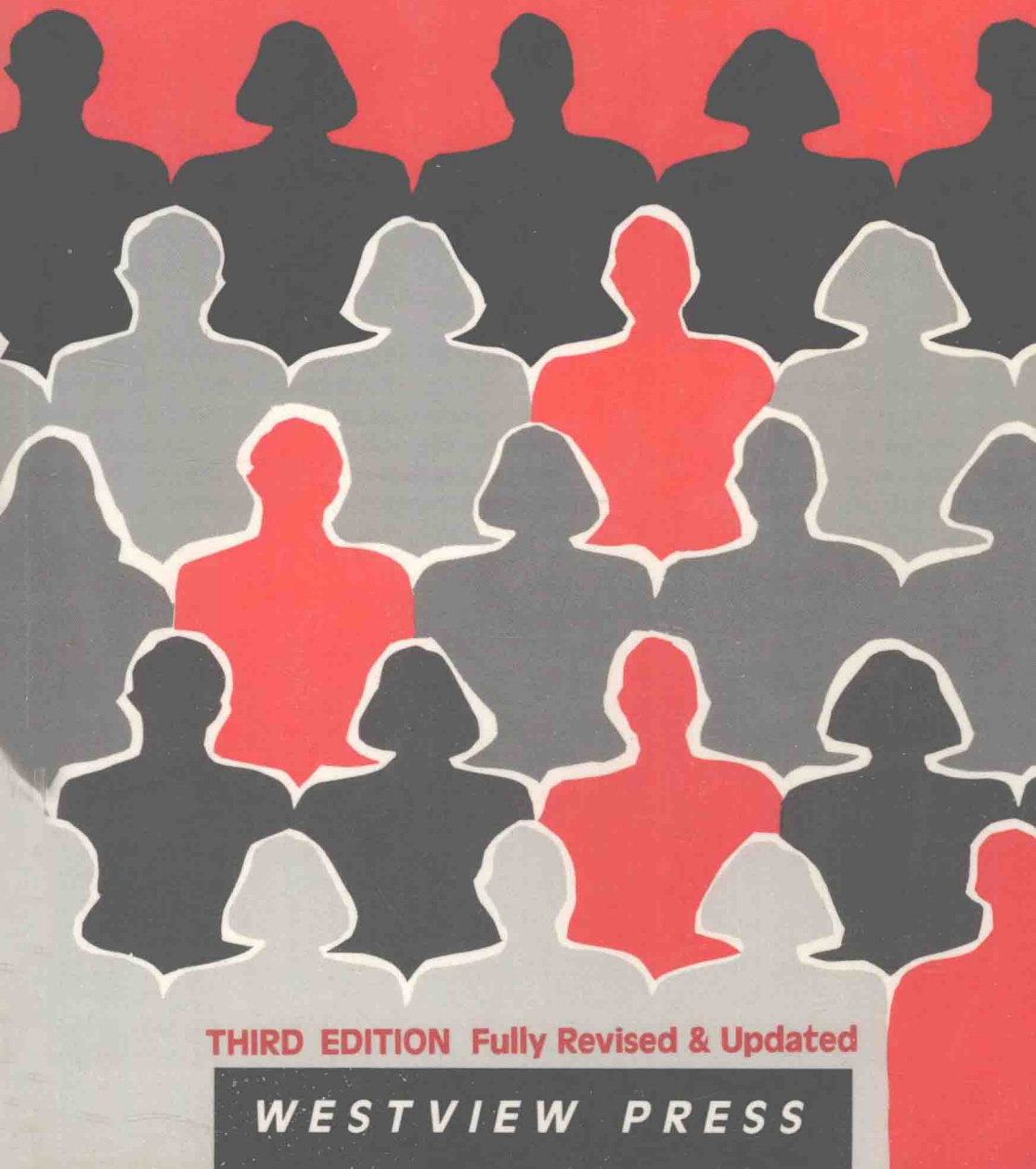


*DARRELL P. HAMMER*

# ★ The USSR ★

## The Politics of Oligarchy



**THIRD EDITION** Fully Revised & Updated

**WESTVIEW PRESS**

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# **The USSR**

## **The Politics of Oligarchy**

**Darrell P. Hammer**

Indiana University

**Westview Press**

Boulder • San Francisco • Oxford

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# Preface

The Soviet Union is changing, and its future is uncertain. For seventy years the country has been controlled by the Communist party. No organized opposition was allowed, and during most of that period the party tolerated no alternative philosophy to Marxism-Leninism, the official ideology. Then in March 1985, Mikhail S. Gorbachev became party leader, and he launched an extraordinary crusade to reform the USSR. Gorbachev's program promised radical changes, and it quickly caught the world's imagination. The people of several Western nations were seized by "Gorbomania" when he visited their countries. This uncritical adulation of the Soviet leader has made it difficult to separate Gorbachev the politician from his ambitious reform program. It seems to be widely assumed in the West that the success of the reforms depends on Gorbachev's personal survival as Soviet leader.

The reforms have certainly changed the face of the USSR. But the results of the reform program should not be exaggerated. Although Gorbachev has brought the Soviet people a degree of personal freedom that seemed inconceivable before 1985, his administration has not yet solved two critical questions in the contemporary Soviet Union: (1) how to improve the performance of the economy, and (2) how to ease the ethnic unrest that threatens to cause the breakup of the Soviet Union. In the pages that follow, we shall try to develop an objective understanding of the reforms and the prospects for eventual success.

In 1989 the reform reached the Eastern European states that had organized their governments on the Soviet model. In the Eastern European countries, the impulse toward reform leapt out of control and led to the collapse of the local Communist parties.

In the Soviet Union the Communist party has so far managed to stay in power, but it has obviously lost the tight grip that it once held on Soviet society. In trying to understand current developments in the

Soviet political system, the critical question is whether Soviet communism will collapse like its offspring in Eastern Europe or will somehow manage to weather the crisis. And will this collapse, if it comes, lead to total chaos in Soviet society? Or will the people of the USSR be able to develop a functioning political system without the Communist party? This book cannot provide the answers. I will try to guide the reader toward a better understanding both of the Soviet system and of the reform process now in progress.

