

GORBACHEV'S RUSSIA

BASILE

THE AUTHOR OF MODERN SOVIET SOCIETY

KERBLAY

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G O R B A C H E V ' S **R U S S I A**

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B A S I L E K E R B L A Y

T R A N S L A T E D B Y R U P E R T S W Y E R

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P A N T H E O N B O O K S
N E W Y O R K

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PREFACE

■ To some people the publication of a new book about the Soviet Union while Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms are in progress is bound to seem naïve, while others will view the undertaking as rash. It will seem naïve to those who assume from the outset that the initiatives of the general secretary of the Communist Party are simply the kind of fine promises all new governments make; to others, it simply seems too risky to try to pronounce upon a situation that is complex, shifting, and inchoate.

I do believe it is possible to make a useful contribution to the discussion of trends in the Soviet Union, however, by standing aside from the conventional views. Sovietologists generally focus on the political regime or the workings of the economy; they give pride of place to scenarios of conflict and change in the leadership or analyse economic performance, but they cast only an occasional glance at society, for the well-bred scholar holds that society has no leverage on so rigid a system. I believe, on the contrary, that it is in the changes taking place in society that we should seek the roots of the problems currently facing the country's leaders, and there that we should assess the

likelihood of success for the reforms that have been brought forward to tackle them. In other words, I am concerned primarily with the capacity for change of the main strata of Soviet society and with the processes that these reforms are likely to set in train at some time in the future.

Another feature of my approach is my concern with longer-term trends. It is not within the historian's power to assess the effectiveness of a policy until enough time has elapsed to enable him to appreciate its results. On the other hand, he does have a duty to try to place events in a broader perspective than the journalist's, who is mainly concerned with current events. The reforms now in progress and debates surrounding them should not mislead us into thinking that they have sprung up spontaneously, at a wave of Gorbachev's magic wand.

I have begun this study with a reminder of the origins of the economic and social problems that have arisen over the past thirty years, as a result of discordances between social structures, political institutions, and cultural aspirations. This is not the first time since Stalin's death in 1953 that attempts have been made to provide a remedy. Thanks to glasnost, people now feel freer to express themselves, and currents of thought already seen in the 1960s, regarding the need for decentralization, greater autonomy for enterprises, the need to bring legality into public life, are surfacing once more; Gorbachev is offering them what could prove to be their last chance of prevailing.

What is Gorbachev trying to achieve?

We are all familiar with the watchwords of his reform campaign: transparency or openness (glasnost), restructuring (perestroika), and democracy. However, we should not take this last term in the sense ascribed to it in the Western democracies. The misunderstanding does not lie in the intentions of the leadership, which has consistently

stressed that it is not its intention to introduce a market economy or a representative pluralist regime, but to give the economy a shot in the arm by encouraging initiative and efficiency, and by stimulating more active involvement by the population in all spheres of public life. The Party has no intention of relinquishing either its ideological monopoly or its control over all aspects of social life.

That raises the question of whether this policy is not hamstrung by structural inconsistency from the outset. How does one reconcile autonomy for enterprises with the preservation of central planning to lay down guidelines, state orders, and certain essential prices? How can freedom of contractual relations be assured when enterprises are in a monopoly position vis-à-vis each other?

What can Gorbachev do about this? Is Soviet society capable of accepting change? Is there not a risk that the new calls for efficiency may go unheeded because the prime motive force – the spirit of enterprise – is sadly lacking? Collectivization destroyed the bedrock of traditional society, which was the community, and atomized the population. How can one mobilize it for renewed effort without immediately giving something in return, when the groups that make up civil society in other countries (labour unions, associations, churches, etc.) are here the direct offshoots of the Party, or else under its control? Further, the population has grown individualist in its behaviour, even if it does retain some of the reflexes of its peasant roots, such as hostility to inequality and personal wealth. Here, as elsewhere, rigid attitudes are the chief obstacle to change.

We ought not, however, to underestimate the dynamic that glasnost has set in motion. Its effects are bound to make themselves felt in the fairly near future, making a reversion to the status quo ante highly unlikely.

The first of these consequences is the emergence of public opinion, which is visible in the eagerness with which people devour newspapers and follow TV discussions, and

even more so in the influence that certain movements are coming to exert in sensitive areas such as ecology, the preservation of the national heritage, and the building of nuclear power stations, to the point where they are starting to affect decisions. Most such campaigns have been sparked by the intelligentsia in the press and have been taken up by the young, who are highly sensitive to everything affecting the environment, besides being influenced by certain Western fashions, in reaction to established dogma in their own country.

