



SOVIET UPDATE

1989-1990

edited by
Anthony Jones
and David E. Powell

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EDITED BY

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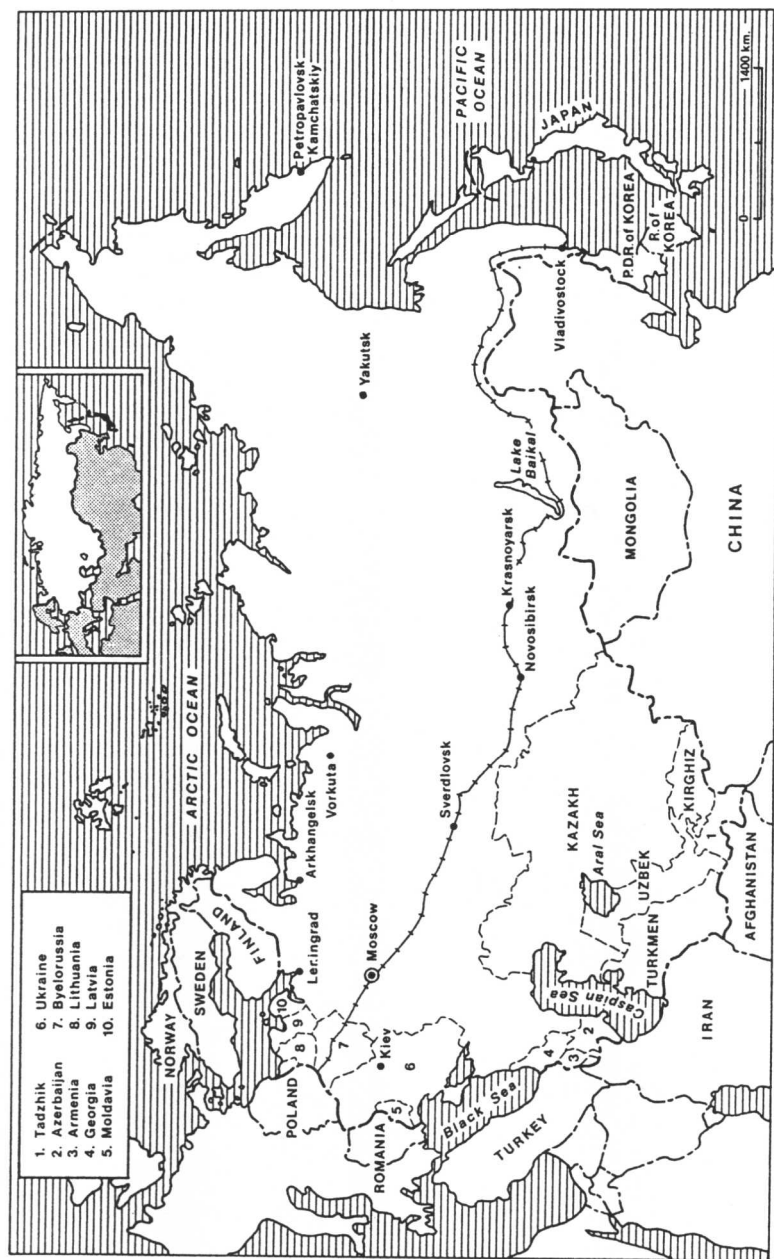
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Anthony Jones



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1

Introduction: The Years in Review

Anthony Jones

At the beginning of 1989, in spite of the fact that social and economic problems were a cause for concern, the general mood was quite positive regarding the course of *perestroika*. At the close of 1990, however, the prevailing sentiments were those of pessimism and despair; the economy was in deep trouble, daily life was very difficult for most people, and there was genuine concern that the greater openness introduced by *glasnost* was coming to an end.

