

EXCURSUS I

Peter L. Berger on

The Genghis Khan Model of Imperialism

When speaking about imperialism, and regardless of their ideological outlook, most people have in mind a phenomenon that resembles the global expansion of Western nations in the two centuries preceding the great historical watershed of World War I. This is the case with the Leninist theory, which continues to dominate the thinking about imperialism of virtually everyone on the ideological Left. (Lenin's seminal essay on imperialism was published in 1917—at the latest possible moment, one might say.) But it is also the case with most of those who have proposed alternative theories (Joseph Schumpeter is a significant case in point). What this means is that the notion of imperialism refers to a very particular phenomenon, characterized by a very particular fusion of economic, political, and military factors. More specifically, it refers to the expansion of nation-states with highly developed economies and with the political will to translate economic strength into military power. Undoubtedly this notion is empirically adequate in many instances, perhaps even in some parts of the world today. It is quite inadequate for an understanding of most of what goes on today in the international system.

With respect to the Western nations, the most important fact about their imperialist potential is a precipitous decline in the political will to translate economic into military muscle. This decline first affected the old European colonial nations in the wake of World War II and was at least one major cause of the rapid dissolution of their overseas empires. The same decline of political will (perhaps for somewhat different reasons) has affected the United States since its defeat in Indochina. There are other even more curious constellations. Thus there are states with no military power at all managing to bargain economic into political advantage of impressive scope. Thus Saudi Arabia has become a major force in the Middle East. Recalling the classical feat of another Arab who boiled forty thieves in oil, one might call this the Ali Baba model of imperialism.

But the most important case of imperialism today, that of the Soviet Union, is characterized by yet another constellation. Here is a state with a very weak economic structure (in parts, some analysts maintain, even an underdeveloped one), which nevertheless is building an awesome military machine and appears to have an unbroken political will to expand its power into new areas of the world. This is hardly a novel constellation in history. Indeed, it reasserted itself again and again, over a period of millennia, as successive waves of "barbarians" descended on the rich but defenseless lands on

their borders. This pattern could aptly be called the Genghis Khan model of imperialism.

The economic weaknesses of the Soviet Union are well known. The Soviet empire in Eastern Europe demonstrates that, at least to date, these economic weaknesses have not stopped the USSR from effective political and military domination. It is important to keep in mind that several of the East European nations (notably Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic) are considerably more advanced than the Soviet Union by most economic indicators. Equally well known by now is the buildup of Soviet military power; there is widespread agreement on the facts of this buildup, even if there is controversy about its significance. Nor is there much dispute about Soviet efforts to expand its power into new areas, at the moment especially in Africa, although once more there is disagreement about the ultimate intentions of this expansion. Yet there is no agreement on the most important question: *How viable is this form of imperialism under modern conditions?*

The answer to the question finally hinges on a dispute between Sovietologists. There are those who believe that, whatever its economic and social problems, the Soviet Union will continue to be able to control them so as not to interfere with its external adventures. Indeed, history suggests that such adventures might be one way by which despotic regimes like that of the Soviet Union manage to contain their internal problems. In this view the Genghis Khan model of imperialism is viable today, as it has been viable in the past. If that is true, the military buildup of the Soviet Union and its penetration into Third World countries is very ominous indeed, demanding a strong political and military regaining of will if the West is to survive. This understanding of the situation prevails in groups such as, for example, the Committee on the Present Danger.

Another view holds that the socio-economic crisis of the Soviet Union is systemic to the point where its political and military capacities are inevitably affected. In this view the Soviet Union, much more than the West, is a "helpless giant"; its political grandiloquence and its military posturing, consequently, should be taken less seriously. If so, the Genghis Khan model is finally not viable under the conditions of modern technological society.

The latter view has been argued persuasively by a number of Soviet dissidents, notably Andrei Amalrik. The position has been stated recently and with much verve by a young French political scientist, Emmanuel Todd, in a book entitled *The Final Fall: Essay on the Decomposition of the Soviet Sphere* (*La chute finale: Essai sur la décomposition de la sphère soviétique*, Paris, 1976). Todd enumerates the familiar weaknesses of the Soviet system—the endemic inability of the system to operate an efficient economy, the pervasive cynicism and opportunism of the ruling élite, the irresistible appeal of Western ideas and life-styles in the technocratic

strata, the mounting centrifugal pressures of the non-Russian nationalities (about to become the majority of the Soviet population), and the restiveness of the captive nations of Eastern Europe (whose historic mission, Todd believes, is to hasten the disintegration of Soviet power). In view of all this, so runs the argument, it is illogical to assume that the system can sustain for long the kind of imperialistic exercises in which the Soviets are now engaged in Africa. The military, like every other Soviet institution, is permeated with inefficiency and corruption; even the repressive organs of the system are in a process of rot.