The second effect of glasnost has grown out of the condemnation of Stalinism, which has led to a search for legitimacy in the teachings of Lenin, in the rehabilitation of the victims of the purges of the 1930s, and in the revival of the intellectual and political debates of the 1920s. The intelligentsia has taken advantage of the opening to come out and raise the problem of morality in public life. These calls for an awakening of moral consciousness or a return to traditional – or even reactionary, in the case of the association called Pamyat – values could serve to catalyze mass movements in the event of economic or national crisis. Consequently, I have dwelt at some length on discussions such as those concerning the preservation of national languages and cultures under threat from modernization or Russification; although these problems are first aired by certain sections of the intelligentsia, they touch upon the shared aspirations and concerns of a much wider public.

The key test for the future will be the attitude of the population once economic reforms start to bite. I have therefore tried to consider the prospects for price reform and redundancies in certain sectors of the economy. Surely there is a risk that threats to purchasing power and job security could undermine the social pact that has been the basis of working-class acceptance of the Soviet regime and labour-union compliance.

Some readers may be surprised that I have said nothing

about the right attitude to adopt toward present trends in the Soviet Union.

I have tried to remain as objective as possible, and this aim has precluded any value judgements concerning events now unfolding, whose full implications are by no means clear as yet. Moreover, two implicit convictions have shaped my attitude. The first is that politics is not just a matter of technical choices, and that such decisions must have a moral underpinning. Yet moral law is neither Christian, nor Jewish, nor Marxist: it is universal or it is nothing. To seek to divide up humanity in terms of the terrible memories of the past, or of outdated ideologies, or of shortsighted national interests, will be of little use in solving problems common to all countries: how to secure peace, how to permit the free movement of people and ideas, how to ensure growth and full employment, and how to eradicate poverty.

But we must not confuse political decision-making with morality. Policies must take account of what is possible, not only what is desirable, so compromise is the result. Individual morality has no room for compromise; if it did, no act could be truly moral. As an individual, I am free to adopt an attitude of nonviolence when dealing with an adversary, but a political leader cannot force a nation to act altruistically; he must take individuals as they are. That indeed is the conclusion reached by foreign leaders after their talks with Gorbachev: regardless their differences, they all credit him with a desire for change and openness. Such trust is the sole basis for genuine international security, though the policies must be judged by their results. But to prejudge these results and allow the potential adversary to become mired in his difficulties would merely fuel the vicious spiral that leads from a sense of weakness to fear, and from fear to aggression.

What is more, efforts to influence the Soviet regime from outside – notably, with embargoes – have always ended in

failure, because there is no way in which outside pressures can exert leverage on the regime. On the contrary, the internal situation of the USSR and the portion of Europe under its control determine the potential scope for opening up and an easing of tensions. Unfortunately, perestroika provides no immediate answer to the difficulties of everyday life or to the most acute of the country's chronic problems, such as blasé youth, which could one day erupt into protest, or the more unpredictable and emotionally charged problems relating to certain nationalities.

Moreover, restructuring can only succeed if it does not create disturbances in neighboring countries – if that happens, advocates of the Brezhnev doctrine will waste little time intervening. This explains why Gorbachev is urging his allies to follow his example and ease domestic tensions as much as possible. All that adds up to a great many unknowns for a policy which, like any far-reaching change, will take years to bear fruit.

The Russian has shown me in so many instances how even an enslavement and an oppression that continually overwhelm all powers of resistance need not necessarily bring about a degeneration of the soul. There exists, at least in the soul of the Slav, a degree of submission which deserves the epithet perfect, because even under the most massive and annihilating pressure it creates for the soul a secret arena, a fourth dimension in which, however grievous conditions become, a new endless and genuinely independent freedom can now begin.