Like the earlier editions, the book is a political analysis of the Soviet Union. Unlike the earlier editions, it will be published at a time of great uncertainty about the future of the Soviet system. Despite the lack of certitude about the future, it seemed to me that it was appropriate to prepare a new edition. I want to thank the editors of Westview Press for their act of confidence in deciding to publish it. My own confidence comes from a conviction that the Soviet experience during the past five years of turmoil and reform has justified the general approach taken in the earlier editions. The emphasis there was on the historical tradition of authoritarian rule, on Soviet political culture, and on the Soviet bureaucracy as a key institution in the system. The bureaucracy today is the main obstacle to Gorbachev's ambitious plans for reform, and we need to understand the bureaucracy in order to understand the reforms. Furthermore, Gorbachev himself has said that the democratization of the country can succeed only if there is a change in its political culture.

The book is basically divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters 1-6) begins with a brief discussion of political theory related to authoritarian regimes, oligarchy, and the nature of bureaucracy. It then surveys political culture and the institutional arrangements of Soviet society. The second half of the book (Chapters 7-12) deals primarily with policymaking and policy problems. It begins with a theoretical chapter describing the model of bureaucratic pluralism, which is then applied in an effort to understand the policymaking process. Chapter 12 offers an assessment of Gorbachev's reform program and the prospects for success. The second part of the book also considers the crucial question: What if Gorbachev fails? We will look at the various alternatives to Gorbachev as national leader and the policies that other leaders might pursue.

I owe thanks to many people who helped in the development of this new edition but most particularly to many Soviet citizens who have helped me in my efforts to understand the system. My thanks go also to the International Research and Exchanges Board and the Midwest Universities Consortium for International Studies, two organizations that have enabled me to visit the USSR each year since Gorbachev came to

power. Although many have contributed to the pages that follow, the responsibility for both the factual material and the interpretation is, of course, mine alone.

