TITLE: THE PATH AND THE TASK; A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO SOVIET HISTORY

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TITLE VIII PROGRAM

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PROJECT INFORMATION:

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 807-19
DATE: May 8, 1995

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1 The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).
Executive Summary

This report describes the ways in which my research into early Bolshevism can help us understand difficulties facing Russia today. Both the Communists and today’s reformers are forced to resort to similar excuses and evasions when confronted with unpalatable realities. A cognitive approach shows that this similarity is not due to some specifically Russian failing, but to the nature of political solutions in general. Any proposed solutions to societies’ problems such as Bolshevism or “market society” will have both strong sources of plausibility and disquieting anomalies in practice.

My research is aimed at discovering both the sources of plausibility for the Bolshevik solution and the anomalies it faced throughout Soviet history. In presenting my main conclusions, I also provide comparisons with Russian opinion today. I argue that the way to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the post-Communists is first to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the Communists.

The strength of the cognitive approach is that it reminds us that the crucial struggle in Russia today is a competition between stories. If we don’t want malevolent or defensive stories to guide Russian policy, we should be careful not to associate ourselves with stories that explicitly or implicitly relegate Russians to permanent second-class citizenship in the world community. This is sometimes hard to avoid because of our own psychological stake in stories that confirm our right to world leadership.

The dominant tendency in both the United States and Russia today is to dismiss the Bolshevik solution as obvious stupidity. This view of the Soviet past is presented in books with titles like Utopia in Power and The Past of an Illusion. The danger is that we will overlook the very real problems that made it plausible in its time — problems that have far from vanished. Bolshevism was a failure, but if we can bring ourselves to look at its strengths as well as its weaknesses, we might learn something that will help us foster stories with equally powerful sources of plausibility but less disastrous consequences.
Irony of the Present Moment

The post-Soviet era has now lasted long enough to start having its own history. To an observer familiar with Soviet history, some ironies present themselves: people who earlier enjoyed themselves mocking the excuses and evasions of Communists, sympathizers, or "soft-liners" are now forced to adopt some of the same excuses and evasions in their defense of Boris Yeltsin and the post-Soviet order.

Ends and Means

For example, we were often told that one indication of the Communists' moral depravity was their acceptance of the motto "the end justifies the means." But now we are told that unpleasant means—the impoverishment of old-age pensioners, the bombing of the Russian parliament, the collapse of law and order—are all necessary for the noble end of "reform." It was instructive to observe the frantic attempt by some American commentators to distinguish Yeltsin's attack on Parliament ("it was standing in the way of reform") from Lenin's attack on the Constituent Assembly in 1918, an act which has always been prominent on the list of Bolshevik "original sins." Excuses are made for Yeltsin by pointing to pressure from hard-line nationalists, in a manner reminiscent of "Joe Stalin, prisoner of the Politburo."

Far-off Advantages

Another source of easy sarcasm was continual attempts by Soviet spokesmen to explain away "temporary difficulties" and confident promises that the "worker's paradise" was just around the corner. But today such things as inflation and organized crime are similarly explained away as inevitable growing pains. Just the other day I heard an economist say something like the following: "The privatization of business in Russia has been an outstanding success. Of course, it will take a decade or even decades before this success is translated into proper entrepreneurial behavior."

Holdovers from the Past

And when things go wrong—when people don't behave the way the reformers assured us they would—the explanations sound very familiar to me. Again we are told that all problems result from the psychology of the old regime ("Homo sovieticus"), the "sabotage" of
unreconstructed apparatchiki, and the "cultural backwardness" of the Russian people. All these excuses come under the heading of the "holdovers from the past," an excuse often used by the Bolsheviks.

Nationalism, Lack of State Power

Other standard accusations against the Communists, while no doubt just, also sound a little different when we see possible alternatives. The Communists repressed nationalism in the name of centralism: very true, but the present flowering of nationalism is, how shall I say, also far from ideal. (The present waffling over Yeltsin's destruction of Chechnya shows our new-found ambivalence.) Again, a standard item in the litany of Communist faults was "statism"—yet "statism" doesn't look quite as bad now, when we are forced to contemplate the possibility of a complete breakdown in governance.