What, then, was the course of events that brought about this dramatic change of fortune? It is the purpose of this volume to provide a brief survey of the events of these two years, and to help readers to understand their significance in both the current period of transition and the longer-term development of Russia and the Soviet Union. Given the enormity of the changes that have occurred, it would be impossible for any book to be definitive in its coverage. Instead, the contributors were asked to write an account of the period 1989-1990, providing their own evaluations of what the most significant phenomena were. Of necessity, therefore, the chapters that follow reflect the choices made by the authors, as well as their own understanding of the meaning of the events of these two years.

Because in real life developments and events have an effect on many parts of the society at once, it is not possible to deal with, say, political and economic events in isolation from one another. The reader will therefore find a degree of overlap between the chapters, an

overlap that we have resisted the urge to remove on the ground that it serves to help rather than to hinder the reader's understanding. We believe that it is an awareness of the interconnections that make the current changes understandable, and the chapters that follow provide considerable guidance on the complexity of the connections.

At the same time, it is as important to know the chronology of events, since this brings into focus the actions and reactions that are the stuff of history. While each chapter sets out the chronology of events in a particular sphere, such as the economy or ethnic politics, the reader also needs some guidance as to the sequence of events in general, to the "shape" of the two years covered in this book. What follows, then, is a highly selective survey of some of the events of 1989-1990, not so much a listing of everything that happened, but rather a coverage of enough of the highlights to indicate the directions in which society was moving, the forces that were emerging and competing for power, and the changes in direction that were becoming increasingly obvious as 1990 drew to a close.

1989: Revolution Abroad, Reform at Home

Winter: January 1989 saw the first maneuverings in the CPSU in preparation for the March elections, the first real elections since 1917. Given that the Party was allotted one third of the seats, the outcome of these struggles was to prove important for the make-up of the Congress of Peoples' Deputies, and in turn for the make-up and behavior of the smaller Supreme Soviet. In other official organizations, there was also a political struggle going on for nominations, such as that in the Academy of Sciences, where Andrei Sakharov was first rejected and then placed on the slate after a great protest.

Also in January, Estonia passed legislation that gave minorities four years in which to learn the language of the indigenous nationality in preparation for making Estonia a single language state. This initiative was to be followed in various forms in the next ten months by the republics of Lithuania (also in January), Latvia (in May), Tadzhikistan (July), Kirghizia and Moldavia (August), and Uzbekistan and Ukraine (October). These actions brought to the fore the issue of minority rights in the republics, and language was to become the issue around which emotions swirled throughout 1989 and 1990. The final withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in mid-February marked the end of a long, costly, and very unpopular involvement. The announcement by the Ministry of Defense that

university students were no longer to be subject to the military draft came just six weeks later.

The winter was also marked by stirrings of change in Eastern Europe, with the announcement in February that Soviet troops would withdraw from Czechoslovakia, and with the start of talks between Solidarity and the Polish government. The green light for change in Eastern Europe was given in early March, when the Brezhnev Doctrine was formally renounced and it was declared that the region's future was now in the hands of the individual societies. A week later, mass demonstrations took place in Budapest without official interference.

On March 26, the Soviet elections marked a real as well as symbolic turn away from the past as Party officials in many cities (including Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev) went down to defeat, in spite of running unopposed. Even more important were the decisive victories of the Popular Front candidates, who won about three quarters of the seats in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The election of Boris Yeltsin with 90 percent of the vote in Moscow was to change the face of Soviet politics for the next two years. Responding to the results, Gorbachev declared the defeat of party candidates evidence that democracy was already working, and hence there was no need to legislate a multiparty system.

Spring: In April, restrictions on religion were lifted, marking the end of official attempts to enforce an atheistic society and opening the way for an even greater growth of interest in the church. As other legislation was put in place during the coming months, religion returned not only to the social and political sphere, but to the schools as well, as priests and others began to offer courses in state schools and in church-run Sunday schools. Religious themes and symbolism became commonplace in Soviet society, and on December 27 the government of the Russian Republic declared the Russian Orthodox Christmas (January 7) an official holiday.

