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Perspective

1990-10

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PERSPECTIVE

Volume 1, No 1 (October 1990)

The Soviet Crisis: Causes & Meaning

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That there is a crisis is doubted by no one. The talented economist Stanislav Shatalin put it well in his speech to the February plenum of the Central Committee of the party: "It is not a question of saving socialism, communism or any other -ism. It is a question of saving our country, our people." It is also very much a question of the survival of the communist party itself, as well as of the Soviet Union, over which it has ruled for seventy years.

There are at least three elements in the crisis, which, though interconnected, can be distinguished: ideological, national and military, and economic.

Ideology

Take ideology first—Stalin killed most of the true believers. Exceptionally, Khrushchev retained a simple belief in the inherent superiority of the socialist system, in its ability to outgrow and outproduce the United States, and even looked forward to introducing the first stages to communism by 1980, when the USSR would (he thought) have forged ahead. Khrushchev was replaced by gray, dull, aged, and corruptible bureaucrats. Under Brezhnev, stability degenerated into immobility, and there was visibly developing a crisis of system, of belief in its ability to cope with the problem of maintaining dynamism, of not falling further behind in the technological revolution. The huge cost of the arms race, hidden by false statistics, was in itself a major cause of overstrain. Even the conservative majority in the top leadership could see that radical reform was

inescapable, and they (no doubt unwillingly, and by a narrow majority) elected Gorbachev.

At first Gorbachev could speak of going "back to Lenin," of the need for "more Socialism." By 1987 he was outspoken in his criticism of the Stalin despotism, and the process began of rehabilitating those victims of the Stalin terror (such as Bukharin, Rykov, Zinov 'yev) who had remained "unpersons" until then. However, *glasnost* advanced beyond the limits previously imposed. By 1989 almost everything could be said, published, discussed on television and in the remarkably open debates in the Supreme Soviet. The Stalin terror could be said (by Tsipko, in a series of articles first in *Nauka i Zhizn'*, then in *Sobesednik*) to have been "the responsibility and tragedy of Bolshevism," and Stalin's views largely derived from those of Marx and Lenin; the October revolution was in fact reactionary, destroying freedom and destroying also the rising class of peasant proprietors. Of course, others disagreed, stressing that Stalin was not the executor of Lenin's will, but rather the executioner of Lenin's comrades. But many voices were raised, especially in 1990, to the effect that Marx was fundamentally mistaken in his view of socialism and of the market, that he did (he did!) envisage "labor armies, especially in agriculture" (Pantin and Plirnak in the Party's own *Kommunist*, No. 4, 1990), that he and Engels had no understanding of the problems of work motivation or indeed of planning, that they were wrong about the State, and that the Bolsheviks were wrong to dismiss the Constituent Assembly in 1918, wrong to kill the Tsar and his family.

Attacks on Lenin

Novy mir (No. 3, 1990) printed Ivan Bunin's harsh words, written seventy years ago, about the "criminals" Lenin, Trotsky, Dzerzhinsky. Numerous publicists (for instance the neo-liberal Selyunin, but also the Slavophil conservative Soloukhin) began to assert publicly that Lenin had forced Russia onto the wrong road, a road that was now a cul-de-sac. Those ideas were reinforced by the publication of Solzhenitsyn's works, as well as of articles by and interviews with Western "Sovietologists" of various views: Conquest, Helene Carrere d'Encausse, Pipes, Stephen Cohen, Tucker, myself. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* has been quoted too. East European radical reformers are frequently

cited. So the entire legitimacy of the Soviet system has been publicly put into question, and the legitimacy of doing this has been formally recognized by the abandonment, after seventy years, of the monopoly of the communist party. It is losing members, at all levels.

The party has lost popularity, purpose, the ability to get its orders obeyed. Alternatives seem many, but they are confused, contradictory, diffuse. Russian nationalism of offensive and neo-fascist anti-semitic species, Russian nationalists of much milder and more tolerant kinds, Social-Democratic, Socialist, "Kadet," monarchist, even AnarchoSyndicalist groups try to present their programs. Moscow (under G. Popov) and Leningrad (under Sobchak) have elected local Soviets of a radical-reformist kind, but this is as yet not typical of the provinces, and in any case the Soviets have not yet devised a power apparatus which can implement decisions. A power vacuum threatens.