Chance for a New Look: Solutions and Problems

How do we react to all the ironies that have begun to pile up? One way is to blame it on the Russian national character: what else can you expect from such envious, aggressive types? Another way preserves the purity of democratic reform by condemning the reformers: they are "neo-Bolsheviks" who have betrayed the democratic revolution. (Sound familiar? This is the device used by Trotsky and others to save the purity of Bolshevism.)

There is another way out, which I am convinced is the only way that leads to heightened understanding, although it requires some humility and self-criticism. We must accept the fact that our previous easy sarcasms, grand moral maxims, and confident solutions were designed more for self-reassurance than for understanding. We never really believed that the end does not justify the means, we were always too glib in our dismissal of Communist excuses, and we never bothered to understand the problems to which the Communists were responding. We must understand that Soviet socialism was a powerfully plausible solution to Russia's problems. Paradoxically, the way to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the post-Communists is first to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the Communists.

Cognitive Approach

I believe the cognitive approach can help us achieve an understanding that is both critical and sympathetic. The cognitive approach posits the existence of strong interpretive frameworks that are the brain's only tool for organizing the raw data of experience. The existence of such frameworks can be observed in everything from visual perception to the most exalted scientific theories. In everyday social life, as cognitive psychologists have shown,
narratives and scenarios are a particularly important framework for organizing perception and memory.

I propose to treat Bolshevism as such a framework, made up of two parts: a narrative of identity, plus a picture of the world within which that narrative made sense. The narrative I call "leadership on the path to socialism," and the picture of the world I call "the advantages of socialism." Together these two make up the Bolshevik solution to the problems confronting Russia in the twentieth century.

The Bolshevik solution, then, was a powerful framework that was hard to step outside, once adopted. There existed very solid grounds for believing in it as the best possible response to Russia's problems. Like any framework, it had strengths and weaknesses, and much of the impetus for change in Soviet history comes from various responses to perceived weaknesses within the framework; revolutionary change came only when essential problems were seen as insoluble within the old framework.

Given these assumptions, four research questions arise. What were the specifics of the Bolshevik solution? what accounts for its original plausibility? what anomalies and weaknesses did it have to confront in practice? what strategies were adopted in order to retain faith in the original framework?

I could go on at length about the trendy social science side of this approach, but more important for me is the moral/political aspect. The cognitive approach starts with the working assumption that any durable framework has strengths that account for its plausibility as well as weaknesses that have to be explained away. In order to bring this out, I will accompany my analysis of the Bolshevik solution with remarks on the search for solutions in Russia today.

The cognitive approach can yield its fruit only if we can drop our debater's stance toward Soviet communism. The debater's stance concentrates on exposing the weaknesses of the Bolshevik solution without worrying too much about the sources of its plausibility or the genuine difficulties it had to confront. The debater's stance is common to both the right and the left; the only difference is that the right wants to use Bolshevik "mistakes" to discredit socialism, while the left uses them to save socialism from the Bolshevik failure.

Americans are especially committed to the debater's stance as a way of reaffirming our own national identity as the bearers of the obviously correct political solution. We need to realize—as events in the former Soviet Union should make us realize—that the American solution is not obviously right; it has its own weaknesses and anomalies to contend with. I recently read in the newspaper a comment like this: "Yeltsin will make his fundamental political choice not in view of Russia's best interests, but in view of what will get him elected
in 1996.” But wait a minute: didn’t we insist on free elections as the only way to insure the devotion of leaders to the national interest? If we face up to the difficulties inherent in our own political solution, we will be more ready to admit that we don’t know the answers—in fact, we don’t even know the questions.

Leadership on the Path to Socialism

Let us proceed with the first task implied by the cognitive approach: describing its basic narrative of identity. It is a cliché among observers of Bolshevism to point to the profusion of martial metaphors: struggle, fronts, retreats and advances, and the like. But two much more fundamental metaphors are the path and the task. Once you start noticing these two, they seem ubiquitous in Bolshevik rhetoric. Lenin had very little to say about what socialism was, but he had a great deal to say about solving the tasks encountered on the road to it. Only on the basis of these metaphors can we get to the heart of Bolshevik self-definition. The essential meaning of the October revolution in 1917 in this scenario was that it allowed Russia to start down the road to socialism. The road might later turn out to be more difficult and have more twists and turns than originally expected, but at least Russia had won the right to travel down it.

