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Book Reviews

Ivan Abroad, Purse in Hand

THE UGLY RUSSIAN. By Victor Lasky. 313 pp. New York: Trident Press. \$4.95.

By AMITAI ETZIONI

THE Soviet foreign aid program is about as ineffective as ours and beset with many similar difficulties. Thirty-eight out of sixty-one Soviet Ambassadors are reported not to know the language of the country to which they are accredited. Many of the twenty-odd countries that received the bulk of Soviet aid over the last decade are as sorely in need of aid now. The political pay-offs of granting aid are few and remote: the main recipients of Soviet aid, with the exception of Cuba, remain non-aligned in their foreign policy, and preserve a non-Communist social and political structure.

In Guinea the Soviet Union built a large jet airport, but when the Cuban missile crisis came, they were refused permission to use it themselves. Nasser jailed the leaders of the Egyptian Communist party while Egypt was receiving a large and growing amount of Soviet aid. As a rule, the recipients of aid are not even grateful; they gripe about the quality and the quantity, depriving Russia of most of the hoped-for propaganda gains. No wonder the Soviet Union, like the United States, has recently reduced its aid program. (An increasing proportion of the aid still given is now channeled to countries in which the Soviets compete with Communist China for local influence, e.g., Zanzibar.)

The fact that the Soviet program faces many of the same dilemmas as ours puts the problems of aid-giving in a much sounder intellectual perspective than it was in earlier

days, when our own program was lambasted as if its deficiencies arose largely (and uniquely) out of the incompetence of our foreign service or deficiencies of our national character. If our Ambassador does not speak Swahili, Vietnamese, or Urdu this might be interpreted as American arrogance. But if the Soviet Ambassadors (and the German, British, and Chinese) do not speak these languages either, then this might remind us of the practice of all foreign services — of reassigning their top personnel frequently. This is done, in part, to prevent them from "going native," from adopting too much of the local viewpoint and representing it to their home capitals, rather than representing the viewpoint of their home countries to the nations in which they are stationed.

IF we build a bread bakery in countries that eat no bread, or a highway across a mountain peak that draws no traffic, then conservative critics seize upon such incidents and denounce the whole program. If the Soviets send snowplows to Guinea and the Poles improve fishing techniques there but forget to build a smokehouse, then they might seem incompetent. Put together, these incidents suggest that the talent for helping a faraway, vastly different country is not highly developed; and that when one agency, such as A.I.D., serves scores of countries, as different as they come, dealing with hun-

dreds of projects, some slip-ups are likely to occur.

If countries to which we give massive aid do not, in short order, develop, democratize, and line up in support of United States foreign policy, foes of foreign aid like to make us seem like fools. But when the countries to which the Soviets devote their efforts do not develop, turn totalitarian, or line up in support of Soviet foreign policy, foreign aid can seem just another area in which big powers try to achieve too much with too little.

This is not to suggest that a comparative review of foreign aid programs would not show any difference among the programs. Some follies are peculiar to each donor country. The Soviets, for instance, must deal with the defection of their staff members; we rarely do. And there are lessons we might learn from each other. The Soviets could do worse than to imitate our Peace Corps and we could learn from them to grant loans at lower interest rates. Moreover, after fully realizing how expensive and long-term the foreign aid program is, and how limited the partisan political pay-offs are, we might consider giving more aid, cooperatively, through the United Nations, as Senator Fulbright recently suggested.

All these interesting and significant ideas are touched upon ever so lightly by Victor Lasky here, in the manner of Polly Adler writing about municipal government or Walter Winchell on the sociology of crime.

In India, Lasky tells us, there is "the well-remembered evening" when a young Russian engineer, having had too much vodka, smashed up a jeep to which he had no legal title, and — hold (Continued on Page 16)

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Ivan Abroad

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your breath—who was in the jeep with him? A Russian female! Once, in an African country, two Russians followed a pretty girl to her home and almost got into a fight with her husband, Lasky reports.

Digressing for a moment from his tour of underdeveloped countries, Lasky also brings in an important datum from Moscow: an Indian—bachelor, Lasky notes—met “two lovely ballerinas” at an official function in his honor. He asked for their telephone numbers. When he called them a few days later, the number turned out to be that of the Soviet Protocol Division. This, Lasky feels, illustrates the “Russian attitudes toward their womenfolk.” The first locale of which Lasky speaks is the Lido Cabaret of Accra. He sees in the fact that the Russians do not frequent it a sign of racial bigotry; that many of them have a touch of puritanism seems not to have crossed his mind.

To write this book, the author drew on a three-month journey to 20 countries, which allowed him, on the average, to “cover” two countries per week (though part of that time was devoted to traveling from one country to the next). While he must occasionally have left the cities to inspect the rugged sites where many of the Soviet technicians are, his most original anecdotes are derived chiefly from the Lido of Accra, the New Delhi Connaught Circus (a “night spot”), the Calcutta Swimming Club, “the bars of the native quarter” somewhere in the Congo, and other such places.

On the other hand, a great many of the “ugly-Russian” anecdotes put together in this book have been reported before.

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Much of Lasky's information—that is, what does not come from “ugly-American” sources, such as the cocktail party at the Embassy and the bar of the No. 1 hotel—comes from newspaper morgues. Lasky quotes several American and foreign newspapers as sources, but he could have quoted many more.

This material, the clippings and the gossip are combined with the same free-and-easy technique he used in his book on John F. Kennedy. As long as he has a source—chat, a newspaper clipping—he throws it in.

THE book, while innocent of any serious attempt to analyze any of the previously mentioned problems of foreign aid, Soviet or otherwise, is not without a thesis. It purports to show that while Communism is “a dynamic conspiracy that seeks to dominate the world,” still “Ivan is not 10 feet tall.” To support this idea, Lasky permits himself to list numerous accounts of Soviet bungling, with very little evidence of their successes, producing about as fair an account of the Soviet foreign aid program as a Goldwater supporter would write of the Kennedy Administration. He props up his thesis with accounts of Soviet officials manhandling defectors. He largely ignores what H. J. P. Arnold and other authoritative sources have said about the genuine nature of most of the Soviet economic and technical aid.

If you believe that “Ivan is 10 feet tall,” by all means do read this book. He will seem four feet tall and about as vicious as before. If you knew all the time that the Russians have no horns, and probably no tails, you might wonder why this preoccupation with ugliness?