

The Soviet Might-Have-Been

A Survey of Recent Articles

Was the Soviet Union doomed to collapse, as it did in 1991—or might further reforms have saved it? Stephen F. Cohen, a well-known commentator on Soviet and Russian affairs who teaches at New York University, stirs up a far-reaching debate in the pages of *Slavic Review* (Fall 2004) by arguing that such reforms were indeed possible.

Nations and systems can change, Cohen contends. “Can it be plausibly or morally argued that an original Soviet evil was greater, more formative, or more at odds with the state’s professed values than was slavery in the United States?”

The prevailing scholarly view is that the failure of Mikhail Gorbachev’s effort over six years (1985–91) to remake the Soviet Union along democratic and market lines shows that the Soviet system could not be reformed. That’s just “retrospective determinism,” Cohen says, countering that the “relatively free speech, political activity, and elections” permitted by 1989 opened the door to wide political participation. And while popular support for reform was growing, “very large majorities . . . continued to oppose free-market capitalism and to support fundamental economic-social features of the Soviet system—among them, public ownership of large-scale economic assets, a state-regulated market, guaranteed employment, controlled consumer prices and other standard-of-living subsidies, and free education and health care.” In a referendum in Russia and eight other republics in March 1991—just nine months before the Soviet Union was abolished—76 percent voted to preserve the union. “Nor is it true that a mass anti-Soviet ‘August Revolution’ thwarted the attempted coup by hard-line officials” in 1991 and left Boris Yeltsin in a commanding position.

As Cohen sees it, there were many forks in the road, and if Gorbachev had chosen differently at one of them—for example, by sending Yeltsin into “remote ambassadorial exile” in the 1980s—the Soviet Union

(minus the Baltics and some other republics) might live today.

Archie Brown, a professor of politics at Oxford University, agrees with Cohen that the Soviet Union was reformable, noting that even President Ronald Reagan recognized and applauded Gorbachev’s reforms. But reform was not enough. The Soviet Union needed to be *transformed*, and that was a process it would not have survived.

The Soviet system under Gorbachev did take remarkable strides toward political transformation. In March 1990, for example, the Communist Party gave up its constitutionally guaranteed monopoly on political power. As early as 1985, Gorbachev considered splitting the party in two, with his own social democratic party facing a party of “true communists.”

Economic transformation, however, was an impossible project, Brown says. Gorbachev couldn’t simultaneously streamline the existing command economy and move to a market system. Yet that’s what he tried to do, leaving the Soviet economy “in limbo.”

Stephen E. Hanson, a political scientist at the University of Washington, finds unpersuasive Cohen’s “explicit rejection of all attempts to explain the Soviet collapse in terms of deeper underlying contradictions within Leninist ideology and Soviet institutions.” The collapse followed so soon after Gorbachev’s reforms, Hanson observes, that it’s only natural to consider the possibility of a causal connection.

Karen Dawisha, director of the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, accuses Cohen of attempting to keep the Old Left’s dream alive, of asking “us to believe that the USSR was reformable, but also that it was worth reforming.” If Cohen wants to play with counterfactual history, she says, he should ponder the fact that Vladimir Putin, the iron-fisted authoritarian, would have had a much better chance than Gorbachev of salvaging the old Soviet system—and may yet succeed in re-creating it in modern Russia.