More changes in the CPSU occurred in April when 110 older high-ranking members of the Party resigned, thereby weakening the conservative wing of the Party. In response to complaints by conservatives about the Party's loss of power in the elections, Gorbachev praised the election as a positive achievement for *perestroika*.

Tragedy, and a major scandal, struck on April 9 when soldiers and police attacked a crowd of demonstrators in Tbilisi, Georgia, using clubs, sharpened shovels, and poison gas. The passions that this action provoked did much to harden people's resolve against the central authorities, and the media kept the issue on the public agenda for many months. In May, Lithuania and Estonia created legislation

declaring their sovereignty, and then a week later the newly elected Congress of Peoples' Deputies opened in Moscow. The members promptly elected Gorbachev president of the Congress, and then on the 26th elected the smaller Supreme Soviet, which began its own session on June 3. To the astonishment of many citizens, these meetings were televised in full, and the coverage was watched by millions. So popular was this coverage that the government complained that it was affecting people's work, and so broadcasting was restricted to the evenings in late June. That the Supreme Soviet had a mind of its own was shown by its rejection for ministerial posts of some Gorbachev nominees, including Defense Minister Yazov (subsequently accepted), and deputy premier Kalashnikov.

June also saw increasing ethnic violence, with attacks on Meskhetian Turks by Uzbeks in the Fergana Valley, and Ministry of the Interior troops having to go in to restore order. Intervention was unable to prevent dozens of deaths, however, or a large addition to the growing number of internal refugees in the USSR.

In foreign affairs, the spring was very active. It had begun with Gorbachev's visit to Cuba and Britain, and with the Polish government legalizing Solidarity and agreeing to run against the union in a limited election. The results of the June 4 election, though, showed a decisive defeat for the communists. In May, the Hungarians created history by being the first nation in Eastern Europe to open its borders to the West by removing the barbed wire that separated it from Austria, thus setting the scene for what was to prove an unstoppable and momentous movement of populations. Gorbachev's visit to China in May strengthened the resolve of young reformers in that country, leading to the bloody crackdown against Chinese students that brought democratization to a halt. During his visit to West Germany in June, Gorbachev suggested that the Berlin wall was not a permanent structure, thereby undermining the position of the conservative communists in East Germany and raising the hopes of West Germans for reunification.

Summer: July saw the first major industrial action of the *perestroika* period, when thousands of miners in Siberia went on strike, to be joined before long by miners in the Donbass and Kuzbass regions. After proposing to the CPSU that the Party Congress be moved from 1991 to the fall of 1990 in order to deal more quickly with urgent issues of reform, Gorbachev went on record on July 23 in support of the striking miners. Days later, the first organized bloc of liberal reformers was formed, the so-called Interregional Group, led by Yeltsin, Sakharov, Popov, and others who were to be in the forefront of reform for the next two years. Unfortunately, Sakharov's death in December robbed the

movement of its moral standard bearer, and this may have had an influence also on the subsequent inability of the reform forces to present a united front in 1990, allowing conservative forces to make a partial comeback.

On July 29 Latvia declared its sovereignty, adding to the growing unity among the Baltic republics. July also saw Gorbachev continuing his history-changing travels with visits to France and Romania, where he again stated that the societies in the Warsaw Pact were free to choose their own path of development. The way to a free Eastern Europe was strengthened when Gorbachev urged the Polish Communist Party to join a coalition government with Solidarity, and when Hungary's complete opening of the border with Austria set in motion a mass exodus of people from East Germany.