Until the mid-thirties, the basic constitutional formula of the Bolshevik regime was “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Scholarly commentary on this notion overwhelmingly stresses its repressive aspect. As used by Bolshevik spokesmen, however, the dictatorship of the proletariat had three faces. Toward the bourgeoisie, the dictatorship was repressive, in order to thwart bourgeois attempts to close off the path to socialism. Toward the “wavering” petty bourgeoisie (mainly peasants and intellectuals), the task of the dictatorship was to educate them and to use the concrete advantages of socialism to overcome their natural hesitation. Toward the workers, the dictatorship was originally intended to open up vast possibilities of direct participation through the “soviets” or elective councils. Each of the faces of the dictatorship of the proletariat was defined by the tasks of leadership on the path to socialism—that is, by the overall narrative of Bolshevism.

To sum up: the Bolsheviks saw themselves as leaders on the path to socialism. The party’s job, like that of any hero, was to successfully solve the tasks needed to complete the journey. Any amount of difficulty and hardship could be tolerated if this overall narrative of identity held firm.
Advantages of Socialism

Since the basic source of Bolshevik identity was their self-portrayal as revolutionary leaders, they had no particular disagreement with other socialists about the meaning of socialism or the advantages of a socialist system. A definition of socialism as understood by the Bolsheviks is: “a rational economy under proletarian control”—that is, the definition includes an organizational element and a class element. It is sometimes said that “the Bolsheviks had no blueprint for socialism when they took power, and so they had to improvise.” True, but they had something better than a blueprint: they had a powerful story, coupled with a concrete sense of the advantages of socialism.

Long-term and Utopian

The advantages of socialism can be put into three categories: high, utopian, long-term; practical, organizational, middle-term; popular, emotional, immediate. The “high” advantages come from the all-embracing Marxist vision of a completely rational and classless society that had overcome the anarchy of the market and was no longer disfigured by conflict and exploitation. This vision was a very real presence for the Bolsheviks, as can be seen by the science fiction novel Red Star, published in 1912 by Alexander Bogdanov and available in English, which describes “socialism in one planet” (Mars).

Medium-Term and Practical

Perhaps even more important than this high and distant vision was a series of eminently practical economic and social advantages that the Bolsheviks felt would soon manifest themselves. Here is a sample list: no trade secrets hindering industrial progress; standardization of parts; rational investment policy; eventual complete elimination of middlemen; foreign trade monopoly (and no upper class spending money abroad); lowered transportation costs; class cooperation in the factories.

Short-term and Popular

Finally, we must look at what we might call popular or even “nonparty” Bolshevism: socialism as the elimination of bossing (or at least bossing by “alien” classes) and as improvement of living standards. This aspect of Bolshevism is almost entirely overlooked in the standard account of Bolshevism, but it is crucial.
It would be instructive to draw up a similar account of the advantages of capitalism as now perceived in Russia. At the high or “utopian” level, we would have values such as freedom, individual self-fulfillment and the like. The middle or practical level would include the efficiency to be created by competition, renewed access to foreign capital, ability to fire workers, and so on. At the popular level, we might find something familiar: a desire to eliminate bossing (by party bureaucrats anyway) and the improvement of living standards.

For both communism and post-communism, there is an expectation that many of the advantages and pay-offs will start making themselves known long before the advent of “full communism” or “full capitalism.” The Bolshevik scenario of the path to socialism was in fact highly dependent on the growing presence of these advantages. One crucial task, for example, was to lead the peasants to socialism by showing them the concrete and practical advantages that the socialist economy could provide.

Plausibility of this Solution

I have sketched out the cognitive framework of Bolshevism: an assertion about the nature of the world (the existence of the advantages of socialism) plus a narrative of identity (leaders on the road to socialism). I now proceed to the second part of my program: showing why this framework was a plausible solution to Russia’s problems.

