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COMPARATIVE OBJECTIVITY AND THE THIRD EDITION OF THE LARGE SOVIET ENCYCLOPEDIA

Summary: The first volume of the new (3rd) edition of the BSE has recently been received in the West. Although still hampered by dogma, by comparison to its predecessor many of the entries have included progressive changes directed toward a more factual presentation of events.

As the Soviet Union's basic reference work, the Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia [Large Soviet Encyclopedia] is in the process of being published in a third edition, the final volumes of which are to be completed in 1974. In contrast to its predecessor, which was published in 51 volumes from 1950-1958, the new edition will be limited to 30 volumes for the sake of greater availability and convenience, yet will contain more than the approximately 100,000 entries of the old edition. This will be accomplished by reducing the size of long articles and using a smaller type, the latter of which, however, will make the text more difficult to read. Judging from the first volume (1) which has recently become available in the West, the contextual differences are of greater importance and make a

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- (1) Although the initial volumes were scheduled to appear last year, the first volume was published in 1970. The delay is probably due to the death of the original chief editor, V.A. Vvedenskii, who was also the chief editor of the last 44 volumes of the second edition. His successor is A.M. Prokhorov, a physicist and winner of the Nobel Prize in 1964.

significant change in the view of both internal and external affairs. A report by TASS six years ago gave encouraging signs that the new edition would be less propagandistic and more concerned with objective and factual information: the new edition

will lay emphasis on contemporary developments and history will be included only to the extent necessary for an understanding of new phenomena and events.... The team of authors will eliminate in the new edition the sharply critical tone of a number of articles and will report only facts which give a realistic idea of peoples and events. (2)

Although progressive steps have been taken in many of the entries to free the subject matter from Marxist-Leninist dogma, the contents are still heavily biased and reflect the basic view that an encyclopedia should be a forum for CPSU propaganda. While a Western encyclopedia, such as the Britannica, has as its object a compilation of "periodic reports on the state of man's knowledge," the editors of the new BSE are of the opinion that

the encyclopedia's articles must provide a reasoned scientific criticism of the ideological conceptions of the current defenders of the bourgeois system and the preachers of anti-communism, of right and "left" revisionism, [and] of contemporary bourgeois teachings in the spheres of philosophy, sociology, history, [and] esthetics.

Nevertheless, the positive changes are considerable.

Among the striking features of the first volume of the previous edition were the innumerable references to Stalin and his genius including three full color pictures of the man. The new first volume is equally striking by his absence. His pictures have been removed and his name mentioned rarely, and then only as a factual point concerning his participation in a given event. One article entitled "autonomization" even criticizes his early ideas concerning the nationalities question as being at variance with those of Lenin.

(2) TASS, 22 April 1966.

Equally important is the treatment of those political figures purged by Stalin but rehabilitated after his death. (3) I.A. Akulov, for example, who was first deputy chairman of the OGPU and a Secretary of the USSR Central Executive Committee in the early 1930s and in 1939 a victim of Stalin's purge, is not mentioned in the second edition but referred to in the new first volume with the dates by year of his various posts although there is no explanation of how he died. The same is true of Ya. I. Alksnis (Astrov), in 1937 a deputy of the People's Commissariat of Defence. In his case, however, the exact date of his death is given [29.7.1938] although not the circumstances under which he died.

The change in treatment of political figures active during Lenin's time and opposed to his views depends on their importance in the Russian revolutionary period. Friedrich Adler, an Austrian socialist whose views were more moderate than Lenin's but who was not an active participant in the political schisms in the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party, is described in the second edition as "a bitter enemy of the revolutionary workers movement, [and] an agent of USA imperialism" whose "reactionary philosophical outlook was utterly destroyed by Lenin's 'Materialism and Empirio-criticism'" whereas the new edition describes him merely as "one of the leaders of Austrian Social-Democracy" and that his views were "criticized by V.I. Lenin in his work 'Materialism and Empirio-criticism.'" In the case of Pavel B. Axelrod, however, the editors are less revisionist. As one of Lenin's collaborators-turned-Menshevik, the new edition saw fit to remove only the adjective "ardent" before the words "enemy of Leninism...[and] ...Soviet rule."

Another distinct change is in the treatment of abstract art. Whereas the second edition maintains that it is "a term introduced by American artistry" and is "one of the expressions of the reactionary ideology of the imperialistic bourgeoisie -- primarily American -- and is directed against the realistic and democratic tradition in art," its successor, although still disapprovingly, considers that it originated in Germany with the paintings of [the Russian] V.V. Kandinsky and Paul Klee and gives four examples of abstract art, the biggest and the only one in color, that by Kandinsky entitled "Vostok [The East]."

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- (3) Since the first volume only deals with the letters "A" through "Angob," the number of such persons is naturally limited.

But if a Russian is credited with being one of the founders of abstract art, which in fact he was, the contention that a Russian, A.F. Mozhaisky, was responsible for "the first flight in the world" made by an aircraft of his own creation has been dropped. The new edition acknowledges the Wright brothers as making the first successful flight and admits that Mozhaisky's plane crashed on take-off.

Religion is also given better treatment. The article on the Adventists, for example, has been tripled in size and includes statistical information on their numbers in the USSR, (4) something of a rarity in Soviet literature in general and not mentioned at all in the second edition.

A commendable feature of this more scientific approach is the use of bibliographies at the end of many articles, despite the fact that the references are sometimes outdated. Another new and interesting aspect is the fact that most of the articles are signed by their author(s) which indicates that care has been taken to exercise moderation so as not to be in an intractable position when official policy changes and a re-writing of history required as has happened so often in the past.

As a reflection of present Soviet attempts to gain influence in the developing countries, the editors promise to give more extensive coverage to Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the first volume, the section concerning Algeria has been expanded by about 60% with more and better maps than in the second edition and the section on Asia has also been increased. The bias of Soviet scholarship, unfortunately, is typified by the inclusion of new articles such as "American (USA) Aggression in Vietnam" and "Anglo-Franco-Israeli Aggression Against Egypt (1956)."

Such faults notwithstanding, the new edition, judging by its first volume, is a considerable improvement over its predecessor although it has a long way to go before it attains the level of a truly objective and scholarly work.

G.v.D.

(4) It is claimed that there are 21,000 Adventists in the USSR excluding Adventists-Reformists and Seventh Day Adventists who do not recognize the official state-influenced central organization -- the ASD. The actual numbers of Adventists is therefore greater.