Everything You Think You Know About the Collapse of the Soviet Union Is Wrong

*And why it matters today in a new age of revolution.

BY LEON ARON | JUNE 20, 2011

Every revolution is a surprise. Still, the latest Russian Revolution must be counted among the greatest of surprises. In the years leading up to 1991, virtually no Western expert, scholar, official, or politician foresaw the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it one-party dictatorship, the state-owned economy, and the Kremlin's control over its domestic and Eastern European empires. Neither, with one exception, did Soviet dissidents nor, judging by their memoirs, future revolutionaries themselves. When Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985, none of his contemporaries anticipated a revolutionary crisis. Although there were disagreements over the size and depth of the Soviet system's problems, no one thought them to be life-threatening, at least not anytime soon.

Whence such strangely universal shortsightedness? The failure of Western experts to anticipate the Soviet Union's collapse may in part be attributed to a sort of historical revisionism — call it anti-anti-communism — that tended to exaggerate the Soviet regime's stability and legitimacy. Yet others who could hardly be considered soft on communism were just as puzzled by its demise. One of the architects of the U.S. strategy in the Cold War, George Kennan, wrote that, in reviewing the entire "history of international affairs in the modern era," he found it "hard to think of any event more strange and startling, and at first glance inexplicable, than the sudden and total disintegration and disappearance ... of the great power known successively as the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union." Richard Pipes, perhaps the leading American historian of Russia as well as an advisor to U.S. President Ronald Reagan, called the revolution "unexpected." A collection of essays about the Soviet Union's demise in a special 1993 issue of the conservative *National Interest* magazine was titled "The Strange Death of Soviet Communism."

Were it easier to understand, this collective lapse in judgment could have been safely consigned to a mental file containing other oddities and caprices of the social sciences, and then forgotten. Yet even today, at a 20-year remove, the assumption that the Soviet Union would continue in its current state, or at most that it would eventually begin a long, drawn-out decline, seems just as rational a conclusion.

Indeed, the Soviet Union in 1985 possessed much of the same natural and human resources that it had 10 years before. Certainly, the standard of living was much lower than in most of Eastern Europe, let alone the West. Shortages, food rationing, long lines in stores, and acute poverty were endemic. But the Soviet Union had known far greater calamities and coped without sacrificing an iota of the state's grip on society and economy, much less surrendering it.

Nor did any key parameter of economic performance prior to 1985 point to a rapidly advancing disaster. From 1981 to 1985 the growth of the country's GDP, though slowing down compared with the 1960s and 1970s, averaged 1.9 percent a year. The same lackadaisical but hardly catastrophic pattern continued through 1989. Budget deficits, which since the French Revolution have been considered among the prominent portents of a coming revolutionary crisis, equaled less than 2 percent of GDP in 1985. Although growing rapidly, the gap remained under 9 percent through 1989 — a size most economists would find quite manageable.

The sharp drop in oil prices, from $66 a barrel in 1980 to $20 a barrel in 1986 (in 2000 prices) certainly was a heavy blow to Soviet finances. Still, adjusted for inflation, oil was more expensive in the world markets in 1985 than in 1972, and only one-third lower than throughout the 1970s. And at the same time, Soviet incomes increased more than 2 percent in 1985, and inflation-adjusted wages continued to rise in the next five years through 1990 at an average of over 7 percent.

Yes, the stagnation was obvious and worrisome. But as Wesleyan University professor Peter Rutland has pointed out, "Chronic ailments, after all, are not necessarily fatal." Even the leading student of the revolution's economic causes, Anders Åslund, notes that from 1985 to 1987, the situation "was not at all dramatic."

From the regime's point of view, the political circumstances were even less troublesome. After 20 years of relentless suppression of political opposition, virtually all the prominent dissidents had been imprisoned, exiled (as Andrei Sakharov had been since 1980), forced to emigrate, or had died in camps and jails.