Fall: The pressure put upon the Communist Party in East Germany by the exodus of thousands of people was added to by Gorbachev's comments during his visit there in October. As if to reinforce the message that the East German regime should not try to resist the changes sweeping Eastern Europe, on the same day that Gorbachev was warning the East Germans, the Hungarian Communist Party changed its name to the Hungarian Socialist Party. Eleven days later, Erich Honecker was replaced as head of the Party by Egon Krenz, and a mere three weeks after that the Berlin Wall was opened. That events were unstoppable was shown by the fact that following a massive rally in Prague and the formation of Civic Forum on November 15, the Czechoslovak Communist Party resigned on November 24, the nation abandoned the leading role of the Party on the 28th, and a non-communist government was formed on December 10 with Vaclav Havel becoming president on December 29. Meanwhile, riots in Romania in mid-December began a process that ended in the military trial and execution of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife ten days later.

By the end of 1989, then, the face of Eastern Europe had been changed beyond recognition, with a speed and direction that could not have been foreseen at the beginning of the year. Domestically, however, the consequences of the Soviet program of *perestroika* were far less dramatic, although in their own way very far reaching. Gorbachev himself was beginning to show impatience with the way *glasnost* was developing, and in October launched an attack on two of the most popular publications, *Ogonek* and *Argumenty i fakty*, for what he claimed was irresponsible and negative reporting. Just a month later, though, he was publicly suggesting that the part of the constitution guaranteeing the leading role of the CPSU was open to change.

As the year drew to an end, internal reforms continued, with the Supreme Soviet adopting in November the draft of a law that would end censorship and legalize the publication of newspapers by private groups and individuals, and a month later the Congress abolishing the arrangement that gave seats to organizations, including the CPSU. This showed the weakening position of the party, even though an attempt to get the Supreme Soviet to end the leading role of the party was defeated (though by a mere three votes).

1990: A Year of Hesitation and Decline

1989 had witnessed startling changes in Eastern Europe and a series of fundamental changes in the Soviet domestic situation, but although Eastern Europe continued to move away from the Soviet model and the Warsaw Pact itself was eventually dismantled, the reforms inside the USSR began to run into trouble. The sources of this difficulty were a decline in the economy, the increasing disarray of the democratic and reform forces, the increasing ethnic and nationality conflict and confrontation, and a failure of nerve in facing the consequences of a rapid move to a market economy. In this situation, it was relatively easy for the more conservative forces in society to begin to slow down the reforms, and even to begin to reverse some of the changes that had been achieved. To the dismay of liberals, Gorbachev seemed increasingly to side with the conservatives, and to take the public position that the real dangers to the nation were now coming from the left, not the right.

Winter: The year opened with a month of conflict in the republics, beginning with a riot on the border between Azerbaidzhan and Iran by thousands of Azerbaidzhanis. During a three-day visit to Lithuania by Gorbachev, a quarter of a million people demonstrated for independence, and he stated publicly that a multiparty system would be acceptable if it served the needs of the people. While this visit was in progress, Armenia gave itself the right to veto Soviet laws, setting the scene for a later declaration of independence. As the tension between Armenia and Azerbaidzhan worsened, each republic mobilized its troops, and then on January 19-20 Soviet troops entered Baku, an action which resulted in the deaths of more than sixty people. A few days before this intervention, mass demonstrations in Moldavia had called for reunification with Romania.

At the beginning of February, the troubles in the outlying republics moved to Moscow, when more than 100,000 people demonstrated on behalf of greater democratization. Attacks on Armenians in

Tadzhikistan's capital, Dushanbe, left almost forty dead on February 13, followed twelve days later by pro-democracy demonstrations across the Soviet Union, including Moscow. The month also saw important political changes, as Gorbachev proposed at a Central Committee plenum on February 5 that the Party should relinquish its leading role, accept a multiparty system, and reform itself as a party dedicated to democratic humane socialism. In spite of considerable opposition to these ideas, the Party accepted Gorbachev's general position.

In the elections in February and March, non-communist candidates did very well, especially the nationalist parties in the Baltic republics, and local governments in many major cities came under the control of pro-reform forces. The declaration of independence in Lithuania on March 11, and the election of Vytautas Landsbergis as president, provoked threats from the central government and the seizure of a number of buildings and factories. This was followed in mid-April by the cutting off of energy supplies to Lithuania, a blockade that was to last until the end of June when the Lithuanian parliament voted to freeze the declaration of independence for at least one hundred days. March also saw the re-election of Gorbachev as president of the Congress of People's Deputies, and his selection of a fifteen-member Presidential Council to advise him.

