

1991

The Impoverished Superpower: Perestroika and the Soviet Military Burden

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Recommended Citation

Uhler, Walter C.; Rowen, Henry S.; and Wolf, Charles Jr. (1991) "The Impoverished Superpower: Perestroika and the Soviet Military Burden," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 44 : No. 4 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol44/iss4/29>

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Rowen, Henry S. and Charles Wolf, Jr. *The Impoverished Superpower: Perestroika and the Soviet Military Burden*. San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1990. 386pp. \$14.95

The phrase “impoverished superpower” resonates with meaning not only for the strategic analysts, diplomats, and scholars familiar with the conclusions of Paul Kennedy (*The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*) and Robert Gilpin (*The Political Economy of International Relations*), but also for a large number of Americans who have been bombarded with the prospect of living in a world subject to Japanese and German economic predominance. The phrase implies the deteriorating utility of weapons in a post-Cold War era and the consequential economic decline, vis-à-vis Japan and Germany, of the two powers which spent huge sums of money on those weapons. Rowen and Wolf’s book examines one of those powers, the Soviet Union. The book simply attempts to demonstrate that the economic burden caused by the Soviet military has proven to be greater than commonly thought.

The Impoverished Superpower contains eleven chapters of uneven quality that treat the term “impoverishment” narrowly and unimaginatively. Each was written by a participant in a March 1988 conference on this subject. Not all of the authors concern themselves with the economic burden imposed by the Soviet military. The chapter by Stephen M. Meyer, arguably the best, examines the three

levels of Soviet defense decision making, but concludes that “economic considerations have played a more intrusive role in Soviet defense policy-making than is commonly assumed.” Nevertheless, most of the chapters are closely associated with the book’s title.

David F. Epstein plausibly demonstrates that spending occurs for “a range of military and related activities that impose costs on the Soviet economy but are not included in the CIA estimate.” Anders Aslund and Richard E. Ericson conclude, not unreasonably, that the Soviet per capita Gross National Product (GNP) is significantly smaller than previously believed. Aslund believes that it is probably less than one-third that of the United States (in 1986), rather than the forty-nine percent calculated by the CIA. Thus, the increase in the numerator (military expenses), when combined with a decrease in the denominator (per capita GNP), results in a dramatically enlarged military burden—Epstein believes that it may be as large as twenty to twenty-eight percent of GNP. Although ostensibly persuasive, such conclusions rest upon abysmally poor Soviet statistical data which have been hewn here into intelligibility.

The book suffers from two additional problems. First, information which was current in March 1988, has been “dated” by subsequent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Second (and more important), the book offers no perspective or context for its conclusions. One searches in

vain for John L.H. Keep's conclusion (found in *Soldiers of the Tsar*, 1985) that Russians have endured an inordinate military burden for most of the past five hundred years. Given that perspective, this book's already narrow treatment of impoverishment appears even less compelling.

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Moynahan, Brian. *Claws of the Bear: The History of the Red Army from the Revolution to the Present*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. 468pp. \$24.95

Mr. Moynahan, the author of *Airport International* and *The Tourist Trap*, knows no Russian. Thus, one marvels at his courage in undertaking the difficult task of summarizing some of the most complex events in the twentieth century. He shows all the faults of an amateur historian. He presents no original research or ideas, and he is not aware of which secondary sources to avoid. For example, in his discussion of the Russian Civil War, he has relied on other amateur historians, such as Massie and Lockett, and lacks any understanding of the genuine issues, problems, and complexities of Soviet history. He has committed so many errors that it would be too tedious to enumerate them. His history is a mish-mash: the author is interested in personalities rather than historical issues; and the book lacks continuity, thus blurring the vast differences between eras. For Moynahan, as for the

pre-Gorbachev Soviet historians, Soviet history from the time of the Revolution to the present is all cut from the same cloth.

The first section not only adds nothing to our appreciation of the second but undermines our confidence in Mr. Moynahan's competence.

The second section describes the Soviet military during the waning years of the cold war, and it is somewhat better, because the author does not pretend to be a historian but is content to be a journalist, which in fact he is. He describes more or less reliably the various branches of the Soviet military, weapon systems, military doctrine and strategy, and the evolution of Soviet disarmament policies, and evaluates the fighting capacity of the soldiers. However, these chapters are not very much better than the first section. But the fault is not entirely the author's. It would be unfair to blame him for not foreseeing the vast changes which have occurred in the Soviet Union. After all, people far more knowledgeable than he did not predict the collapse of world communism. Nevertheless, in a book published in 1989 one would at least expect to find references to the devastatingly serious problems that the Soviet Union already faced, such as draft resistance and interethnic fighting.

But since the author wanted to convey a sense of the danger that the West faced from Soviet aggression, he dwelt upon Soviet capabilities rather than upon weaknesses and intentions.