— *Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Major-General von Sedlakowitz, December 9, 1920*

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GORBACHEV'S RUSSIA

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NEW TRENDS IN SOVIET SOCIETY



■ It is never easy to describe the direction a society is taking, because its future is never predetermined. The history of the USSR in particular serves as a constant reminder of what it owes to one or another of its leaders, who, for better or worse, have altered the course of events. Among those leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev will unquestionably represent a decisive step forward in the history of the Soviet Union, even though it is not always easy to distinguish words and intentions from actual deeds, or what is happening in Moscow or Leningrad from everyday conditions in the provinces.¹ But the task is further complicated by the need, after analysing the various mechanisms of Soviet society, to develop a comprehensive view of how they interact.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE SYSTEM: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Comprehensive models that seek to define the system generally start by focusing on either the economy or ideology as the determining factor in other spheres. Soviet doctrine

draws its inspiration from the Marxist teaching that control of the means of production and exchange by the state is sufficient to radically modify the structure of social relations; this accounts for the disproportionate importance accorded to the economy in the concerns of the nation's leaders. According to this interpretation, the Bolshevik Revolution should be regarded as the inevitable outcome of the growth of nineteenth-century Russian industry and capitalism; Stalinism, therefore, was rendered necessary by faster industrialization in the 1930s, while today the maturity and complexity of the industrial system call for the type of reform that has been set in motion to boost efficiency.

Sovietologists, who base their analysis on the specific characteristics of Soviet ideology and power, argue that the October Revolution predates the country's economic development. Bringing the means of production under state control does not in itself create wealth: it consolidates the power of the regime. Power is the key factor, whereas plans are subject to constant review. In this view, the ultimate driving force behind the development of the system is to be sought in ideology and the circulation of the political elites. As long as ideology remains unchanged, we have grounds for doubting the system's capacity for change.

My own analysis rejects the vision of a monolithic, changeless Soviet system. Each of its three essential components – power, society, and culture – develops along its own, unsynchronized, lines. Each of these three variables has a dynamic of its own. It is important to bear this in mind, because it is from the discordance between them that the tensions or problems facing the Soviets today arise.

Of the three spheres, the political system is the most stable. A mere nine leaders have run the country since 1917. Their power still rests upon four pillars, none of which has ever been challenged, even in the current period:

- The leading role of the Party, a principle that rules out any kind of pluralism.
- Social ownership of the means of production, which gives to the leadership absolute control over production, jobs, and pay.
- Democratic centralism, which allows the central authorities to appoint officials at all levels of the hierarchy (*nomenklatura*) and to integrate a composite society to form a single whole.
- The monopoly of education and information, and the censorship that is its corollary.

Within this rigid framework, however, we may observe a certain number of trends affecting the composition of the Party, the influence of the bureaucracy, and the significance of ideology.

According to Lenin and the intellectuals who formed the majority of his machine, the Party was originally meant to be a revolutionary group whose membership was confined to an elite. From 1926 on, however, it was submerged by a wave of militants recruited to take over the administration of the country. These newcomers, hastily trained in the people's universities (*rabfaks*), were of humble origins, and their style of command and narrow-mindedness remain a feature of many of the country's managers and officials. A new generation of officials of middle-class origin, trained in the higher engineering colleges and the universities, has arisen since World War II, and is tending to take over from its predecessors. The gap between the two types of political and economic manager is particularly evident today.

The leadership and supervisory functions that the Party has taken upon itself are what legitimize this flood of specialists into the apparatus; this is reflected even in the membership of the Central Committee, which numbers only twenty or so workers and peasants out of a total of

453. One result of the professionalization of the Party cadres and the incorporation of the technical elites has been to substitute rational criteria, based on expert recommendations, for the earlier voluntarist decision-making. Moreover, this category of personnel has sought to stabilize its position and consolidate its privileges by strengthening legal procedures and review channels, in order to protect itself from arbitrary decisions. Consequently, membership in the establishment has become a stable social status, which can be transmitted to one's descendants, notably by means of the prestigious schools reserved to the children of the elite.

Regardless of generation, the apparatchik retains a preference for democratic centralism, under which he must seek approval from higher authority for decisions for which he does not wish to shoulder responsibility himself. To that should be added the logic of a command economy, which has spawned a cumbersome hierarchy of state committees (Gosplan, Gossnab, etc.), technical ministries at federal and republic levels, unions of industrial or agro-industrial enterprises, and so forth, each having its own regulatory powers. This proliferating bureaucracy cancels out the theoretical advantages that might be expected from a planned economy, especially in a period of perpetual technological change.

Ideology in turn, with its nineteenth-century dogmas, is incapable of producing practical political solutions. The economic choices and external relations of the USSR are not subject to any predetermined rules. The ideology that inspired the early decisions of the Bolshevik Revolution is now no more than a source of legitimation of the regime. It posits that the state is led by a moral elite inspired by a scientific doctrine that confers quasi-religious infallibility upon it. Ideology has become debased to the level of a stereotyped discourse that no longer has any bearing on reality.² This means that science and technology are