

NOMENKLATURA

Russia's capitalists

What is the nature of the ruling class in Russia? Who are they and what is the basis of their power and wealth? Obviously, the answers to these questions cannot be found by simply comparing the Russian rulers with the capitalist class in the west. For example, no one in Russia has legal title to any of the factories, mines, mills, transport and communications systems, and to underline this there is an absence of shareholding and stock exchanges. Nevertheless, there is a social class there whose members live privileged lives in comparison with the vast majority of Russian people. Indeed, the higher ranks of this class enjoy luxurious lifestyles and have an army of servants to look after their every comfort.

How can all this be in a supposedly "socialist" society and how does this privileged class get its wealth if not from legal ownership? These questions, and many more, are dealt with by a dissident Russian scholar, Michael Voslensky, in his book *Nomenklatura - Anatomy of the Soviet Ruling Class*, published by The Bodley Head (£12.95\). This book was first published in German but the English edition has been brought right up to date to include the periods in office of both Andropov and Chernenko.

Nomenklatura is a Latin word meaning an index of names. A more meaningful definition is contained in *Structures of the Party*, a manual of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

The Nomenklatura is a list of the highest positions; the candidates for these positions are examined by the various party committees, recommended and confirmed. These Nomenklatura party committee members can be relieved of their positions only by authorisation of their committees. Persons elevated to the Nomenklatura are those in key positions (p 2).

Anyone admitted to this magic circle is issued with a document confirming his or her exalted status and membership is virtually guaranteed for life.

Voslensky, who now lives in the west, was himself an important figure in Russia and writes with insight about his subject. He identifies the *Nomenklatura* as the secretaries and heads of departments and divisions of the Communist Party, Komsomol (communist youth) and trade unions; the central committees of those organisations at both national level and in the various republics; the heads of state administration and their deputies at

national and republic levels plus a host of representatives of the state security services, the armed forces, the KGB, the diplomatic services, education, science, industry and agriculture. According to Voslensky the *Nomenklatura* totals about 750,000 and together with their families at around 3 million, or 1½ per cent of the population. So it is only those who have reached a certain rung on the Communist Party ladder who can become members, and even the international fame and personal wealth of such as writers, artists and film stars do not gain them admission.

Even if we could not put our finger on the exact point in the Communist set-up where someone becomes a member of the *Nomenklatura*, this need not concern us any more than what is the exact amount of capital someone in Britain must have invested before becoming a member of the capitalist class - is it £100,000 or £1 million? The undeniable fact is that despite any grey areas there is a capitalist class in this country which, because of its legal ownership, monopolises the means of production and distribution. Similarly there is a class in Russia, the *Nomenklatura*, which, because of its monopoly of political power, does exactly the same there.

Voslensky argues that the *Nomenklatura* are in fact the collective owning class in Russia. He points out that ownership does not have to be by individuals with legal title and cites the nationalised industries in the west where the state undertakes their management on behalf of the national capitalist class. If those industries show a profit then the capitalists will get their "dividend" in the form of tax cuts or of not having to pay tax increases to finance them. At the very least they will get industries which, even if not profitable, they can use to service the enterprises they themselves own. The capitalists in this case own not as individuals but collectively, as a class. And collective ownership exists not only in nationalised industries. The Roman Catholic Church owns vast wealth in property, investments, art treasures, etc, but no individuals, not even the Pope, have legal title to any of it. This wealth is owned collectively by the church hierarchy who use it to protect and extend their power and influence and, incidentally, to live very well but none of them could, for instance, sell St. Peter's. Any such decision would have to be taken collectively because that is the basis of their ownership.

It is the same with the *Nomenklatura*. They own as a class and the state manages the production of wealth on their behalf. Their pay-out comes in the form of inflated salaries, the free use of luxury apartments, Black Sea villas, country houses (dachas), more or less free food, free use of cars and many other perks. Also, many of them are allotted more than one official post and receive a separate salary for each. This may not compare with the huge incomes of some western capitalists but, what the *Nomenklatura* get is

a fortune to the average Russian.