Success and Failure of the Bourgeoisie

Where did the Bolsheviks get their deep conviction that the road to socialism was the right one? Not really from old books or intelligentsia day-dreaming, but from the most evident facts of the world around them. They can be summed up as bourgeois success and bourgeois failure. The bourgeois success story was the fantastic growth in rational, society-wide organization during the first two decades of the twentieth century. We tend to think of the Bolsheviks as rejecting the market competition, individualism and pluralism of Western Europe and America, but what they were really doing was being inspired by the huge economic organizations such as the US trusts, the highly disciplined mass parties such as the British Labour Party or the German Social Democratic Party, and the centralized social mobilization that kept Germany fighting in the war for so long.

The essential bourgeois failure was the world war: a moral disaster so complete and devastating that we no longer have any conception of it. All that rational organization had now been turned to the goal of destruction. It was the misery caused by the war much more than exploitation on the factory floor that provided the essential Bolshevik talking point. Hear
Bukharin’s rhetoric from 1918, while the war was still on:

The war has everywhere vastly deteriorated the position of the working class, which was bad enough as it was... The flower of the working class has either perished or is lying eaten alive by lice in the trenches, busily at work in the cause of destruction. Everything has been demolished in the course of the war: even brass door handles have been confiscated for war requirements... The policy of the war has led the ruling classes into a dead-end from which there is no exit... The decaying capitalist order is beginning to totter, and will sooner or later have to make way for a new order of things, under which the imbecility of the world war for the sake of gain will have become impossible.

These inescapable facts explain how the Bolsheviks could keep faith in the road they had chosen, despite the quickly multiplying ironies and difficulties they faced: bourgeois society had convincingly demonstrated the great potential of the modern economy as well as its own utter inability to realize this potential. The Bolsheviks’ road may have been a difficult one, but at least it was going somewhere.

In today’s Russia, as well, the market utopia is not really validated by doctrinal arguments (even if Yegor Gaidar was inspired by F. A. Hayek), but by the evident fact of capitalist prosperity and socialist stagnation. The most compelling argument for the capitalist path, despite the quickly multiplying ironies and difficulties, is the tupik or dead end of Soviet socialism.

The “Immaturity” Debate

Russian Mensheviks and Western Marxists such as Karl Kautsky attacked the plausibility of the Bolshevik story by proposing a counter-story: driven by their impatience and/or lust for power, the Bolsheviks forgot the ABCs of Marxism and tried to establish socialism in Russia, even though Marxism plainly teaches that objective conditions in Russia were not ripe for socialism. This counter-story can be called the “immaturity critique.”

This Kautsky-style critique has been popular even with non-Marxists, but it does not really engage the real Bolshevik claim, which was that objective conditions permitted Russia to begin the journey to socialism under the guidance of a proletarian state power. The real Bolshevik claim was daring and controversial enough, but it did not involve the complete repudiation of Marxist principles, as asserted by so many observers.
Something like the immaturity critique can be heard today: Russia lacks the objective conditions required for a functioning market system. Without a reliable legal system, a social safety net, sophisticated accounting techniques, and a host of other requirements ranging from entrepreneurial psychology to a decent telephone system—without all these, Russia will only achieve a "savage capitalism" that will discredit the whole idea of the market right at the start.

Russia's Problems

The Bolshevik solution also had specific relevance to the problems faced by Russia. Russia needed a political elite that was not so alien to the mass of the population that the state was afraid to mobilize even in time of war; it needed to modernize peasant agriculture, preserve a multinational state, and to resist economic and cultural dependence on the West. Obviously, the Bolshevik solution to these tasks was faulty, but at least the solution acknowledged the existence of these problems and had a coherent strategy for responding to them. Were the existing alternatives to Bolshevism—monarchism, liberal constitutionalism, moderate socialism, peasant anarchism—able to put forth strategies as coherent or as convincing?

Deferred Dreams

I have now outlined the Bolshevik solution and tried to show why it was far from implausible, especially in relation to the alternatives. Now I want to look at plausibility over time. As I have stressed, the Bolshevik solution depended very heavily on the advantages of socialism coming steadily on stream. And yet very many of these advantages did not show up on schedule. How did the Bolsheviks respond to these disappointments and anomalies?