There did not seem to be any other signs of a pre-revolutionary crisis either, including the other traditionally assigned cause of state failure — external pressure. On the contrary, the previous decade was correctly judged to amount "to the realization of all major Soviet military and diplomatic desiderata," as American historian and diplomat Stephen Sestanovich has written. Of course, Afghanistan increasingly looked like a long war, but for a 5-million-strong Soviet military force the losses there were negligible. Indeed, though the enormous financial burden of maintaining an empire was to become a major issue in the post-1987 debates, the cost of the Afghan war itself was hardly crushing: Estimated at $4 billion to $5 billion in 1985, it was an insignificant portion of the Soviet GDP.

Nor was America the catalyzing force. The "Reagan Doctrine" of resisting and, if possible, reversing the Soviet Union's advances in the Third World did put considerable pressure on the perimeter of the empire, in places like Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, and Ethiopia. Yet Soviet difficulties there, too, were far from fatal.

As a precursor to a potentially very costly competition, Reagan's proposed Strategic Defense Initiative indeed was crucial — but it was far from heralding a military defeat, given that the Kremlin knew very well that effective deployment of space-based defenses was decades away. Similarly, though the 1980 peaceful anti-communist uprising of the Polish workers had been a very disturbing development for Soviet leaders, underscoring the precariousness of their European empire, by 1985 Solidarity looked exhausted. The Soviet Union seemed to have adjusted to undertaking bloody "pacifications" in Eastern Europe every 12 years — Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in 1980 — without much regard for the world's opinion.

This, in other words, was a Soviet Union at the height of its global power and influence, both in its own view and in the view of the rest of the world. "We tend to forget," historian Adam Ulam would note later, "that in 1985, no government of a major state appeared to be as firmly in power, its policies as clearly set in their course, as that of the USSR."

Certainly, there were plenty of structural reasons — economic, political, social — *why* the Soviet Union should have collapsed as it did, yet they fail to explain fully *how* it happened *when* it happened. How, that is, between 1985 and 1989, in the absence of sharply worsening economic, political, demographic, and other structural conditions, did the state and its economic system suddenly begin to be seen as shameful, illegitimate, and intolerable by enough men and women to become doomed?

LIKE VIRTUALLY ALL modern revolutions, the latest Russian one was started by a hesitant liberalization "from above" — and its rationale extended well beyond the necessity to correct the economy or make the international environment more benign. The core of Gorbachev's enterprise was undeniably idealistic: He wanted to build a more moral Soviet Union.

For though economic betterment was their banner, there is little doubt that Gorbachev and his supporters first set out to right moral, rather than economic, wrongs. Most of what they said publicly in the early days of perestroika now seems no more than an expression of their anguish over the spiritual decline and corrosive effects of the Stalinist past. It was the beginning of a desperate search for answers to the big questions with which every great revolution starts: What is a good, dignified life? What constitutes a just social and economic order? What is a decent and legitimate state? What should such a state's relationship with civil society be?

"A new moral atmosphere is taking shape in the country," Gorbachev told the Central Committee at the January 1987 meeting where he declared glasnost — openness — and democratization to be the foundation of his perestroika, or restructuring, of Soviet society. "A reappraisal of values and their creative rethinking is under way." Later, recalling his feeling that "we couldn't go on like that any longer, and we had to change life radically, break away from the past malpractices," he called it his "*moral* position."

In a 1989 interview, the "godfather of glasnost," Aleksandr Yakovlev, recalled that, returning to the Soviet Union in 1983 after 10 years as the ambassador to Canada, he felt the moment was at hand when people would declare, "Enough! We cannot live like this any longer. Everything must be done in a new way. We must reconsider our concepts, our approaches, our views of the past and our future.... There has come an understanding that it is simply impossible to live as we lived before — intolerably, humiliatingly."

To Gorbachev's prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, the "moral [*nravstennoe*] state of the society" in 1985 was its "most terrifying" feature:

> *[We] stole from ourselves, took and gave bribes, lied in the reports, in newspapers, from high podiums, wallowed in our lies, hung medals on one another. And all of this — from top to bottom and from bottom to top.*

Another member of Gorbachev's very small original coterie of liberalizers, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, was just as pained by ubiquitous lawlessness and corruption. He recalls telling Gorbachev in the winter of 1984-1985: "Everything is rotten. It has to be changed."

