TITLE: Russian Communism in Perspective
and
Democratic Revolution in Russia
and the Ideology of Frustration

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Summary

In 1991, communism became simply an episode in Russian history. It will be some time before this shift of perspective becomes assimilated by scholars or by policy-makers. One temptation is simply to dismiss the Bolsheviks as evil fanatics; another is to see them as emanations of the spirit of “eternal Russia.” Thus one set of attitudes isolates communism from Russian history and the other way lets Russian history swallow it up. One approach that avoids these extremes is to see communism as a set of particular answers to certain long-term problems that would confront any ruler of Russia. Some of the issues that benefit from this type of perspective are briefly discussed.
Russian Communism in Perspective

In 1991, communism became simply an episode in Russian history. It will take quite some time before this shift of perspective becomes assimilated by scholars or by policy-makers. There is already evident two contrasting ways of denying the individuality and significance of the communist episode. One is to picture the Bolsheviks as nothing more than evil fanatics, so that all the crimes and failures of the Soviet era stem exclusively from their intolerance and obviously mistaken ideas. The other way is to see the Bolsheviks simply as an emanation of the eternal Russian spirit--in particular, of such unpleasant qualities as imperialism and envy. The first way is widespread among Russian opinion leaders at the present time and the second in some of the other post-Soviet republics.

Thus one set of attitudes isolates communism from Russian history and the other way lets Russian history swallow it up. I think both are dangerous temptations for Western observers. The first way leads to disillusion when the very real problems that defeated the communists do not go away just because the communists did. And this disillusion may lead in turn to acceptance of "eternal Russia" explanations that justify Western failure to make sacrifices in support of Russian democratization.

One approach that avoids these extremes is to see communism as a set of particular answers to certain long-term problems that would confront any ruler of Russia. The inadequacy of these answers is of course apparent. What is not so apparent is the extreme difficulty of the long-term problems facing Russian rulers and the shortage of any alternative answers that did not suffer from serious inadequacies of their own. It seems to me that
political scientists and historians can make their best contribution by bringing out these less obvious aspects.

Some examples:

1. Ideology of frustration. I explain what I mean by this in the accompanying report.

2. Economic concentration. One of the reasons for the present retreat from “shock therapy” is the predominance of huge monopolistic enterprises. This pattern of industrial structure was not created by the communists but (in its main features) inherited by them from tsarism. It should be accepted as a semi-permanent feature of the Russian economy that will always impose limitations on market logic.

3. Time of Troubles, or getting from here to there. In 1917 the removal of the tsar led to a political and economic breakdown that helped make Bolshevism inevitable. One reason for this is the centrifugal tendencies created when coordinating structures (either political such as the communist party or economic such as the planning system) collapse without being replaced by new ones. (An analysis of the process is contained in my book Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921.) Russia is now going through a (thankfully milder) time of troubles, and some of the same problems have reemerged.

4. Nationality problems. The challenge of creating the conditions for peaceful coexistence for the many ethnic groups scattered across the plains of Eurasia is not simply a matter of removing communist oppression. The break up of the Soviet Union into fifteen independent countries only changes the terms of what is essentially the same problem. The irony here is that the core of the Leninist solution still dominates thinking in post-communist Russia. Lenin’s solution was to give each ethnic group their “own” political structure,
whether it be republic, autonomous republic, autonomous region, or whatever. It is this linking of territories, ethnic identity, and political sovereignty that is so explosive today. To add to the irony, America’s own Wilsonian heritage makes us ambivalent and unsure about “national self-determination.”

5. Strategies of reform. Russian reformers have always faced the problem of creating a social base of support that will make their reforms irreversible. Pyotr Stolypin (Tsarist prime minister in the years after the 1905 revolution) needed to create an independent Russian peasant who would be his ally in breaking up the old communal peasant village. In their turn, the Bolsheviks wanted to “remake” the peasant into a committed supporter of large-scale collective enterprise. The reformers around Yegor Gaidar aimed at the creation of a dynamic entrepreneurial class. Although the ultimate goals of these reformers were very different, the basic dilemma was the same: creating a loyal constituency for new structures at the same time as the new structures themselves are created.

