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POLITICAL changes in the Soviet Union are always dramatic and often baffling. They are dramatic because they come suddenly, and seem to be the result of a convulsion inside the Communist hierarchy; and they are baffling because the facts are hidden behind stage-managed occasions. It was not surprising, therefore, that comment on Malenkov's resignation should have had a prevailing uneasiness. Relations between East and West are so delicately balanced that a shift of power inside Russia is at once seen as a possible threat to world security. Rightly or wrongly, Malenkov had been regarded as a "moderate." He was known to have advocated higher living standards for the Russian people, and experts believed that production had been slanted towards consumer goods at the expense of heavy industry. The resignation in January of the Minister of Trade, Mikoyan, indicated a change of policy. This seemed to be confirmed when Malenkov ceased to be Prime Minister.

The problem for Western observers is to discover how far these changes can be related to foreign policy and to an internal struggle for power. It is perhaps too easy to see the threat of "a tougher line" towards the West whenever new rumblings are heard from the Kremlin. If agricultural production is lagging, and heavy industry is temporarily weakened, the Russians will need time to strengthen their economy. A more aggressive foreign policy can be used to divert attention from internal difficulties; but it is not likely to be carried too far, especially while the Communist Party is uncertain of its leadership. The gap left by Stalin has not yet been filled; and although it is possible that power could be shared by a triumvirate, or even by a larger group, a necessary condition would be a structural change in the system of government. While Russia remains a

monolithic state, it seems inevitable that a single figure must reach the top.

The candidate most favoured at present by Western observers is Khrushchev. As First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, he has the tactical advantage exploited by Stalin, who, in the same job, was able to place his supporters in key positions. Yet Khrushchev is not Stalin, and it is by no means certain that he could use the methods of his predecessor with equal success. The times are very different. Russia is not now emerging from a revolution: she is a world Power, governed by a party with discipline and experience, and in great need of stability if she is to keep her hold on the satellite countries. Internal dissension could weaken the nation's defences at a critical time. There are hints, including the appointment of Marshal Bulganin as Prime Minister, that the army hopes to strengthen its influence on Soviet leadership.

Beria's dismissal and execution showed that a conflict had followed Stalin's death; but it is too soon to be sure that a new dictator, if one appears, will have the absolute power of Stalin. One of the most interesting features of the new situation is the treatment of Malenkov and Mikoyan. Although they declared themselves to be "guilty" of administrative failures, in the usual Russian manner, they have not disappeared from the hierarchy; and Malenkov, as Minister in Charge of Power Stations, will remain influential. It is possible that their eclipse is to be gradual. If they are left alone, it could mean that Khrushchev is uncertain of his strength, or that the military leaders are holding the balance of power. Khrushchev cannot afford to wait long if his purpose is to reach the dictatorship; and if he moves prematurely there will be no second chance. We must wait and see.

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