My answer has three parts. First, the Bolsheviks did not simply go into denial: they were aware of the disappointments and talked about them. Second, they could usually come up with some good excuses—that is, genuinely plausible reasons—why the advantages had not as yet come through. Third, the major shifts in Soviet elite thinking can be traced to these diagnoses of the failure of the expected advantages to appear.

Civil War

In 1920, as a disastrously burdensome period of civil war and invasion came haltingly to an end, the Bolsheviks had a natural and very convincing excuse why the advantages promised in October 1917 hadn't yet come through. How could they have, given the economic
consequences of the world war, the necessary preoccupation with keeping power and “defending the revolution,” the need to impose huge sacrifices on the population, the need for dictatorial ruthlessness? As Zinoviev said in September 1920: “They say that there is no communism in Russia, that we have a soviet republic, but not bread or coal, that the workers must freeze and go hungry. It’s true, comrades! But show us another path, one that is easier for the working class—and we will be the first to take it.”

For anyone new to this subject, it will hardly be surprising that the Bolsheviks used the civil war as an excuse. Even people deeply opposed to the Bolshevik solution might concede that it didn’t get a fair test under those circumstances. Yet I feel that my description of the Bolshevik outlook in 1920 is one of the major results of my research. Why is this result so important? Many writers have observed that our interpretation of Soviet history as a whole is strongly influenced by our interpretation of “war communism” (the ex post facto name given to the policies of this period). In my view, however, scholarly orthodoxy has fundamentally misconceived what the Bolsheviks thought they were up to during this period.

I maintain that the Bolsheviks saw themselves as making the first steps on a long and difficult journey. The standard view maintains that the Bolsheviks thought they had almost reached the end of their journey in 1920. Martin Malia’s fervid rhetoric in his recent book The Soviet Tragedy is entirely typical: “Thus in a veritable ideological delirium, the most colossal economic collapse of the century was transmogrified into really-existing Communism, the radiant future hic et nunc, a vision projected in Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii’s once famous ABC of Communism”.

The ABC of Communism was written in 1919 as a popular commentary on the party program. We don’t have to go further than its table of contents to see that Malia’s claims are the opposite of the truth: Bukharin and Preobrazhensky insist that the advantages of socialism were slow in coming because of “the disastrous legacy of the imperialist war; the civil war and the struggle with international imperialism; the petty-bourgeois character of the country; the lack of extensive organizational experience on the part of the proletariat, etc.” Or take the following typical remark: “Communism strives for equality of wages. But unfortunately we can’t jump right away to communism. We have so far made only the first steps toward it.”

If I am wrong and the standard view of “war communism” in 1920 is correct, the cognitive approach as a whole is simply not tenable. It is one thing to see the Bolsheviks as deeply committed to a solution we find repugnant in many ways, and another thing to see them as blind fools suffering from “ideological delirium.” The search for plausibility is out of place if “the Bolsheviks’ perception of the real world had become almost comically distorted in many respects by 1920” (Sheila Fitzpatrick in The Russian Revolution). Furthermore, if we
reject the first years of the Soviet experience as a time of delusion, we deprive ourselves of crucial data about the content of the Bolshevik solution. The ABC of Communism is a crucial work for this purpose, for example, but who would bother to take seriously a book described by competent authorities as a species of ideological raving?

Finally, an incorrect view of the first step of the Bolshevik journey distorts our view of the rest of the Soviet experience. If you go into a bookstore today, you are most likely to find two (and only two) powerful statements on the meaning of Soviet history: Richard Pipes’ massive volumes on the Russian revolution and Martin Malia’s The Soviet Tragedy. Each of these two writers has used his scholarly credentials to make influential interventions in current debates about the Soviet Union and Russia. Each writer bases his overall interpretation very strongly on a picture of Bolshevik views in the early years. Pipes manages to arrive at the conclusion that the Bolsheviks could not have been ideologically motivated by the early 1920s(!), since they must have realized that all their foolish hopes and dreams had failed. Malia’s interpretation is preferable because he stresses genuine belief in the idea of socialism, but as the statement quoted earlier demonstrates, Malia is content to caricature both the idea and the people who believed in it. Thus where Pipes sees utter cynicism, Malia sees blind fanaticism.