It is a little early to tell what the foreign policy of the Carter Administration will turn out to be, but there is some reason to think it is tending toward something like the Todd view of Soviet power. If that view is correct, then some recent actions of the United States constitute an important regaining of the initiative in the face of an adversary whom past administrations may have overestimated. Then, quite apart from moral considerations, the recent emphasis on human rights is good international politics—the United States going on the ideological offensive instead of maintaining a defensive position. Then it is wise to remain relaxed about Eurocommunism—the Eurocommunists, far from being a Trojan horse for Soviet expansion into Western Europe, may be yet another force subverting the Soviet empire. Then it also makes sense to give the Soviets a good deal of rope in Africa and in other parts of the Third World—they will soon outreach themselves, and the putative victims of their imperialist ambitions will soon find that only the West is in a position to be useful economically to them. A foreign policy that may look soft at first glance may therefore be very realistic, even Machiavellian.

The further question—whether, given the “greened” climate of opinion in this country, domestic politics will impose a soft policy on any administration—need not be pursued here. But there certainly is no reason to reproach the optimistic view of Soviet power with lack of sophistication; it may even turn out to be *more* sophisticated than the alternative view. At present, nobody knows—not the Sovietologists, not the Administration (which, one assumes, has the same intelligence sources that were available to its predecessor), perhaps not even the Kremlin. This, however, is precisely the most important point: *Nobody knows*. There are two Sovietological hypotheses. American foreign policy may favor one over the other. If the Carter Administration opts for the hypothesis favored by Amalrik, Todd, and others, the option is defensible. What would *not* be defensible would be the absence of alternative plans if the hypothesis turns out to have been erroneous. Economic pressures, ideological offensives, and deft diplomacy would then, once again, have to take second place to other means—most important, to the old means of credible military power. It is unwise to gamble everything on the hypothesis that Genghis Khan will run out of horses.

EXCURSUS II

Elliott Wright on

Muzorewa's Last Hope for Rhodesia

The breakdown of the Geneva talks late last year dampened hopes for any negotiated settlement between Rhodesia's ruling white minority and black nationalists in the recalcitrant British colony. True, Her Majesty's Government and the United States remain committed to peacefully achieved majority control. In April Foreign Secretary David Owen persuaded Ian Smith to agree once more to a constitutional conference. But many Africa-watchers, including much of the U.S. press, dismiss the likelihood of orderly transition in Salisbury. The prevailing scenario projects an expanding Viet Cong-style guerrilla struggle against Smith's superior military machine, the now rather small Patriotic Front of Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe sooner or later whipping the whites with Soviet guns, the blessing of Kenneth Kaunda, and, perhaps, some Cuban troops

Bishop Abel T. Muzorewa, head of the African National Council of Zimbabwe (ANC-Z), is the only major African figure in the Rhodesian drama still clinging to the always fragile dream of black liberation by negotiation. The United Methodist cleric is a politically fascinating amalgam of idealism and realism. He abhors the bloodshed and destruction of property already under way in his people's battle for independence, yet concedes violence will, and must, continue in the absence of other alternatives. He cannot, however, rest easy with a military solution as long as nonviolence has a breath of a chance. And he believes a “very last chance” to attain nationalist goals without carnage is possible—possible though fading fast.

Muzorewa's last hope is a peace plan revising the standard diplomatic design for the transfer of power. His plan—actually a program approved by ANC-Z in March—entails no preliminary agreement among the contentious Zimbabwean liberation groups, and rejects a constitutional conference as automatic first step in the shift to majority rule. The bishop once accepted British logic that a constitutional framework, approved by all parties involved, is prerequisite to a new order. No more. Muzorewa is too skeptical of Smith to swap theories with him. So in April, while Owen traversed Africa on behalf of initial constitutional talks, Muzorewa visited London and New York to enlist support for a scheme culminating in a constitution.

The ANC-Z five-point plan pivots on a national referendum to elect a leader to whom Smith would hand over power. Point One—Smith's categorical and unequivocal surrender of authority—must be taken as both the black goal and the condition the white-dominated Rhodesian Front must accept at the outset. Surrender of power requires a structure,