Back in the 1950s, Gorbachev's predecessor Nikita Khrushchev had seen firsthand how precarious was the edifice of the house that Stalin built on terror and lies. But this fifth generation of Soviet leaders was more confident of the regime's resilience. Gorbachev and his group appeared to believe that what was right was also politically manageable. Democratization, Gorbachev declared, was "not a slogan but the essence of perestroika." Many years later he told interviewers:

> *The Soviet model was defeated not only on the economic and social levels; it was defeated on a cultural level. Our society, our people, the most educated, the most intellectual, rejected that model on the cultural level because it does not respect the man, oppresses him spiritually and politically.*

That reforms gave rise to a revolution by 1989 was due largely to another "idealistic" cause: Gorbachev's deep and personal aversion to violence and, hence, his stubborn refusal to resort to mass coercion when the scale and depth of change began to outstrip his original intent. To deploy Stalinist repression even to "preserve the system" would have been a betrayal of his deepest convictions. A witness recalls Gorbachev saying in the late 1980s, "We are told that we should pound the fist on the table," and then clenching his hand in an illustrative fist. "Generally speaking," continued the general secretary, "it could be done. But one does not feel like it."

THE ROLE OF ideas and ideals in bringing about the Russian revolution comes into even sharper relief when we look at what was happening outside the Kremlin. A leading Soviet journalist and later a passionate herald of glasnost, Aleksandr Bovin, wrote in 1988 that the ideals of perestroika had "ripened" amid people's increasing "irritation" at corruption, brazen thievery, lies, and the obstacles in the way of honest work. Anticipations of "substantive changes were in the air," another witness recalled, and they forged an appreciable constituency for radical reforms. Indeed, the expectations that greeted the coming to power of Gorbachev were so strong, and growing, that they shaped his actual policy. Suddenly, ideas themselves became a material, structural factor in the unfolding revolution.

The credibility of official ideology, which in Yakovlev's words, held the entire Soviet political and economic system together "like hoops of steel," was quickly weakening. New perceptions contributed to a change in attitudes toward the regime and "a shift in values." Gradually, the legitimacy of the political arrangements began to be questioned. In an instance of Robert K. Merton's immortal "Thomas theorem" — "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequence" — the actual deterioration of the Soviet economy became consequential only after and because of a fundamental shift in how the regime's performance was perceived and evaluated.

Writing to a Soviet magazine in 1987, a Russian reader called what he saw around him a "radical break [*perelom*] in consciousness." We know that he was right because Russia's is the first great revolution whose course was charted in public opinion polls almost from the beginning. Already at the end of 1989, the first representative national public opinion survey found overwhelming support for competitive elections and the legalization of parties other than the Soviet Communist Party — after four generations under a one-party dictatorship and with independent parties still illegal. By mid-1990, more than half those surveyed in a Russian region agreed that "a healthy economy" was more likely if "the government allows individuals to do as they wish." Six months later, an all-Russia poll found 56 percent supporting a rapid or gradual transition to a market economy. Another year passed, and the share of the pro-market respondents increased to 64 percent.

Those who instilled this remarkable "break in consciousness" were no different from those who touched off the other classic revolutions of modern times: writers, journalists, artists. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, such men and women "help to create that general awareness of dissatisfaction, that solidified public opinion, which ... creates effective demand for revolutionary change." Suddenly, "the entire political education" of the nation becomes the "work of its men of letters."

And so it was in Soviet Russia. The lines to newspaper kiosks — sometimes crowds around the block that formed at six in the morning, with each daily run often sold out in two hours — and the skyrocketing subscriptions to the leading liberal newspapers and magazines testify to the devastating power of the most celebrated essayists of glasnost, or in Samuel Johnson's phrase, the "teachers of truth": the economist Nikolai Shmelyov; the political philosophers Igor Klyamkin and Alexander Tsypko; brilliant essayists like Vasily Selyunin, Yuri Chernichenko, Igor Vinogradov, and Ales Adamovich; the journalists Yegor Yakovlev, Len Karpinsky, Fedor Burlatsky, and at least two dozen more.