Another view with considerably more standing in scholarly circles is that at least some Bolsheviks saw the errors of their ways and evolved a new form of Bolshevism, represented by the period of the New Economic Policy or NEP (the label given to the years between the civil war and Stalin’s “revolution from above” in 1930). E. H. Carr, the most influential historian of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, claims that prominent party leaders such as Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin came to the conclusion that “war communism constituted . . . a plunge into untried and utopian experiments which objective conditions in no way justified.” But the fact of the matter is that there was no good reason for the Bolsheviks to revise their basic commitments nor did they do so. They did not shelve their dreams but only deferred them.

Degeneration

The Bolshevik narrative of identity assigned a heroic role to themselves as leaders on the path to socialism. Inherent in this narrative is the possibility of “degeneration” (just as the possibility of betraying the Covenant was an inherent feature of the Old Testament story). The Bolsheviks had in front of them the awful example of the German Social Democratic Party: a once revolutionary party whose leadership had turned into a closed caste with no link to the masses, rationalizing its betrayal of the revolution with fake Marxist orthodoxy.
When economic advantages failed to come through even after the civil war—when the living standard of the workers failed to grow, or planning stayed at a rudimentary level, or private middlemen continued to outperform state cooperatives—one possible excuse was the degeneration of the party. I have discovered that the top Bolshevik leader most committed to this sort of explanation was not Trotsky, but Grigory Zinoviev, who was already bemoaning the party's resemblance to a closed caste in 1919. During the early 1920s, he felt that peace and economic recovery would break down the wall he observed between leadership and mass. By 1925, this hope was getting a bit threadbare and so, at least partly for this reason, Zinoviev went into opposition.

The degeneration critique always remained a possibility (just as today the degeneration of the "democrats" remains a possible explanation for why the advantages of capitalism are not coming through). It explained the nonappearance of the advantages of socialism in a way that did not cast doubt about their potential reality. Once having made this critique, however, you removed yourself from the party, which naturally assumed that it had not degenerated or wandered off the true path.

Roadblock on the Road to Socialism

During the 1920s, the party leaders indignantly rejected any assertion that they had shelved their revolutionary aspirations; they argued that Russia was moving steadily along the road to socialism. At the end of the decade, there appeared before them a barrier that seemed to block further progress. According to Stalin, the roadblock faced by the Bolsheviks consisted of a dilemma: industrialization was needed to collectivize agriculture, while collectivized agriculture was needed to industrialize. The original Bolshevik solution had counted on enticing the peasant with concrete proof of the advantages of socialism; now these advantages seemed unavailable.

Stalin's solution to this dilemma—forced-pace collectivization—can be called his "shock therapy": a set of measures intended as a one-time massive adjustment in order to make further smooth progress possible. Although obviously the sacrifices imposed by Stalin were much huger than those imposed by Gaidar, there is a similarity in the way social costs were justified as (in Bukharin's phrase) "production costs of revolution."

A crucial dispute about Soviet history is the relation between Stalin's forced-pace collectivization and the original Bolshevik solution. Was Stalin merely calling off the retreat announced in 1921 and carrying out the original solution? or was collectivization a betrayal of Bolshevism's best ideals? The cognitive approach see collectivization as a consciously
innovative strategy for dealing with a serious anomaly that had developed in the original solution. Stalin’s strategy required sacrificing key Bolshevik values in order to achieve what Stalin regarded as even more essential ones, on the gamble that later progress would recoup the sacrifices.

Sabotage and Vigilance

It follows from the scenario that I have just presented that after a period of “difficulties” (a key word in the Stalinist world-view), there was supposed to be a return to steady progress forward. And indeed, Stalin announced just such a shift in an important speech in January 1933. Unfortunately, Stalin reasoned in this way: at the cost of overcoming great difficulties, we have laid the foundation of smooth progress—and therefore the only reason preventing such progress is sabotage, wrecking and the like. In other words: if the advantages of socialism do not reveal themselves by now, the only explanation is “criminal incompetence”—with the “criminal” being taken more and more literally as time went on. Therefore, vigilance becomes the most important duty of a party member (and we know from our own history what vigilant justice looks like).

