

1990

Presidents Notes

Ronald J. Kurth

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Kurth, Ronald J. (1990) "Presidents Notes," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 43 : No. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol43/iss1/1>

This President's Forum is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.



President's Notes

Soviet Change in a Changing World

A standard catechism has developed on change in the Soviet Union. Early in the development of this catechism a procrustean bed was fashioned to which observations and arguments about change in the Soviet Union have been fitted selectively. Now this catechism, one that is remarkably optimistic, has gained permanence through repetition. However, it is too soon, and dangerous, to decide how the rest of the story will run. The supporters of the catechism of optimism seem to include the majority of our countrymen and Western friends. Many seem troubled by any view skeptical of the outcome of change in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, skepticism about change in the Soviet Union seems even more unacceptable because of the astonishing developments in Eastern Europe.

The specific axioms of this catechism—though thoroughly contradicted by history—really do not keep me awake at night. However, so that we can begin on common ground as I develop my argument, I offer the following tenets from its credo:

- Mr. Gorbachev leads the pursuit of peace.
- The Soviet people, even the KGB, have abandoned authoritarianism forever.
- We are on the threshold of saying farewell to arms.
- Since it is apparent that we have come to the end of the cold war, it is inevitable that democratic liberalism will everywhere be embraced.

Admiral Kurth spent 17 years in and out of the Soviet Union, including tours as Naval Attache (1975-1977) and Defense Attache (1985-1987). He is fluent in Russian and has a Ph.D. from Harvard in government (Soviet Studies).

Let me add quickly that I am not the last of the cold war warriors looking for comfort in the good ol' days. I know, as do you, that Mr. Gorbachev is committed to reform and has motivated more change in the Soviet Union in the last two years than occurred in the previous sixty.

We also ought to admit together that the pressure is very strong both to accept that Mr. Gorbachev is a prophet and that the farewell to arms has begun. We hear that the war now to be fought by our elected officials is not the cold war. Rather, we must fight the new wars on drugs, deficits, and environmental damage. I cannot imagine a candidate seeking election today who would publicly support investment in readiness against a Soviet threat of any kind. It simply won't play in Peoria. I saw it most of all on one bumper on the road to Maine: Three stickers: "Just say no," "Embrace your mother" (printed over a green planet Earth), and "Give peace a chance." One was missing: "Forgo an import." So, the imperatives of our country's current domestic issues as well as the lure of simplistic and repetitive analysis are pushing us away from thinking about even the possibility of undesirable consequences resulting from current events in the Soviet Union.

The problems which Gorbachev faces are enormous. The chance of failure is greater than that of success. The chance of chaos is real. And the resolution of chaos could easily become a new political form of Russian authoritarianism. That, in my judgment, has a reasonably high likelihood of being the final product of Mr. Gorbachev's search for a more economically sound Soviet Union.

Our proclivity for optimism is a natural outgrowth of America's culture. We place a positive and hopeful view on nations moving to free themselves from the bonds of totalitarianism. We support the underdog, and we make his champion more heroic and admirable than warranted by the champion's known behavior. As a body politic, we want to limit both the number and the complexity of the issues we think about. We tire of analysis stretching our cognitive limits. Perhaps we want to avoid the sacrifice so often attending drawn out struggles between nations. Perhaps we are inclined to believe that the human race is one and that human decency will inevitably emerge. We say that all people are created equal. We conclude easily that people are the same all over the globe and that Russians are really Americans in fur hats. It is at this point—the point of ignoring the characteristics of a distinctively unique Russian culture—that we are almost precipitously embracing a uniform but unrealistic optimism. It is my thesis that we ignore, at our own risk, the characteristics of Russian culture which will come to dominate the course and outcome of perestroika just as those same characteristics presided over the building of the Russian—and then Soviet—empires.

Soviet successes in foreign relations will not make perestroika work. Mr. Gorbachev's higher public standing than that of Mr. Bush in West Germany will not make perestroika work. Neither will bold and unilateral arms control

4 Naval War College Review

proposals. The only steps which could make perestroika work are events which take place inside Soviet borders.

The common sense of our focus on drugs, deficits and the environment draws our attention away from the shallowness of our popular analysis of events and prospects in the Soviet Union. It is these phenomena which underlie our outraged reaction when a senior public official dares to think out loud that Gorbachev's prospects are dim.

My argument looks at perestroika against the background of Russian culture. Let me turn to an expert witness, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. You may wish to argue with me about the great author's current state of mind. What you cannot deny, however, is that the author of *The First Circle*, *The Cancer Ward*, and *The Gulag Archipelago* knows Russian culture. In the Spring 1980 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Solzhenitsyn published an article entitled "Misconceptions About Russia Are a Threat to America." He said that one mistake is:

"... the failure to realize that communism is irredeemable, that there exist no 'better' variants of communism; that it is incapable of growing kinder, that it cannot survive as an ideology without using terror, and that, consequently, to coexist with communism on the same planet is impossible. Either it will spread, cancer-like, to destroy mankind, or else mankind will have to rid itself of communism (and even then face lengthy treatment for secondary tumors)."