Of course the top ranking members of this class do have incomes on the scale of western capitalists. How else can we view the disclosure that a district committee first secretary paid 192,000 roubles (about 160 years' pay for the average Russian worker) into his wife's bank account? Moreover, they have an open account at the state bank which allows them to draw out any money they require. Even western capitalists cannot do that. Those at the very top have no need to touch their salaries as everyone at this level simply lives at the state's expense. Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, recalled how her father never touched his wages: "The drawers of his desk . . . were full of these sealed envelopes" (p 231). And yet the *Nomenklatura*, denies its own existence as a class of exploiters and try to pass themselves off as workers

This personal wealth is only a fraction of the surplus value which the *Nomenklatura* robs from the Russian workers. The entire state apparatus which keeps them in power is financed from this source. The armed forces the arms industry and the spy and espionage systems which are used to protect their interests from the threat of their international rivals, the massive police force, prisons, labour camps, courts, militia, phony trade unions, all of which are employed in keeping the workers in line, are paid from the proceeds of this robbery.

One significant similarity the *Nomenklatura* has with the capitalist class in the west is that it endeavours to hand on its privileges to its children. Although it is true that membership is not hereditary in any legal sense, in a practical sense it may as well be. Voslensky gives several examples of how the children of the *Nomenklatura* are as good as guaranteed important, well paid positions irrespective of their personal abilities and concludes that although entry to the *Nomenklatura* can be obtained by ordinary careerists, ". . . the chance of entering it by that route are becoming more and more restricted while the royal road of birth is more and more frequently used" (P 102).

The most important difference between the Russian rulers and the western capitalists is explained by Voslensky.

What matters to the *Nomenklatura* is not property but power. The bourgeoisie is a class of power owners and is the ruling class as a consequence of that. With the *Nomenklatura* it is the other way around; it is the ruling class and that makes it the property owning class. Capitalists magnates share their wealth with no one, but gladly share power with professional politicians. *Nomenklaturists* take care not to share the slightest degree of power with anyone. The head of a department in the Central committee apparatus never objects to an

academician's or a writer's having more money or worldly goods than he, but he will never allow either to disobey his orders. (p 72)

So, in the west it is money which is paramount. In Russia what counts is power of which privilege is the proof. This explains why the *Nomenklatura* apparently have no wish to actually own a dacha. What is more prized is having a state-owned dacha made available to them. That is a sign that they have really arrived, and to actually own a dacha is considered to be bad form.

On occasion Voslensky reveals a sound grasp of the theories of Karl Marx. For example, he approvingly quotes an old Bolshevik ruefully explaining to him, as a schoolboy, why Russia was not ripe for the socialist revolution.

You and your friends, Misha, would like to be airmen or arctic explorers, but with the best will in the world it is impossible because you are still children, and you can no more skip your age than I, unfortunately, can become a schoolboy again. It is not we who determine the various stages of our life, it is those various stages that determine us. And that is true not only of individual human beings, it also applies to human beings in general, to human society. Could Russia, or any other country at the same stage of social development, by a mere act of will take a single leap that would put it ahead of the most advanced countries? Marx said it could not and it was obvious (p 15).

He denounces Leninism as not Marxist at all but merely". . - a strategy and tactics for the seizure of power decked out in Marxist slogans" (p 289) and goes on to pour scorn on the idea that the *Nomenklatura* are Marxists — "Marx would have turned away in disgust from the system they have established" (p 290).

Voslensky's own conception of socialist communist would seem to be the same as our own, for he says

I believe the idea of a classless communist society as a free association of producers of material and intellectual goods to be a fine one (p 347).

Against this he shows some weakness on Marx's theory of surplus value, confusing surplus labour—which is present in any society – with surplus value, which is produced under the specific conditions of capitalism's commodity production. He also shows a certain naivety in stating that government ministers in the west "live on their pay, just like other people", and that their wives do the cooking and housework themselves (p 178)!

We can easily forgive Voslensky's slips. By throwing more light on Russia's rulers and by highlighting the class divided nature of Russian society together with its repressive state, his valuable book is surely one more nail in the coffin of the idea that socialism or communism exists in that tortured land.

Vic Vanni