To them, a moral resurrection was essential. This meant not merely an overhaul of the Soviet political and economic systems, not merely an upending of social norms, but a revolution on the individual level: a change in the personal character of the Russian subject. As Mikhail Antonov declared in a seminal 1987 essay, "So What Is Happening to Us?" in the magazine *Oktyabr*, the people had to be "saved" — not from external dangers but "most of all from themselves, from the consequences of those demoralizing processes that kill the noblest human qualities." Saved how? By making the nascent liberalization fateful, irreversible — not Khrushchev's short-lived "thaw," but a climate change. And what would guarantee this irreversibility? Above all, the appearance of a free man who would be "immune to the recurrences of spiritual slavery." The weekly magazine *Ogoniok*, a key publication of glasnost, wrote in February 1989 that only "man incapable of being a police informer, of betraying, and of lies, no matter in whose or what name, can save us from the re-emergence of a totalitarian state."

The circuitous nature of this reasoning — to save the people one had to save perestroika, but perestroika could be saved only if it was capable of changing man "from within" — did not seem to trouble anyone. Those who thought out loud about these matters seemed to assume that the country's salvation through perestroika and the extrication of its people from the spiritual morass were tightly — perhaps, inextricably — interwoven, and left it at that. What mattered was reclaiming the people to citizenship from "serfdom" and "slavery." "Enough!" declared Boris Vasiliev, the author of a popular novella of the period about World War II, which was made into an equally well-received film. "Enough lies, enough servility, enough cowardice. Let's remember, finally, that we are all citizens. Proud citizens of a proud nation!"

DELVING INTO THE causes of the French Revolution, de Tocqueville famously noted that regimes overthrown in revolutions tend to be less repressive than the ones preceding them. Why? Because, de Tocqueville surmised, though people "may suffer less," their "sensibility is exacerbated."

As usual, Tocqueville was onto something hugely important. From the Founding Fathers to the Jacobins and Bolsheviks, revolutionaries have fought under essentially the same banner: advancement of human dignity. It is in the search for dignity through liberty and citizenship that glasnost's subversive sensibility lives — and will continue to live. Just as the pages of *Ogoniok* and *Moskovskie Novosti* must take pride of place next to Boris Yeltsin on the tank as symbols of the latest Russian revolution, so should Internet pages in Arabic stand as emblems of the present revolution next to the images of rebellious multitudes in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the Casbah plaza in Tunis, the streets of Benghazi, and the blasted towns of Syria. Languages and political cultures aside, their messages and the feelings they inspired were remarkably similar.

The fruit-seller Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation set off the Tunisian uprising that began the Arab Spring of 2011, did so "not because he was jobless," a demonstrator in Tunis told an American reporter, but "because he ... went to talk to the [local authorities] responsible for his problem and he was beaten — it was about the government." In Benghazi, the Libyan revolt started with the crowd chanting, "The people want an end to corruption!" In Egypt, the crowds were "all about the self-empowerment of a long-repressed people no longer willing to be afraid, no longer willing to be deprived of their freedom, and no longer willing to be humiliated by their own leaders," *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman reported from Cairo this February. He could have been reporting from Moscow in 1991.

"Dignity Before Bread!" was the slogan of the Tunisian revolution. The Tunisian economy had grown between 2 and 8 percent a year in the two decades preceding the revolt. With high oil prices, Libya on the brink of uprising also enjoyed an economic boom of sorts. Both are reminders that in the modern world, economic progress is not a substitute for the pride and self-respect of citizenship. Unless we remember this well, we will continue to be surprised — by the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet world, the Arab Spring, and, sooner or later, an inevitable democratic upheaval in China — just as we were in Soviet Russia. "The Almighty provided us with such a powerful sense of dignity that we cannot tolerate the denial of our inalienable rights and freedoms, no matter what real or supposed benefits are provided by 'stable' authoritarian regimes," the president of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbayeva, wrote this March. "It is the magic of people, young and old, men and women of different religions and political beliefs, who come together in city squares and announce that enough is enough."

