin seems to have approached the Russians without idealistic urges or evangelical zeal. In his hyper-empirical

way, he was always ready to learn by experience, most of which was pretty bitter. One of the most persuasive passages of this wise book is the author's characterisation of Bevin's beliefs during the Berlin blockade: 'What sustained Bevin's confidence was the conviction, by no means common at the time, that if the Western powers could get through the immediate future without suffering a collapse of nerve, history would prove to be on their side, and not on the Russians'. And this, in turn, derived from his belief that in the USA there was available the basis of power necessary to restore sufficient sense of security to release the European peoples' own talents and energies.'

The dual debt to both Bevin and the Americans is still there today. We have inherited a landscape moulded in good part by the energetic foresight of Capability Bevin. We tend to take the exertions of former generations for granted, as we do our public parks or Georgian houses. Living on past capital is a national disease, as is the luxury of self-criticism. It is easy to find fault with what we have inherited, and the expense of the upkeep is appalling. But few can think of anything better.

The author tackles head-on the major criticism of Bevin and his generation. Why did they fail to foresee the necessity of Europe? Many of us have felt a retrospective sense of lost opportunities. But Professor Bullock induces, on this subject, a healthier sobriety. It was easy for Churchill to exercise in opposition his visionary talents. Indeed, it was his role. But the inspired rhetoric should be measured against his own conservatism when he was back in power. It is easy to accuse Bevin of plodding caution and lack of vision. But if his eyes had been straining too far beyond the immediate future, he might have stumbled over the more insistent practical priorities of defence – the Brussels Pact and Nato – without which there would have been no security, and ultimately no Europe. It is like accusing a gardener of preparing the soil, but failing to plant the roses. Better rich soil than dead roses.

Britain played an active role in the European Payments Union and OEEC. But, as Professor Bullock points out, the fact that Europe became synonymous with instant federalism and the end of sovereignty was a serious drawback. The Coal and Steel Community sounds now like a natural British stepping stone to Europe. But it didn't look like that then, for good reasons. 'The question was whether the British were ready to set themselves as an immediate aim the pooling of their coal and steel production and the institution of a new high authority with binding decision-making powers.' It is difficult to dissent from the realpolitik verdict of Morrison: 'It's no good, we can't do it, the Durham miners won't wear it.' Professor Bullock might indeed have made more of the spectacle offered to Britain at the time by France and Germany. We would not have been throwing in our lot with mature democracies, as we did later, and it was asking too much of us – given, in particular, the inheritance of Empire – to take the lead.

In foreign affairs we need less ideology and pure mathematics, and more rumbustious humanity: more Falstaff and less Faust. In international relations, as in art, we are living through a period of mannered decadence. This is as true of the tired and expensive imitators of Dada as of the fancier nuclear theorists. We cannot afford it to be true of today's Nato or of the Atlantic partnership. The groundwork of our security was laid by intelligent, workmanlike hands. Look back at the quality of the men in question – not only

Bevin himself, but Acheson, Kennan and Marshall.

We have enjoyed this security for a third of a century: Nato and Berlin are still here, and so are we. The danger now is of running

to fat, and to excitable extremes. The importation of UHT milk is, we are told, the end of Europe. The slightest tremor of dissent in the Atlantic Alliance is the end of Nato. We permit ourselves delicious frissons of nuclear

neurosis. A bit of bullish Bevin diplomacy might prevent our overwrought imagination getting the better of common sense. Reading about him is an energising experience. After the unrelenting erosion of national self-

confidence, and all those revelations in the Sunday papers, it is good to be reminded by the present book that while Blunt was working for his strong-man, Stalin, Bevin was working for Britain. □