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President's Notes

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President's Notes

The Dialectics of Disillusion or Can the Soviet Union Really Reform?

We often express our consensus as an American polity with quotations, slogans or aphorisms. For example, all of our coins are engraved with the aphorisms "Liberty," "E Pluribus Unum," and "In God We Trust." *Forbes* magazine devotes its final page to aphorisms and quotations, and John Bartlett is famous for a book of them. We are further inclined to accept these slogans, trademarks or aphorisms as statements of popular belief or accepted truths. Typical Americans are not likely to examine such aphorisms under the microscope of conscience. One of my favorites for reflection is the statement on the New Hampshire license plate: "Live Free or Die."

Recently I encountered the work of a French Renaissance political theorist, Étienne de La Boétie, 1530-1563. Boétie wrote that "all servitude is voluntary, and the slave is more despicable than the tyrant is hateful . . . liberty is the only joy upon which men do not seem to insist . . . resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed."

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

It occurs to me that intellectuals may be more devoted to aphorisms than ordinary folks. And ordinary folks in the course of an ordinary day may not recognize the penetrating truth of what Boétie had to say about accommodating tyranny.

Not long ago in Newport I saw a man in a car that carried those New Hampshire license plates, reminders of the political circumstances which might give him cause to consider dying. As he drove he flipped a gum wrapper out of the open window, and I could not help but contrast the nature of that unconcerned act with the principle espoused on his license plates. The point for each one of us is, when do we convert ideas to action?

In this context, consider current circumstances in the Soviet Union. Does the conversion from perception to correction, from slogan to action happen differently in the mind of a Russian inside *his* or *her* political system than it does in the mind of an American within our system? When does the dark threat of loss or the sunny promise of betterment move thought to potential action?

Take for example the mental process of the average Russian in places like Irkutsk, Yakutsk, Dushanbe or Minsk: is disillusion with the Soviet social system a burning issue in the breast of a Tadjik or a Siberian, and is it capable of moving average Russians to want reform? That would be reform from the bottom up. Is the Soviet Communist Party leadership capable of providing real reform? That would be reform from the top down. Just how is the current phenomenon of reform occurring in the Soviet Union? It appears to be from the top down. Does exhortation from the party leaders in Moscow for such reform touch a Russian who may be driving his Zhiguli in Omsk under a street banner proclaiming *perestroika* as he flips a candy wrapper out the window?

Mikhail Gorbachev has said that a revolution no less significant than that which occurred in 1917 must occur in the Soviet Union. He has said from the beginning that there must be *novoye miushleniye*, or new thinking, which he describes as a complete break with the mind-sets of recent decades. But he is careful not to let that new thinking exclude Leninism, and he is very careful to preserve the legitimacy of the party's power and the Soviet socialist form of government. Clearly, he is placing the new revolution in an unrevolutionary straight jacket. A basic tenet of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which he apparently seeks to preserve, is that a ruling class or group does not yield its power voluntarily. Power is seized by force and by a proletariat which has cast off its chains.

Gorbachev seems aware of the fact that the degree of reform he wants demands some kind of shift in power. He has said that previous attempts at economic reform failed because they were not accompanied by political reform. By political reform he must mean shifts in the distribution of political power. In fact *he* is at the head of the ruling class in his own power structure and, logically, his personal power likely would be the first target

4 Naval War College Review

for change. So on the one hand, his own Marxist-Leninist ideology tells him that he and his type will *not* yield power, and, on the other hand, he seems to be saying that they *must* if the country is to avoid an economic crisis.

Is Gorbachev looking for a compromise measure so that, like Janus, the god with two faces, he can look toward both objectives? Perhaps that is what he sought from the party conference in June which gave him a Supreme Soviet which promises to look a little more like a parliament. The conference also gave him a new, more legitimate, apparently more empowered and more parliamentarily selected chairman, the executive position which he had wanted to call "The President."

And, apparently, he will take that position for himself.

If all of this is the quality of Gorbachev's new thinking, it is neither new nor very exciting. It certainly is not revolutionary, but is it being made to *look* revolutionary? Vladimir Tismaneanu, in a recent article in *Society* (May-June 1988, p. 9) wrote:

"Communist regimes are more than ever ideologically vulnerable. Since ideology and power are inextricably linked in the nature of communist systems, increased social conflicts should be expected in the countries of the Soviet Empire. Against the oppositional actions and programs, the rulers cannot offer more than promises impossible to be fulfilled. Whenever this tactic does not work, they resort to naked violence to mute their critics."*

In Tismaneanu's terms, the "oppositional actions and programs" I am talking about are apathetic "workers" who do not work and the stratagems of bureaucrats who drag their feet on *perestroika*. Is Gorbachev offering empty promises? If they do prove empty, should we brace for violence when they fail? If so, what form might the violence take? Remember, it was Yegor Ligachev, the second most powerful man in the country, who, at the party conference, cautioned Gorbachev not to enter a room unless he knew the way out again.

Glasnost and democratization are the programs by which Gorbachev hopes to raise the political consciousness of the masses, get the people involved, convince them, and motivate them to produce the economic goals of *perestroika* to avoid the severe economic crisis, on the threshold of which, he says, the country now stands.

The Russian driver in Omsk, tossing candy wrappers out of his Zhiguli as he passes the banners with slogans about *perestroika*, may be like the New Hampshire driver who does not see any signs of tyranny that might make him think of dying for his freedom. The Russian may not see anything that Gorbachev promises to be so much better than what he has that he is influenced to work harder.


*Part of this essay's title is based on Mr. Tismaneanu's article.

Gorbachev has taken away the vodka; he wants more hours from the factory worker at lower piece-rates in order to increase production and get the country moving; a worker now can be fired and the State is promising to tolerate unemployment. But there is not an increase in consumer goods on the shelves. The last sector to be touched has been agriculture. Apparently there is less meat now rather than more, according to complaints at the party conference. Just *whose* revolution is this?

I think we Americans are in danger of developing a great misimpression. *Glasnost* is definitely out in front, and I have witnessed that fact on Soviet television, in Soviet print media and in the Soviet theaters, as well as on U.S. television programs and in the U.S. print media. However, *glasnost* is more the arena of the Soviet intellectuals than that of the Soviet workers. And like their forebears, the Russian intelligentsia, Soviet intellectuals are largely alienated from the Soviet workers out in the provinces.

The reforming Soviet socialist world of Gorbachev is new and exciting for Soviet intellectuals but appears to be humdrum for Soviet workers. Just as America could never defend its freedom unless our New Hampshire driver felt his freedom so threatened that he marched with his license plate on his chest rather than on his car bumper, so Gorbachev is unlikely to achieve *perestroika* until Soviet workers see a clear chance for better living standards. They have had ample experience with promises—and for that matter, with political violence. Gorbachev must enthrall the workers as he has the intellectuals. Thus far, the great kinetic energy of *glasnost*, which I think we Americans feel and which I fear may mislead our analysis, offers no direct prediction of success for *perestroika* and democratization.

Were he with us today, Boétie might want to condemn the Russian common folks, especially under Stalinism, for failing to resolve to serve no more. He might even judge them as being more despicable than the tyrant was hateful. But the common Russians would likely be wary of an intellectual like Boétie, for they think that the ink in his pen comes cheaply. They are wary because they live in a society whose Marxist-Leninist ideology came from a small minority of intellectuals. It promised them bread, land, and political power and then turned on them, like so many revolutions that eat their children. They will be wary, for—somewhat like my New Hampshire driver—*perestroika* has not yet touched what they hold dear.


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