Spring: Gorbachev began the month of April with the statement that he would use the greater powers given him in February by the Supreme Soviet to bring about radical economic reforms, only to retreat from this on April 24 on the grounds that rapid movement to a market economy would bring hardship and public disorder. As the economy continued to deteriorate, and as ethnic and social disorder grew, Gorbachev's popularity continued to decline, to such a degree that at the May Day parade in Red Square he was jeered by demonstrators, an event that was carried for about twenty minutes on Soviet television until someone decided to stop the broadcast. As May progressed, central support for anything but a slow transition to the market waned. The Ryzhkov government's economic program, presented on May 23, envisaged a gradual move to the market, but did state the intention of raising prices and reducing subsidies. This proposal set off a buying spree as people began hoarding anything they could find, thus adding to the shortages already plaguing the retail outlets. On May 19, Yeltsin's position was considerably strengthened with his election as "president," or more strictly speaking as chairman of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic.

The period April through June saw ethnic troubles continuing, with 22 Armenians being killed during clashes with the police in Yerevan, and 40 people dying in riots in Kirghizia that required the intervention

of Soviet troops. Gorbachev's second summit with President Bush went off without incident, but very little of substance was gained by the meeting.

Summer: In July, the CPSU Congress opened in Moscow, a meeting that was to result in the virtual removal of the Party from control of the USSR. Although the delegates showed great hostility toward Gorbachev and the reformers, he was reelected head of the Party, and his choice for deputy leader, Vladimir Ivashko, won in competition with Egor Ligachev, Gorbachev's longtime rival for power in the Politburo. As Ligachev went off into retirement, and as a few prominent people publicly resigned from the Party, the Politburo was restructured and stripped of much of its power, and a generally pro-Gorbachev Central Committee was elected. The importance of these developments cannot be overestimated--after more than seventy years of rule, the CPSU was now out of power in an institutional sense, even though individual party members continued to hold powerful positions and to pursue party policies in these positions. The Party also continued to lay claim to the ownership of buildings and other resources. But the system in which the Politburo and the Central Committee ruled the nation was no longer in place after the July 1990 Congress. A revolution had indeed taken place, even though it was a revolution that passed without great fanfare or even notice in many parts of the world. The decree issued by Gorbachev on July 15 abolishing the Party's control of print and electronic media underscored the passing of the old order.

The number of republics pulling away from Moscow continued to grow during the summer, with the declaration of independence by Ukraine in July and by Armenia in August, and of sovereignty by Turkmenistan and by Tadzhikistan in August. Although clearly wavering on the question of economic reform, Gorbachev at first endorsed the new plans for moving to a market economy, only to back away during the next few months. Amid rumors of an impending military coup and public fears of a collapse of the economy, Gorbachev used his new emergency powers in September to order state enterprises to comply with their obligation to provide goods for the state, while the Supreme Soviet failed to agree on a program to rescue the economy.

Fall: It was during the last three months of the year that society moved into a state of crisis as a result of the increasing paralysis among the national leadership, the deteriorating economy, the increasing influence of conservative factions, and the refusal of the USSR's constituent republics to come to an accommodation with the center. The tone for this period was set on October 1 with large demonstrations in Ukraine against the CPSU, and the Russian parliament's decision to go ahead with the Shatalin economic plan regardless of the central

government's decision. Opposition forces were strengthened by the October 9 declaration by the Supreme Soviet that all political parties (including the CPSU) had equal status, and the revocation of the right of the CPSU to have organizations in factories and other places of work.