Gorbachev is trying to put a different face on communism. It must have a kinder, more democratic face in his judgment if it is to reenergize an apathetic people and bypass the footdragging of eighteen million bureaucrats. But if Solzhenitsyn is right, then a Gorbachev who abandons force is a Gorbachev who cannot save communism. I have not met a Russian recently who believes that a return to the intimidation and terror of the past could happen. Thus, if Solzhenitsyn is right—and I think he is—Gorbachev is pursuing two opposing goals: the reform of the economy and the preservation of communist rule. At most he can achieve only one of these goals. His chance of achieving neither is high.

Consequently, I conclude that mankind is ridding itself of communism. But, I am arguing, in the Soviet Union communism is akin to a cancer which after 70 years has penetrated the body of the populace. It is a cancer whose cure will be long and whose secondary tumors could be threatening to the rest of us. Later in this same article, Solzhenitsyn writes that:

"... the only path down from the icy cliff of totalitarianism that I could propose was the slow and smooth descent via an authoritarian system. (If an unprepared people were to jump off that cliff directly into democracy, it would be crushed to an anarchical pulp.)"

Gorbachev has tried to be careful in his moves toward economic reform, which after all, *must* change communism, for economics is at the ideological

center of communism. But, if Solzhenitsyn is right, there can be no *reform* of communism, only its *destruction*. The death of the Soviet state and maybe of Russia—to use Solzhenitsyn's distinction—is the threat of the descent to an anarchical pulp of which he warns. I have used the word *chaos* and would be willing to accept possible definitions all the way from social unrest to civil war.

Look at what we are learning from inside the Soviet Union. Soviet youth and blue collar workers do not support perestroika, for to them there is no evidence of results. To them perestroika looks like new icing on a stale cake. A young Canadian student of the USSR, John Battle, who recently returned from a four-month stay in the Soviet Union, writes that:

“. . . continually unfulfilled promises and the inability of the party to adapt itself to new conditions during the 1970s and early 1980s, produced a generation of young people more interested in the pursuit of sex, drugs, heavy metal and the avoidance of military education and service, than in challenging the higher authorities or forming new privately-run cooperatives. The death of idealism among Soviet youth has fostered a 'drop out and turn off' attitude that shuns any type of activity even vaguely resembling politics.”

Workers now go to the store only to encounter shortages they have not seen in twenty years. Professor Bill Fuller of my faculty, a Russian historian who also recently returned from a five-month visit, reports that, while he was there, there were no matches; for a time there was no cheese; sugar was rationed; and that, without Russian soap, there were lines blocks long for North Korean soap. Sergei Petrov, a Russian friend who has just immigrated, told me that last spring bologna sausage was so thin and watery that butchers would sell only the entire casing, for if they sliced it open, the contents would all run out.

Finally, the peasants are not happy because agrarian reform—their hope for long-term rental of land from collective farm plots—is nearly dead in the water, sabotaged by bureaucratic interests.

In the West, we tend to exaggerate the societal health produced by the sunshine of glasnost and nascent democratization. Old communist icons, the glue of Soviet socialist society, are being broken. Let me give you an example from the new Soviet film, “*Solovyetskaya Vlast*.” This film relates the story of the most brutal political prison of all, that which may have served as the template for other Soviet concentration camps. You can read about it in the first volume of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The film documents the origin of the camp in 1919, *with Lenin's approval*.

Glasnost is also filling in the blanks in Soviet history. Now Russians know that it was Russians who killed the Polish officers in the Katyn Forest. Now they know that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty of 1939 had secret protocols. Now they know it was an agreement which was not politically necessary. Now they know it was both illegal and immoral.

To us, the openness these revelations exemplify is good, but I have met many ordinary Russians who revere Stalin even after years of such disturbing revelations. They revere him not because he sat on a pedestal of defensible political ethics, but because he was an authoritarian figure who could make Soviet society function. Respect for that kind of authority is a major characteristic of Russian culture.

In the West we were much attracted to the scenes from the Congress of People's Deputies last spring in which elected representatives demanded an accounting from public figures. Even the KGB got a scathing dose of sunlight. But Russians who watched the Congress endlessly on their televisions were disappointed. What they saw was the weak authority, the shallow competence, and the fulsome mendacity of the party leadership. It was neither pleasant nor inspiring to witness Gorbachev turning off Andrei Sakharov's microphone, regardless of the latter's conduct, for both were men who had won support and admiration.

Glasnost, perestroika and democratization have brought some truth but they have also brought gloom and despair. Without an authoritarian system, Russians are afraid. That fear will not disappear easily or quickly. Russians know the disparate peoples who form their state, their lack of a historical development of social and political institutions like those of Western liberal democracies, and the capacity of their people for violence. They fear chaos. The prop which holds Gorbachev in power is more likely the severity of the crisis than anyone's hopes for perestroika.