Nationalism and the Military

Which brings me to nationalisms and to the military situation (and the situation of the military). The crisis of "ideological" confidence had a profound influence in deciding the Soviet leadership to abandon further attempts to retain control over what were once its satellites. The Afghan intervention was abandoned, the decision to intervene unequivocally condemned. There was a complete transformation of policies toward and attitudes to the West, to NATO, to America, and to the Third World too. Support for overseas countries with a so-called socialist orientation has been sharply criticized, overseas aid diminished. A satirical article by Ye. Ambartsumov in *Moskovskie novosti* of August 19, 1990 refers to what could well have been Moscow's reaction to the Iraq crisis; he makes up a likely TASS despatch reading: "The entire Soviet people wholeheartedly welcomes the victory of the socialist revolution over the rotten monarchist Kuwaiti regime, and expresses class solidarity with socialist Iraq for its generous internationalist assistance to the people of Kuwait. . ." (and so forth) . Ambartsumov ends with the words: "How pleasant it is to note that all this is ended for ever."

However, the Soviet military establishment cannot be pleased with the cuts in men and weapons, and with what must seem to them an ignominious retreat from Central Europe. Officers suffer from low pay and lack of tolerable quarters and many have been upset by the fall in esteem of the armed forces and by press criticism of the harsh treatment of conscript soldiers. Voices are heard urging the "depolitization" of both the armed forces and the KGB. The former major-general of the KGB, Kalugin, went public in his criticism of that organization, and after protesting his dismissal got himself elected to the Supreme Soviet with a big majority.

But military men, policemen too, are supposed to serve in the name of something: an idea, a nation. The "idea" has faded away, and the USSR is a multitude of nations. *Russian* nationalism, strong among army officers, is an irritant to other nationalities in a multinational state, and so can act as a disuniting factor (unlike Polish or Hungarian nationalism in their respective communities).

It is unnecessary to dwell on the much-publicized facts about nationalist-secessionism and interethnic conflicts, affecting the three Baltic republics, Moldavia, Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia. There is tension too in the Ukraine, and even the Tatar autonomous republic wants independence. Some declare sovereignty, erect what are in effect customs and immigration barriers, speak of their own armed forces, currency, police, diplomatic representation. Hundreds of thousands have become refugees: Russians fleeing from some of the Islamic republics, Armenians from Azerbaidzhan, Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan. . . Yel'tsin declares the sovereignty of the Russian republic (RSFSR), and negotiates with Gorbachev as an equal. The communist party's loss of power is paralleled by the loss of authority of the central government, including the presidency. All this has been exacerbated by, and has contributed to, economic disruption.

The Economy

Which brings me to the economy. Again, the facts are beyond dispute. The centralized system was malfunctioning, and had entered a period of stagnation. Gorbachev desired

to give it dynamism through radical reform. However, in the period 1985-89 the reform process proceeded in a contradictory and half-hearted manner. Of course, one should not underestimate the huge practical problems involved. Even if everyone were agreed as to what to do, even if there were no opposition, a shift from the old to a new market-based system would have been a very difficult one: human psychology, old ideological stereotypes, lack of experience, lack of the institutional infrastructure and of market intermediaries, lack also of popular support and understanding, these were all serious obstacles. The government made it all much worse by tolerating a growing budget deficit, postponing long-needed increases in highly subsidized prices, in effect printing far too much money, while loosening control over incomes and over enterprise spending. The ruble became discredited as a currency. The old system was being dismantled, but a new "market" system could not emerge amid growing shortages and confusion. Planned allocation is being replaced not by a market but by a multitude of bilateral barter deals between enterprises, territories, cities. Favorable weather has contributed to a record harvest in 1990, but lack of labor, machines, fuel, storage space, transport, cause unusually heavy losses. Citizens queue for cigarettes, even bread. Tea, soap and sausages are rationed in many places. As I write these words we are awaiting the drastic "marketization" measures said to be drafted by a reform commission. It is impossible to comment on them without details not yet available.

Chaos Ahead?

But clearly the economic mess stimulates nationalist separatism, weakens the legitimacy of authority, and saps the self-confidence of the regime. There is real fear of total breakdown, of civil war, of a new "time of troubles" (the first one followed the death of Boris Godunov in the seventeenth century—at least *this* time we are unlikely to see Polish troops in the Kremlin!). Economic failure is widely seen as evidence of the bankruptcy of ideology, of the first system. S. Dzarasov (*Voprosy ekonomiki*, No. 2, 1990), looking at Soviet historical experience, wrote: "How shall we see Soviet experience? Despite certain achievements, in the last historical analysis, the experience of the Soviet Union has turned out to be negative." The vast efforts of three generations, huge sufferings, millions of victims, have not achieved the desired level of progress. We

are still, as in years past, well behind the advanced countries. "We will soon see if, at this late hour, it is still possible to turn the USSR into a loose confederation of sovereign republics, operating within a common market or free-trade zone, or whether what we are witnessing is the end of the empire amid growing chaos.

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Perspective. This article was originally published at

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