The mind-set behind such thinking is amply revealed in the letters Stalin wrote to Molotov that will be published by Yale University Press in April 1995. In my introduction to the letters, I argue that Stalin’s “anti-bureaucrat scenario” should be viewed from three angles: as the typical response of any top executive, as a set of assumptions deeply embedded in Bolshevik political culture, and finally as an expression of Stalin’s own psychology.

Can “the sabotage mentality” (my label for the tendency to explain problems as the result of sabotage) really be described as plausible? It would indeed be difficult to argue that Stalinist vigilance did anything but damage. Still, I am prepared to argue that the sabotage mentality is a widespread and understandable response to social stress. In any event, I note that it is alive and well in Russia today, and it is often the most dedicated reformers who trace unfortunate results to sabotage by “the nomenklatura” (today’s version of what Stalin called “former people”).

War

By 1939, two explanations used earlier in the thirties—the “difficulties” of Stalin’s revolution from above, and the presence of saboteurs—could no longer be used so freely. It seems that at the 18th Party Conference in 1940, there was a genuine search for the kinds of economic reform that dominated discussion in the post-Stalin period. It is interesting to
speculate about the possible evolution of “normal Stalinism,” but the German invasion soon intervened.

The devastation caused by the German invasion was the most powerful and valid excuse for the belated appearance of the advantages of socialism. I think that Americans do have some dim idea about the damage sustained by Soviet society from the war, but they have not perhaps sufficiently realized the following: the war took at least a decade away from Soviet development, since the immediate postwar years were devoted mainly to recovery. Furthermore, since the war had actually strengthened the American economy, the relative position of the Soviet Union was even further weakened. For reasons that have partly to do with the psychology of Cold War rivalry (“see how much better our system is!”), Americans have not given sufficient weight to the two wasted decades (1914-1925 and 1941-1953) in Russian economic history.

Luckily, today’s reformers have had no such cataclysm to use as an excuse. It is interesting to observe, however, that although the Yeltsin regime is ready to deny almost everything else about the Soviet heritage, it is unwilling to forego the patriotic mantle of victory in World War II. This move is similar to Stalin’s appropriation of the military victories of Tsarism. Here I would like to interject a policy opinion. I read in the papers that President Clinton may snub the victory celebrations in May. I personally think this would be highly unfortunate. Such a move would be deeply insulting not only to “hard-liners” or “nationalists” but to very many Westernizing reformers—and Russians would be right to be insulted. I also think the American public could use some educating on this issue. As I wrote in the entry on Stalinism in The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World:

One crucial aspect of Stalinism is almost forgotten: the “grand alliance.” During World War II, the Western democracies willingly accepted Stalin as an ally. The viciousness of the war on the Eastern front was incomparably greater than the war in the west: Western Europe and the United States survived with their material and moral values more or less intact partly because the Soviet Union took the brunt of the casualties and devastation. In a 1943 cover story on Stalin and the Soviet Union, the editors of Life wrote: “It is safe to say that no nation in history has ever done so much as fast. If the Soviet leaders tell us that the control of information was necessary to get this job done, we can afford to take their word for it for the time being.” But a convenient historical amnesia has removed from popular consciousness the fact that we were once Stalin’s grateful allies.
Destalinization and “Treadmill of Reform”

The course of events after Stalin’s death in 1953 is more familiar and I will only outline how they fit into the cognitive approach. After Stalin’s death, he himself became the next good excuse. If Stalin thought that enemies of the people were the cause of his troubles, his successors felt it was his hunt for enemies that had caused the damage. The strategy that followed from this diagnosis was de-Stalinization, which corresponded to Khrushchevian optimism about the advantages of socialism: now they would really start to roll in.

During the Khrushchev era, the search for effective economic reform within the socialist framework became much wider and more intensive. Soviet elite opinion now divided into the camps that Stephen Cohen has called “the friends and foes of reform,” each with a different set of prescriptions for resolving the anomalies of the economy. Because actual reforms were carried out in a jerky, “stop-go” manner, the Soviet economy found itself on what Gertrude Schroeder called a “treadmill of reforms.”