Darrell P. Hammer

## NOTE ON SOURCES

In this study, reference is made to the constitution of the USSR and to the statutes, or rules, of the Communist party. Unless an earlier constitution (of 1924 or 1936) is specified, citations from the constitution refer to the 1977 document. However, the references follow the text introduced by Gorbachev's sweeping constitutional reforms of 1988 and 1990. An English translation of the original 1977 constitution, along with a detailed commentary, can be found in Robert Sharlet's 1978 book. The constitutions of the fifteen republics that make up the USSR can be found in F.J.M. Feldbrugge's work (1979), but these constitutions too are undergoing fundamental changes. In this book, references to the constitution of the Russian federation follow the text as amended in 1989. For the text of the 1936 USSR constitution, see the translation by H. J. Berman and J. B. Quigley (1969). Berman (1966) has also provided a useful translation of the criminal codes. The 1969 volume contains a number of other basic documents, including the Party Statute that was replaced in 1986. The 1986 statute can be found in Gill (1988). Some of the important decrees of the party can be found in English in the five-volume collection *Resolutions and Decisions of the CPSU* (1977–1982).

Biographical information about Soviet leaders given in this book is generally taken from standard Soviet sources: the directories of Supreme Soviet deputies and the yearbooks of the Soviet encyclopedia.

In addition to the official Soviet sources used, this study is also based on unofficial sources, usually referred to as *samizdat*. That term is used for various kinds of underground writings circulating in the USSR that were not published because of lack of clearance by the Soviet censorship agency. Samizdat were almost the only source for the ideas of the Soviet dissident movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since the introduction of glasnost under Gorbachev, the Soviet media have become much more accessible, and samizdat much less important. Samizdat documents have been systematically collected by the Samizdat Archive in Munich and are regularly published there. The Samizdat Archive assigns a number (AS no.) to each document, and some samizdat material in this book is cited by that number.

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# 1

## Vision and Reality in Soviet Politics

In 1920, Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, wrote a brief description of the new Communist-ruled political system for the benefit of foreigners. Lenin was a Marxist, and following Marx's language he called the Soviet regime a "dictatorship of the proletariat," that is, a dictatorship of the working class over the rest of society. He pointed out the dual nature of the Soviet system: On the one hand, the government consisted of a system of representative councils (soviets) elected by the working class and the peasants; on the other hand, there was the Communist party, which was elected by no one and dominated the soviets.

Lenin believed that the party was the "vanguard" of the working class. The party was the leader and the mass of workers were supposed to follow. According to this theory, the dictatorship of the working class was really exercised by the party. The party, in turn, was led by its Central Committee, which in 1920 was a group of only nineteen men. The day-to-day work of the party and the government was carried on by a still smaller group, a five-man committee, or "political bureau" (Politburo), elected by the Central Committee. Legally speaking, the government ruled in the name of the proletariat. In fact, Lenin said, no important decision was ever made by the government without instructions from the party leadership. Power was exercised on behalf of the people by a party controlled by a group of five men. "This," Lenin concluded, "is a full-fledged 'oligarchy'" (1920: 371). Although he put the word oligarchy in quotation marks, it accurately described the regime he headed.