I have briefly listed some of the problems which benefit from the type of historical perspective I recommend: seeing communism as one set of answers, with its particular merits and demerits, to problems faced in one form or another by any Russian ruler.
Democratic Revolution in Russia
and the Ideology of Frustration

The dominant emotion of revolutionaries is often frustration, and in this respect at least, Boris Yeltsin can sympathize with his Bolshevik predecessors. Revolutionaries usually come to power as a result of a breakdown of the old system, yet this same breakdown persists and threatens to cripple the reform efforts of the new leadership. Since people need to account for a world that seems intractable and perverse, a revolution always gives rise to what may be called an ideology of frustration.

There are at least four strands in today's ideology of frustration that will seem familiar to anyone acquainted with the early Bolshevik years. These similarities are of more than passing interest, since frustration often has a greater impact on crucial decisions than the shining vision of a new society.

1. When people don’t live up to the exalted image that the revolutionaries have of them—when they refuse to be disciplined socialists or daring entrepreneurs—the revolutionaries don’t respond by examining their own preconceptions. People are supposed to be energetic, disciplined, loyal and so on; if they are not, the handiest explanation is that they’ve been corrupted by the previous regime. The Bolsheviks used "the residues of the past" (ostatki proshlogo) to explain away individualistic "petty-bourgeois" behavior by workers and peasants. The democrats use the deeply contemptuous concept of "Homo Sovieticus" to explain why their fellow citizens don’t match their own idealized image of Westerners.
2. Revolutionaries are indignant at "political speculation seizing on temporary difficulties"—in other words, at effective political opposition. One base of support for opposition to the new state authority is "the formers" (byvshie)—a convenient term from the 1920s being revived today to denote people with no prospects under the new dispensation. Another source is ordinary citizens (obyvateli) who are unable to see that they should not blame their suffering on the revolutionary leaders but rather that they should bear it dutifully for the good of the cause.

3. Every revolutionary government faces the same problem: all the people who know how to do things learned how to do them and achieved their positions under the old regime. The Bolsheviks labelled these people "bourgeois specialists," while the democrats call them "nomenklatura partocrats." You cannot trust these people, but you need them. When they refuse to disappear—even when they remain in positions of authority—the result is not only a widespread feeling of disillusionment but a handy explanation for policy failures.

4. All elements of the ideology of frustration come together in the concept of sabotage—a word as ubiquitous today as it was in 1917. If something goes wrong, the explanation must be that some malevolent force wants it to go wrong. There are always plenty of candidates for saboteur status. In an interview given a couple of years ago, Stalin's henchman Lazar Kaganovich defended the obsession with sabotage during the 1930s by pointing out that even today people are justly concerned about the "trade mafia." Good point, Lazar Moisevich—the endemic corruption in the retail network is a favorite target of today's democrats. In January of this year, President Yeltsin used it as an explanation for difficulties caused by his price reforms.
These four strands provide a powerful explanation that can be backed up with many facts: there are genuine conspiracies, demagogic oppositionists, and experts wedded to the past. Unfortunately, the four components of the ideology of frustration also share another common feature: each is permeated with self-righteous anger at people for being what they are. This self-righteousness inhibits understanding not only of others but of oneself. It polarizes society at a time when conciliation is the only hope for civilized reform. And it increases the attractiveness of solutions based on force: if sabotage is the problem, then finding and punishing saboteurs is the answer.

The ideology of frustration ensured the victory of the worst aspects of Bolshevism over the most hopeful. There is at least a possibility that it may do the same to the democrats. The generation of former Soviet citizens that defeated Hitler is being told that their lives were worthless and that they are contemptible examples of Homo Sovieticus, fit only for the trash-heap of history. As Solzhenitsyn and others have pointed out, the sacrifices of that generation probably brought more benefit to the West than to Soviet society itself. If we in the West could remember this, and if we could bring ourselves not to condemn people before we understand them, we might help the democratic revolutionaries avoid disastrous polarization and preserve the civilized values needed to make their dreams come true.