We are inclined to help Gorbachev. It is in our cultural nature to want to bid farewell to arms, to put the cold war behind us and to encourage a greater Soviet reliance on market forces. We believe in bringing the Russians into the international community, whose embrace we think may serve as a catalyst for progress toward liberal democracy. I hear words about countries which trade together not having wars together.

However, until the ruble is convertible, the Soviet Union cannot function effectively in the international economic market. The Soviet Union cannot convert the ruble until its domestic economy is radically reorganized. Gorbachev cannot reorganize the domestic economy until he motivates the work force. He cannot provide that motivation without a drastic expansion of consumer goods. The Soviet government cannot pay for those consumer goods until the heavy industry and military sectors are savagely reduced. However, Gorbachev cannot cut the military so far that he risks the failure of Soviet foreign policy and vast disorder throughout the domestic empire. He cannot control the threat of public disorder without sacrificing the international goodwill upon which he counts so heavily (and that is where we come in).

Others have suggested a Marshall Plan for the Soviet Union. Even if such a program were ideologically possible in the United States, I wonder if the

capital investment possible could make a difference in the Soviet Union. Privately, Russian intellectuals are telling American friends not to try to save the Soviet Union. Their words are based on the view that our help would only prolong the agony. They believe that the Soviet Union must accept its uncertain future, the possible descent to chaos, and must purge itself of its ills: the party, communism, its leadership and all else. I find that view typical of the Russian culture: suffering builds character and earns redemption.

Just as many of those who live there, I too fear chaos in the Soviet Union. First, its resolution would most likely proceed through some new form of authoritarianism, much as Solzhenitsyn tells us. Moreover, I fear that the strength of our own political and social needs—drugs, deficits and the environment—could so distract us that we would not notice the buildup to an unacceptable level of danger inside the Soviet borders until, helplessly, we could only watch it spill outside. Anarchy and civil war inside the Soviet Union would not be events like those of 1825, 1905 or 1917-21. Should this happen, we will not watch from safely outside Russian or Soviet borders while an underdeveloped peasant country resolves its problems in some way. Now we are dealing with a country which is—or has been—a military superpower. Now the Soviet Union is a country with nuclear weapons and energy reactors like that at Chernobyl. These circumstances do not allow complete and irresponsible societal chaos without risk to external powers. If we do not involve ourselves willingly and early, pressures to do so later could approach the levels of political blackmail.

Crotchety, apparently consumed in anger and passionately dogmatic, the old man in Vermont, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, does not like us much. But he likes communists a great deal less. As a Russian Slavophile and a Christian, he vents his spleen of *double* strength on *them*. Our current measure of Solzhenitsyn may tend too much to diminish due regard for his cultural insight.

Let us conclude with Solzhenitsyn that Soviet communism cannot exist free of force and possibly terror. Let us also conclude that Gorbachev would never revert to force and terror to save communism. If we do these things, we must then conclude that communism in the Soviet Union is collapsing. Most Russians whom I know have reached this conclusion. They are unwilling to offer any additional prediction. Nevertheless, let us predict that communism will collapse either peacefully and slowly—incrementally—or violently and rapidly—chaotically. Our interest lies in the success of the incremental transition, and we ought to do all possible to encourage that kind of outcome.

With incrementalism as our policy goal, can we not look at, and work toward, those steps which might help? I will conclude with one vote of support and two ideas.

I vote for the administration in its policy on arms control. The push by the President is correct and should continue. I would press meaningful and

verifiable decreases in nuclear arms everywhere and conventional arms on the central front to the lowest prudent limits.

Next, I would try to pursue constructive and imaginative ideas. Could we help with our best minds to tackle the problem of ruble convertibility? We do not have to be asked. Why not tackle the problem as best we can with our own intellectual resources?

Joint ventures which work on trade-in-kind seem dead-ended to me. Given the magnitude of the problem, natural resources appear of little use as trade options. We must seek to do better.

On to the second idea. The USSR did not come into existence by the consent of the governed. It came to its current empire by fire, terror and political treachery. Millions were sacrificed, and old hatreds are still very much alive in the Soviet Union. The problem is that history is seldom justly avenged. The clock is seldom turned back from *de facto* to *de jure*. The nationality issue in the USSR is potentially explosive. Were it to begin, there would be no turning back from a massive use of the Red Army for renewed subjugation. Once it begins, an enormous bloodletting is possible. Could we not participate by political means to help encourage incrementally more autonomy acceptable to Moscow and the republics? There may be precious little time to lead in this endeavor.

These then are my vote and my two ideas. You may have a vote and some ideas of your own. My two are bold, maybe altruistic. But, I believe now is the moment to try. It is our moment. We may not have another.



RONALD J. KURTH

Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy

President, Naval War College