Oligarchy means rule by the few. The political philosophers of the ancient world classified governments according to the number of people who shared political power. At one extreme was autocracy, a government in which one person ruled as a dictator or a king. At the other extreme

was democracy, a government in which the people ruled. Oligarchy was a third type falling somewhere between autocracy and democracy. During most of its history, the Soviet political system has been an oligarchy in which political power has been concentrated in the small group of party leaders who sit on the Politburo. In theory, the Politburo is accountable to the Central Committee, but the Central Committee is also a small group. Even if the Central Committee was the main source of power rather than the Politburo, the Soviet system would still be an oligarchy. During one period in Soviet history, from the mid-1930s until 1953, the oligarchy was replaced by an autocracy, and the system was ruled by the dictator Josef Stalin (1879–1953). Stalin was one of the original oligarchs in Lenin's government. After Lenin's death in January 1924, a prolonged struggle for power took place during which Stalin defeated the other leaders of the regime, beginning with Lev Trotsky. Most other opposition leaders were put on public trial, found guilty of political conspiracy, and executed during the great purges (1936–1938). Trotsky was forced to leave the country in 1929, and in 1940 he was murdered. This period of personal dictatorship, or autocracy, came to an end with Stalin's death.

The political system then reverted to its earlier oligarchical structure. Within the Politburo in the post-Stalin period, one man has usually been recognized as leader, but there has been no dictator. Lenin was premier, or head of the government, but since his death, the dominant political leader has always been the head of the party, who has held the title of general secretary. Since 1953, the head of the party, like Lenin, has had to share power with the other members of the Politburo. During much of this time, the general secretary has had a state appointment as well—either as head of government (premier) or chief of state (president). But the political authority of the general secretary comes from his position as head of the party (see Table 1.1).

## **VISIONARY MARXISM AND PRAGMATIC LENINISM**

The USSR is called a Communist country, but that designation is misleading. For seventy years the only political party in the country was the Communist party, which is still the dominant political organization, so the USSR can be called a Communist-ruled country. Communism refers to a particular kind of society that was supposed to develop sometime in the future. The USSR, even according to its own official ideology, is not a Communist country. Until recently, it was a country that was "building" communism. Now even that effort seems to have been abandoned.

TABLE 1.1  
Political Leaders in the USSR 1917-1990

	Party Office	Government Office
V. I. Lenin	----	Premier 1917-1924
J. V. Stalin	General Secretary 1922-1953	Premier 1941-1953
N. S. Khrushchev	First Secretary 1953-1964	Premier 1958-1964
L. I. Brezhnev	First Secretary 1964-1966 General Secretary 1966-1982	Chairman* 1977-1982
Yu. V. Andropov	General Secretary 1982-1984	Chairman 1983-1984
K. U. Chernenko	General Secretary 1984-1985	Chairman 1984-1985
M. S. Gorbachev	General Secretary 1985-	Chairman 1988-1990 President 1990-

\*The full title is "Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet." For a brief period (1989-1990) the title was shortened to "Chairman of the Supreme Soviet."

Lenin claimed to be a Marxist, but to develop a policy that was consistent with Marxist theory he had to make some crucial changes in Marxism. As a "master propagandist" (Sowell 1985: 210), Lenin was able to gloss over these changes and to present his own theory of government as simply a continuation of Marxism. As a Marxist, Lenin believed that the divisive forces in society were the result of economic exploitation. He saw most forms of social discord—ethnic conflict, for example—as a by-product of the exploitation of one class of people by another. History, in this view, was mainly the history of class struggle—a protracted conflict between the ruling class and those whom they exploited. Marxism taught that after the socialist revolution, exploitation would vanish, and therefore, social conflict would disappear.

Lenin regarded himself as a political realist and repeatedly denied that he was a utopian thinker. Yet if Lenin was a realist, he was also a visionary. Like other Marxists, he expected that after the revolution, a new and happier society (Lenin called it a "Communist" society) would eventually emerge. His vision of the future was set down in *State and Revolution* (1918a), though glimpses of the vision also appear in some of his other writings. We need to examine Lenin's vision of the future society because in his mind it justified the policies that he followed

as head of the Soviet government. Lenin acknowledged that the government was a dictatorship in which the Communist party ruled alone, but he also believed that the dictatorship was only temporary. It would eventually fade away, and a happier, more abundant society would emerge.

