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Cracks in the Facade

THE dismissal of Lavrenti Beria, Soviet Minister of the Interior, has been interpreted as a move in a struggle for the dictatorship. A conflict of this sort was predicted after the death of Stalin; but it seems to have come more quickly than was expected, and to have been—in the words of an official British spokesman—largely “a response by the Soviet leaders to internal stresses and discontents which could no longer be ignored.” There is evidence that Russia's difficulties are not imaginary. The milder foreign policy could have meant merely that stability was needed while the nation adjusted itself to a new regime. Much more significant was the Soviet reaction to unrest in satellite and occupied countries. The East German riots were followed by promises and concessions. True, the strikes were crushed with severity; but the Russians, or their German spokesmen, confessed errors of policy with surprising frankness. Moreover, the concessions were not confined to Germany. The Council of Ministers in Rumania promised better food supplies; and in Hungary, after a new Government had been formed, the Prime Minister declared that the country would have “a milder type of Communism.”

News from further east, where disturbances were reported, may have been less reliable; but its credibility was supported by what was seen to happen in East Berlin. The inference most widely drawn was that Russian influence in central and south-eastern Europe was weakening. This view has been strengthened by Beria's dismissal. Even if Malenkov is concerned mainly with the destruction of a rival, it seems obvious that he has been able to use Beria as the scapegoat for failures and weaknesses in Russia. The fall of a powerful leader must have its suitable background, and the Russian people may be asked to see it as the result of economic

stresses with which they are already familiar. If there is weakness at the centre, the entire region under Soviet control or influence must be affected. Russia is a vast and powerful country, but the new empire could not be held together without military effort and expenditure that might weaken the economy at home. A loose confederation of Communist States, which could have replaced the present system, is possible only while the peoples in them can be made to accept authoritarian rule. Much can be done by a one-party regime, backed by secret police; but in countries which—like Czechoslovakia—have known better times, repression and low living standards can make the people desperate. In East Germany the forced separation from the West is an additional cause of unrest. Nationalism by itself might not be enough, but economic hardship makes it explosive.

We may be tempted to see only what we want to see in this new situation. It seems certain, however, that Moscow's hold upon the Iron Curtain countries is being sharply tested. For years we have been under the shadow of Soviet imperialism. In spite of wartime losses, Russia seemed to be strong at home; her frontiers had been extended, and beyond them were satellite countries, apparently held irrevocably in the Russian sphere of influence. Yet five years ago the defection of Yugoslavia showed that Communism was not necessarily a source of unity. Even in China, where Communism appears to be in full flood, loyalty to Moscow is perhaps more a matter of strategy than of political conviction. And now, suddenly, we have seen cracks appear in the European facade. There may be no early or far-reaching changes. But enough has happened to show that changes are possible, especially in foreign affairs, while Russia contends simultaneously with an internal crisis and with unrest in Communist Europe.

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