The struggle for power was manifested in many ways for the remainder of the year, ranging from fatal clashes between Moldavians and Russians in Moldavia in November, to competing demonstrations on the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution (November 7), to the Georgian Communist Party's declaration of independence from the national Party. It was during these months that conservative, anti-reform forces became more vocal in their opposition, and seemingly more able to make their agenda that of the central authorities. Thus, the Supreme Soviet continued to rule illegal all claims to sovereignty and independence by the republics, Gorbachev gave a pledge to the military that he would keep the union together, the relatively liberal Minister of the Interior, Vadim Bakatin, was replaced by the decidedly more conservative Boris Pugo, and the KGB began to utter warnings of plots hatched by foreign intelligence services. The head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, even suggested that violence might be needed to restore order, and pledged the organization's determination to fight anti-communist and anti-Soviet forces operating in Soviet society.

The increasing influence of the conservatives, unrest in the republics, the use of force to hold the union together, talk of civil war, economic collapse, the increasing visibility of the military and of the KGB, and the return of official interference in the media all created a climate of fear and pessimism among the population. Add to this the shortage of food and other basic essentials, growing unemployment, the continual increase in the number of people who had had to leave their homes because of civil unrest and natural disasters (a population of internal refugees), and the rising crime rate, and one can see why many in the USSR saw *perestroika* as at best a dubious policy. Public fears seemed justified when, on December 20, the highly popular and successful Foreign Minister, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, resigned. In an emotional speech to the Congress, he warned the nation that a return to dictatorship was daily becoming more likely.

The year 1990, then, ended on a note of despair about the fate of reform and the future of the country. *Perestroika* had stalled. Looking into the future at year's end, it was clear that the reforms could only move forward if the stand-off between the central and local governments could be broken, and if the reformers could settle their differences and create a united front. Without some form of compromise, or a recommitment to radical change on the part of the

Gorbachev leadership, continued decline was inevitable. It was obvious to most people that 1991 would be a year not only of hardship, but also of extreme significance for the future of the Soviet Union and its constituent nations.

As the headings above imply, each year may be seen as having a developing theme. While this is merely a device that helps us to direct attention to particular events rather than to others, I would suggest that future historians will see the year 1990 as one in which those who set *perestroika* in motion hesitated to let it develop according to its own logic, and in doing so, stalled the process. It is still too early to know for sure, but in the summer of 1991 it looks as if this hesitation is being abandoned for a more decisive program of reform. At the same time, the harm done to society and the economy are likely to make the coming reforms even more costly, both financially and in terms of human life, than they would otherwise have been.

In the chapters that follow, readers can see in detail the events of 1989 and 1990, and can form their own opinions of the significance of the events of these years for both the USSR and the rest of the world.

2

Political Developments

Steven L. Burg

Soviet politics in the years 1989 and 1990 was dominated by growing conflicts between the nationalities, between Moscow and the republics, and between proponents of radical reform and more conservative forces. These struggles unfolded against a background of rapidly declining economic performance and living standards across the country, a dramatic proliferation of large and small independent groups of previously unimaginable political diversity, and growing public dissatisfaction manifested in rising levels of popular unrest.

Under these conditions, the introduction of competitive electoral processes produced an explosion of mass political participation and a rapid multiplication of political forces able to influence, but not determine, the shape of Soviet politics. This was accompanied by a sharp decline in the ability of the Communist Party to control the course of events. In short, the highly centralized, authoritarian regime of the past continued to disintegrate along ethnic, regional, and political lines, while no single strategy or specific program for reform enjoyed sufficient support to dominate the policy agenda. The close of 1990, therefore, left the Soviet Union in continuing political disarray.

The only constant features of Soviet politics during this period were the efforts of Mikhail S. Gorbachev to protect and extend his personal political power and to use that power to defend the integrity of the Soviet Union against internal dissolution. Over the two-year period under review here, as the challenges to the Soviet system grew stronger, Gorbachev retreated from radical change and moved consistently toward more conservative positions. He turned