



Merle Fainsod, 1907-1972: I. Intellectual creativity

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I.

Intellectual Creativity

Zbigniew Brzezinski

MERLE FAINSD was a great scholar but, above all, he was a good man. There was a quiet force to him that commanded respect — a kindness that attracted affection — a decency of conduct that inspired confidence. He was a man of complete integrity and of great dignity — a dignity that was natural and easy.

He was my teacher. What I learned from him goes beyond Soviet studies — for Merle Fainsod had a way of sharing his commitment to a scholarship that was pure, of generating an enduring enthusiasm for one's work, of setting a personal example for one's conduct.

When I speak of his scholarship I hope I may be forgiven for viewing it partially in a personal perspective — for his scholarship was very much a part of my own growing up as an academic. I first met him a little more than twenty years ago. He was then on the eve of his greatest intellectual attainment — the publication of his major study of Soviet politics, *How Russia Is Ruled*. To me he was already a towering figure because of his earlier works in American and Soviet Studies, and I will always remember the trepidation with which I entered his seminar. It was there that I became first exposed to that unique blend of exacting scholarship and quiet gentility with which he directed the work of his students. Never brash — nor visibly impatient — he had a way of communicating approval or disapproval — and of making one very proud if it was approval.

A moment which will always have special meaning for me came one evening when walking through the Yard from his seminar, Merle Fainsod asked me to be his assistant in his course on Soviet Politics. This was a major course — attended by several hundred students — and it was easily the best lecture course that I ever had the privilege of hearing. His lectures were meticulous in detail and in delivery — each one was a study by itself, full of significant propositions and new

material — delivered with an eloquence that in some ways was even surprising after the quietly deliberative and reflective mood of his seminars. His style of delivery was unique — there was a ministerial and even charismatic quality to it — it was compelling, even spellbinding — and yet quiet, always held together by an intellectual thread that never compromised on what came first — the significant historical and political insight.

I often wondered how he managed to accomplish so much, with all the enormous demands on his time. He was easily available to his students — sitting in a corner armchair in his book-cluttered study, somewhat in the shadow, with the window behind him, speaking with quiet and very measured tones — he would respond to inquiries, comment helpfully on drafts of theses or seminar papers, discuss carefully the many grades that were to be awarded to the students in his course, and, when need be, engage himself even in the personal problems of his students. He also played an active role nationally, consulted frequently on Soviet affairs by the Government and the mass media, indeed — in moments of crisis — occasionally overwhelmed with calls on his time.

Yet he remained above all a scholar — a creatively productive scholar in the best meaning of the term — a man whose intellectual creativity opened new vistas for others. It was Soviet politics that was his major intellectual passion, even though he also wrote significantly on American politics and in recent years acquired an interest in the politics of the developing countries. His first book, published in 1934 when he was still a young man, *International Socialism and the World War*, dealt with Soviet politics and Communist affairs, and it was hailed (in the *American Political Science Review* of October 1935) for its impeccable scholarship and theoretical significance. After a period of creative interest in American politics, which resulted in such enduring contributions to scholarship as *Government and the American Economy* (which he co-authored with Lincoln Gordon and Joseph Palamounain), Merle Fainsod returned to Soviet studies.

The appearance in 1953 of his monumental work, *How Russia Is Ruled*, marked — and I say this without any exaggeration — a turning point in our understanding of Soviet affairs. His book is truly a classic — on the basis of painstaking research it provided an altogether new perspective on the patterns and dynamics of Soviet politics, moving beyond the institutional framework to a penetrating analysis of the

power realities, deciphering the informal yet politically decisive system of Party controls in the Soviet regime. Twenty years after its publication, it still has no peer; no teacher or student of Soviet affairs can be without it.

Yet within several years of the appearance of this monumental volume, Merle Fainsod contributed to the field of Soviet studies yet another lasting and penetrating study—the analysis of the Party Archives of the Smolensk Region for the years 1917–1941, which through the fortunes of war had fallen into American hands. He plunged into these materials with genuine excitement—working next to his office were two assistants and he would often come into our room to show us or even to read out loud a particularly revealing document, not hiding his joy at its unique contribution or its novel insight. The study that came out of this, *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule*, provided something which no other study of Soviet politics or of Soviet history could match—a systematic look at the innards of Soviet political processes.

With these two works Merle Fainsod reached his peak as a theorist and analyst. He contributed widely to scholarly publications and in recognition of his standing in the profession he was elected President of the American Political Science Association.

To his students—many of whom today teach Soviet politics throughout this country—Merle Fainsod was a force that shaped not only their minds but their characters. As his students, we felt that here was a man whom we could trust—that we meant something to him. Awareness of this made for a relationship that ran deep. His life's work thus continues in that he gave us a part of himself.

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