Of course, the magnificent moral impulse, the search for truth and goodness, is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the successful remaking of a country. It may be enough to bring down the *ancien regime*, but not to overcome, in one fell swoop, a deep-seated authoritarian national political culture. The roots of the democratic institutions spawned by morally charged revolutions may prove too shallow to sustain a functioning democracy in a society with precious little tradition of grassroots self-organization and self-rule. This is something that is likely to prove a huge obstacle to the carrying out of the promise of the Arab Spring — as it has proved in Russia. The Russian moral renaissance was thwarted by the atomization and mistrust bred by 70 years of totalitarianism. And though Gorbachev and Yeltsin dismantled an empire, the legacy of imperial thinking for millions of Russians has since made them receptive to neo-authoritarian Putinism, with its propaganda leitmotifs of "hostile encirclement" and "Russia rising off its knees." Moreover, the enormous national tragedy (and national guilt) of Stalinism has never been fully explored and atoned for, corrupting the entire moral enterprise, just as the glasnost troubadours so passionately warned.

Which is why today's Russia appears once again to be inching toward another perestroika moment. Although the market reforms of the 1990s and today's oil prices have combined to produce historically unprecedented prosperity for millions, the brazen corruption of the ruling elite, new-style censorship, and open disdain for public opinion have spawned alienation and cynicism that are beginning to reach (if not indeed surpass) the level of the early 1980s.

One needs only to spend a few days in Moscow talking to the intelligentsia or, better yet, to take a quick look at the blogs on LiveJournal (*Zhivoy Zhurnal*), Russia's most popular Internet platform, or at the sites of the top independent and opposition groups to see that the motto of the 1980s — "We cannot live like this any longer!" — is becoming an article of faith again. The moral imperative of freedom is reasserting itself, and not just among the limited circles of pro-democracy activists and intellectuals. This February, the Institute of Contemporary Development, a liberal think tank chaired by President Dmitry Medvedev, published what looked like a platform for the 2012 Russian presidential election:

> *In the past Russia needed liberty to live [better]; it must now have it in order to survive.... The challenge of our times is an overhaul of the system of values, the forging of new consciousness. We cannot build a new country with the old thinking.... The best investment [the state can make in man] is Liberty and the Rule of Law. And respect for man's Dignity.*

It was the same intellectual and moral quest for self-respect and pride that, beginning with a merciless moral scrutiny of the country's past and present, within a few short years hollowed out the mighty Soviet state, deprived it of legitimacy, and turned it into a burned-out shell that crumbled in August 1991. The tale of this intellectual and moral journey is an absolutely central story of the 20th century's last great revolution.

Photo credit: ITAR-TASS/ Wikimedia commons

Like this article? Read an unlimited amount of articles when you Subcribe to FP Premium now 20% off.

YOU MAY LIKE

SPONSORED LINKS BY TABOOLA

DEATH OF THE DESKTOP - WHY ULTRA-SLIM LAPTOPS ARE THE WAY FORWARD.
CNN INTERNATIONAL FOR FUJITSU

PLAY IN BANGKOK! THE MOST ADDICTIVE GAME OF THE YEAR!
FORGE OF EMPIRES - FREE ONLINE GAME

THAT'S HOW YOU FIND SUPER CHEAP FLIGHTS!
SAVE70

THIS GAME WILL KEEP YOU UP ALL NIGHT!
VIKINGS: FREE ONLINE GAME

MORE FROM FOREIGN POLICY

BY TABOOLA

THIS MAP SHOWS CHINA'S HILARIOUS STEREOTYPES OF EUROPE

THE OUSTER OF MATTIS: SOME FOLLOW-UP DETAILS AND A WHITE HOUSE RESPONSE

ONE REASON YOU SHOULDN'T GO TO AFGHANISTAN WITH A BEARD

THE STARTLING PLIGHT OF CHINA'S LEFTOVER LADIES

5 THINGS THE PENTAGON ISN'T TELLING US ABOUT THE CHINESE MILITARY

THE REAL SHAME IN PAKISTAN