Professionalization

The Brezhnev era inscribed “professionalization” on its banner, in opposition to both Stalin and Khrushchev. The idea was that if the fruits of the “scientific-technical revolution” could be incorporated into the system, the long-withheld advantages of socialism would manifest themselves. Unfortunately, by trying to make the “administrative-command” system work as well as it could, the Brezhnev leadership also made it an immovable barrier to progress.

During this era we also see greater and greater signs of defection from the Bolshevik solution as a whole. Oftentimes this defection also used the imagery of the path and the task. For example, in 1939 Lazar Kaganovich made a speech in which he said that the Soviet train was now going from Socialism Station to Communism Station. In the Brezhnev era, this image was used as the basis of an elaborate anecdote which described Brezhnev as follows: The train to communism has stopped moving forward, and Brezhnev’s reaction is to pull down the shades and pretend that the train is still moving.

Perestroika

The perestroika era was the last burst of hope within the Bolshevik solution. The new excuse was the most radical one possible without ditching the framework as a whole; it can be called “the path not taken.” The path not taken was market socialism, as symbolized by NEP, and the reason it wasn’t taken was that Stalin had betrayed the original Bolshevik solution
when he imposed collectivization and the "administrative-command system." In order to move forward, therefore, it was necessary to go back to the fatal turning and move down the proper road.

Belief in NEP as a genuine alternative had faded by the summer of 1990; this perhaps superficial change signified a deeper turning away from the Bolshevik solution as a whole. For all sorts of reasons, Soviet society no longer saw itself on the road to socialism; it decided that you can't get there from here.

Among the many reasons for the fall of communism, the cognitive approach stresses the fact that Soviet elite opinion ran out of excuses that were plausible even to itself. What happens to dreams indefinitely deferred? Ultimately they shrivel like raisins in the sun. But the cognitive approach also warns us against the following self-affirming conclusion: the earlier excuses for the non-appearance of the advantages of socialism were no more than the shifts and dodges of fanatics, while the decision in 1991 to abandon the framework altogether was supremely rational. In reality, the decision to abandon the framework was no less but no more rational than earlier cognitive maneuvers undertaken to save it.

Collapse of the Bolshevik Solution and the Search for a New One

After 1991, Russia was in the same situation as one of Jane Austen's characters: "There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do, than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes." Yet a sturdy, plausible set of "opinions and hopes"—the two elements of a political solution—is not easy to come by. In Russia today, the old stories have collapsed and the new stories—primarily nationalism and romanticized capitalism—are proving highly inadequate. The Russian writer Fedor Burlatsky has recently lamented that none of the post-Stalin reform leaders has been able to come up with a social ideal that would "illuminate our path into the future" (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 17 February 1995). The congenital weakness of the nationalism story in its various forms is not intolerance (which is far from inevitable) but a lack of content about the solution to national problems. The power of the nationalism story resides in its call to cast out the oppressors, but once that has been done, the nationalism story tends to fade out with a vague "and they lived happily ever after."

In contrast, the "market society" solution rests on a very concrete sense of "the advantages of capitalism" and their relevance to national problems. What's missing is an operative sense of the path to the "market society" utopia. Boris Yeltsin's major failing as a leader is the absence of any sense that even he has a vision of the path he is treading.
Furthermore, no political group today appears to have the inner confidence given by a really plausible self-portrayal as leaders of the path to “normality.” It is difficult to sustain faith during a period of sacrifice and confusion without a self-glorifying narrative of this kind.

The strength of the cognitive approach is that it reminds us that the crucial struggle in Russia today is a competition between stories. If we don’t want malevolent or defensive stories to guide Russian policy, we should be careful not to associate ourselves with stories that explicitly or implicitly relegate Russians to permanent second-class citizenship in the world community. This is sometimes hard to avoid because of our own psychological stake in stories that confirm our right to world leadership.

The dominant tendency in both the United States and Russia today is to dismiss the Bolshevik solution as obvious stupidity. This view of the Soviet past is presented in books with titles like Utopia in Power and The Past of an Illusion. The danger is that we will overlook the very the real problems that made it plausible in its time—problems that have far from vanished. Bolshevism was a failure, but if we can bring ourselves to look at its strengths as well as its weaknesses, we might learn something that will help us foster stories with equally powerful sources of plausibility but less disastrous consequences.