

New notes from underground

WILL THE SOVIET UNION SURVIVE UNTIL 1984? By Andrei Amalrik. Preface by Henry Kamm. Commentary by Sidney Monas. Harper & Row. 93 pp. \$4.95.

By F. D. Reeve

Sandwiched between a friendly foreword and a pretentious afterword are fifty-two pages of intense speculation about the consequences of current political non-activity in the Soviet Union. Andrei Amalrik supposes that Russia and China will be at full-scale guerrilla war by 1980 and that by 1985 the Russian Empire will have at last collapsed, either by violent revolution or by peaceful federation — or there may be a third possibility, “namely, that none of these things may happen.”

“My essay is based not on scholarly research but only on observation and reflection,” Amalrik states candidly. Whoever has spent some time in Russia during the Sixties or who has closely read *Message from Moscow* by “An Observer” will be pleased by the aptness of Amalrik’s eye and intelligence. His basic assumption is that Russia, a land full of ignorant, selfish people whose sole ideal is some vague notion of “justice,” is inefficiently operated by a militaristic, stagnant regime which has no purposeful plan in mind and a strong desire to change nothing (including its own position). So-called liberalization or humanization, like miniskirts and jazz, are no more than false fronts for a society in which the village — especially “the ‘village’ of the subconscious” — dominates the city and the prevailing ambition, fed by “hatred of everything that is outstanding,” is that “nobody should live better than I do.” The middle class, which wants comforts and needs more political and economic freedom to develop the country, is frustrated by compromises with the government. As a result, relative well-being masks absolute

F. D. Reeve’s most recent novel is *Just Over the Border*.

stagnation. Propaganda invents enemies against whose imagined violence the state’s security must be always vigilant. Searches, trials, excoriation keep every man scared to death.

Amalrik does not discuss the fear that pervades all Russian life. He marshals little sociological data and no economic material. In that sense, his book is impressionistic, but the impressions are those of an alert, prudent mind. His sense of what will happen is not fashionably apocalyptic. Having garnered memories from history, lo! and behold, he says, here comes the wheel round again: “a cast-ridden and immobile society, a rigid governmental system which openly clashes with the need for economic development, general bureaucratization . . . and national animosities” — these were the conditions that, exacerbated by war, led to revolution in

1905-07 and in 1917. Now, a war with China will do it again, Amalrik says, speaking not as Jeremiah or Marshall McLuhan but as a cultural descendant of the Tsarist minister of the Interior of 1914 or of the President of the Duma in 1916, both of whom saw that war would mean agricultural and industrial collapse, ruinous inflation, governmental loss of control, and finally violent overthrow of the government.

Something of an apocalyptic tone lies in his sense of the end of the Russian Empire. The revolution of 1917 having failed, he looks back over Russian history as one vast stretch of imperialist expansion. The Revolution merely replaced an effete government, prolonging the life of the empire sixty years. Now, the whole thing must be rebuilt. War is inevitable; moreover, because internal change is impossible without it, war is desirable. On the other hand, it will be long and costly. “The only real hope for a better future” lies in a rapprochement between the United States and China.

The U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., according to Amalrik, are bound together only by respect for each other’s power. Until and unless the Soviet Union is democratized, he says, there is no point in pressing for a deeper relationship. Pessimistic? Very. Although he idealizes America, he well knows American political stupidity: “By pursuing a policy of encouraging Communism where the people do not want it and opposing it where they do want it, the United States has not only contributed to the division of Europe but also damaged its relations with China. . . . If . . . [it] had supported Mao Tse-tung during the Civil War, this would have averted the rapprochement between China and the Soviet Union, avoided the Korean War and helped considerably in softening the Communist regime in China.” This, which might well have been written not by a young Soviet Russian historian kicked out of college for political deviation but by an intelligent American or European with the same vigor and integrity, says much about the reason and reality of international politics.

But who will read this tart little book? Will you? Or will the review do? You probably feel you know how tough life in Russia is, but do you realize how conservative America, too, is becoming, how internally stagnant, how ruinously inflationary, how demoralized by war and brutality, how sundered by national animosities? The two most powerful countries on earth are trying to stop change. It’s terrifying.