Like Marx, Lenin believed that the state was a product of the class struggle. By Lenin's definition, the state is an instrument of repression, which the ruling class uses to maintain itself in power. The repression eventually leads to revolution when the working class rises up against the exploiters. When exploitation has been abolished and the class struggle is over, the state will no longer be needed. All of this, however, lay in the future. In the period immediately after the revolution, the proletariat (which has now become the "ruling class," according to Lenin) needs the state. Under proletarian rule, the nature of society would gradually change.

That change would come in two phases. In the lower phase, which Lenin called socialism (1918a: 297), the state and the bureaucracy that served it would still exist. The state would still be a dictatorship, although for the first time it would be a dictatorship of the majority over the minority. Gradually, the old exploiter class would disappear. All men would go to work, and all would be paid in accordance with their contribution to society. To ensure this plan, the socialist government would enforce the principle: "He who does not work, neither shall he eat" (Lenin 1918a: 297). This supposedly socialist principle is from II Thessalonians 3:10 in the New Testament.

In the higher phase of development, repression would no longer be needed. The achievement of socialism would release tremendous productive powers, and the new society would be one of great affluence. Because there would be plenty for all, a cumbersome bureaucracy would no longer be needed to allocate society's resources. Administration would be simplified, and professional bureaucrats would no longer be needed because the management of public affairs could be left in the hands of any literate citizen. There would be no distinction between rulers and ruled; the new society would be a classless society. Every able-bodied person, as a matter of conscience, would work to fullest capacity. Every individual would be provided, "according to his needs," with the goods and services that society produces. The capitalist, exploiter society would be replaced by a new, Communist society. Since repression would be unnecessary, the state itself would simply disappear. Or, as Lenin himself put it, the state would "wither away."

Lenin did not say, however, how long the transition to this classless society would take. At one point he wrote that a "whole historical period" would separate the eras of capitalism and communism (1918a:

234), but he was never more precise. So the ultimate purpose of Lenin's revolution, which brought the Communist party to power in the old Russian Empire, was to create a Communist society, a society of abundance, without class conflict and without the instrument of repression called the state. Objective Western observers disagree on how much of Lenin's visionary program has actually been achieved, but even according to Soviet writers, the higher or Communist phase still lies in the future. Bertrand Russell, who visited Soviet Russia only two years after the revolution, concluded that the great experiment had already failed and the vision had been lost. What had emerged from the revolution was not a socialist or Communist society but a regime "painfully like the old government of the Tsar—a system which is Asiatic in its centralized bureaucracy, its secret service, its atmosphere of governmental mystery and submissive terror" (Russell 1949: 119). Russell suggested that perhaps the regime was now motivated by a new and different vision. What inspired the Soviet regime was not the original vision of a Communist society but a dream of a powerful, industrialized state.

In many ways, Russell said, Russia's Communist leaders could be compared to the rulers of a colony. Like the British rulers of India the Soviet regime stood for "civilization, for education, sanitation, and Western ideas of progress; it is composed in the main of honest and hardworking men, who despise those whom they govern but believe themselves possessed of something valuable which they must communicate to the population, however little it may be desired" (Russell 1949: 119). So Russell decided that, on the one hand, as an experiment in communism the Soviet system was already a failure. On the other hand, the system might be defended as a method of achieving the rapid industrialization of a backward and underdeveloped country.

As Lenin acquired more experience in government, he became less optimistic, although he never abandoned his original vision. His later writings take on a more practical, less visionary quality. Like all rulers, Lenin discovered that in order to carry out his program, the first priority was to hold on to office. Thus he gave precedence to establishing a stable and unchallenged government, which meant persuading the country to accept the one-party dictatorship: "It would be extremely stupid and absurdly utopian to assume that the transition from capitalism to Socialism is possible without coercion and without dictatorship," he said, because the country could not immediately rid itself of the "evil heritage of capitalism" (1918b: 461, 475). He wrote that socialism could only be built with the "human material" left over from capitalism—and that this material was poorly educated and undisciplined and in need of strong leadership (1920: 373). Lenin admitted that in the capitalist countries where the socialist revolution had not taken place, the workers