THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Why Did Soviet Communism Fall?

A Survey of Recent Articles

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Soviet communism, for all its obvious failures, did not seem to be at death's door. Yet six years later, the oppressive system collapsed and the Soviet Union expired. The 74-year-old "experiment" in socialism was over. What brought about this momentous development? Was it the West's doing? Was Gorbachev responsible? Did communism's inability to deliver the economic goods do it in? Or was there something more, something in the very nature of the communist system that led to its sudden demise? These questions, along with others about conduct at home during the long twilight struggle, are bound to be debated for years to come. Some of the emerging lines of thought were surveyed recently in the *National Interest* (Spring 1993).

The West did play a critical role in communism's demise, maintains Stephen Sestanovich, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington. Just as external events—defeat by Japan and then World War I—set off the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, respectively, so they led to change in this case. The U.S. defense buildup and hardline policies of the Reagan administration during the early 1980s, Sestanovich argues, prompted the Kremlin to rethink its policies. "By showing that past policies had led nowhere, Western toughness altered the internal power balance of Soviet politics in favor of fundamental change." Then, after Gorbachev embarked on change, Western toughness turned to conciliation. The warming of U.S.-Soviet relations created "a relaxed setting" in which Gorbachev's reforms "steadily expanded and eventually became uncontrollable." Western influence should not be exaggerated, Sestanovich says, but neither should it be denied.

Francis Fukuyama, author of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), agrees, but notes that changes within Soviet society were also influential. The ending of the Stalinist terror by the late 1950s, he says, meant a shift in power from the state to society. Ministers, plant managers, and workers could relax their work efforts, which made it harder for the command economy to function. And while central planning worked adequately in the age of heavy industry, it was unsuited to the information age, with its demand for continual technological innovation.

Nonsense, says Vladimir Kontorovich, an economist at Haverford College. The Soviet Union was always slow in responding to technological change, but that did not stop it from becoming a superpower. It simply focused on one field—the military—and acquired the necessary technology by "stealing, reverse engineering, ingenious domestic adaptations and shortcuts, and massive allocation of resources." With a reasonably good manager, the Soviet economy could still have functioned adequately, he maintains. "While decidedly inferior to capitalist economies, it was compatible with modern industrial society and capable of technological change, increasing consumption, and taking on the rest of the world in military hardware."

Some observers insist that economic failure led to the collapse of the Soviet system. But that explanation, Kontorovich points out, is at best

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT 125

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE 127

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS 130

SOCIETY 132

PRESS & MEDIA 135

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY 137

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT 140

ARTS & LETTERS 143

OTHER NATIONS 147

incomplete. "Poor economic performance is commonplace in the world, while the peacetime collapse of a political system is quite rare." The reason the government lost control of the economy in 1989, he argues, was that it had lost political authority. That authority began to disappear in 1986, "with media criticism of managers, officials, and 'bureaucrats.' . . . The boss-bashing campaign was accompanied by attacks on the official ideology. Starting as mere hints, these attacks steadily gained depth and ferocity, until by 1989 there was little left unattacked." This "delegitimation" of the regime, Kontorovich maintains, was, in the final analysis, "the main reason for the collapse of the whole system." Its downfall was "the unintended result of a small number of disastrous decisions by a few individuals," Gorbachev chief among them.

His movement toward revolution, notes Myron Rush, a Cornell professor of government emeritus, "was not forced on [Gorbachev] by an aroused society or by compelling circumstances; it stemmed from his highly individual perceptions and experimental bent, his openness to the ideas of intellectuals . . . and the erosion of his commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Stalinist institutions to which it had given rise." Chance had brought this "aberrant figure" to power in 1985. He "was a brilliant tactician, blindly self-confident without realizing where he was headed, a decent and humane man who at each critical juncture refused to return to the repressive ways of the past."

As the failure of his first economic program "became increasingly apparent in early 1987, Gorbachev began to favor more radical policies." To overcome conservative resistance, he sought to mobilize intellectuals, particularly in the media. To get them to speak out and to encourage officials to take more initiative, however, he found that he had to reduce their fears. In the spring of 1988, Gorbachev went further, launching "an attack on the Party apparatus. . . . These two revolutionary moves—the abatement of fear and the holding of real elections—culminated in the televised sessions of the newly elected Congress of Peoples' Deputies (June 1989), when delegates openly criticized the regime's performance." Then, Rush says, Gorbachev showed his true revolutionary colors. Instead of retreating and renewing his ties with the Party apparatus, he made new attacks on it, "further discrediting it and pushing it into a decline from which it never recovered."

Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., a Johns Hopkins professor of international relations, takes a less generous view. "Gorbachev . . . forced his own movement to commit suicide, as Jim Jones forced the other members of the People's Temple to drink poisoned Kool-Aid. The Communist Party lost its power in a Soviet Jonestown." The Bolshevik doctrine of democratic centralism, requiring unquestioning obedience from below, left the Party powerless to resist. Fairbanks sees Gorbachev as a Bolshevik true believer who strove to make communism young again and in his utopian fervor destroyed it. One reason Sovietologists never saw the crackup coming, he suggests, is that they never imagined that "the revolutionary spirit" might have been at work continually throughout Soviet history.

Several contributors—including Robert Conquest and Richard Pipes—speculate about why most Sovietologists failed to anticipate the collapse, while two veterans of the Cold War's intellectual battles, Irving Kristol and Nathan Glazer, reflect upon the American domestic scene. Glazer expresses a certain regret about the history of Cold War liberals like himself. In the fight against communism, he writes, intellectuals often lost their sense of proportion. For example, in beating back "the lies and falsehoods that insisted on [the Rosenbergs'] innocence," anticommunist intellectuals such as himself did not question vigorously enough whether the death penalty was appropriate punishment. Too often, these intellectuals reduced "a various and complex world . . . to 'us' and 'them.' "

Kristol takes a different view: "I was indeed a 'Cold Warrior' . . . but I was not engaged in any kind of crusade against communism. It was the fundamental assumptions of contemporary liberalism that were my enemy." It was only the liberal ethos among intellectuals, he believes, that turned the Cold War into anything other than what it was: "a raw power conflict between totalitarian tyranny and constitutional democracy." In his mind, the real cold war continues.