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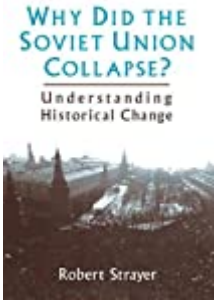

Robert Strayer. *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?: Understanding Historical Change.* New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. ix + 219 pp. $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0004-2; $77.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0003-5.

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The Soviet Union as a Piece of the Larger Puzzle

If one is looking for a singular answer or a simplified explanation on why the government of the USSR came to an end, then Robert Strayer's *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?* will be a disappointing read. The author wants the reader to think about differing viewpoints, and not be told the "correct" one. Approaching the subject from the premise that the demise of the USSR can serve as a case study on the "processes of social change more generally" (p. 4), the author sets up a framework for drawing conclusions that could be applied to analyzing historical events in general. This is important because it demystifies what happened to the Soviet Union by subjecting it to universal analytical considerations. Perhaps for similar reasons Strayer is critical of the prevailing "fatal flaw" argument (pp. 35-37), the notion that the Soviet system of government carried its own seeds of destruction and was destined to fail, as if human agency is of little account.

The book's organization, as judged by its chapter headings, reveals the contours of Strayer's thinking. After an introduction in which presuppositions are explained, Chapter One focuses on background ("Legacies: The Burdens of Russian and Soviet History"). This is followed by an overview of what took place in the USSR after Stalin's rule ("Cracks in the Foundation: The Post-Stalin Years"). Chapter Three then considers the Gorbachev period ("Reviving Soviet Socialism: The Gorbachev Experiment") and Chapter Four offers insight on the ramifications that followed ("Unintended Consquences: Economic Crisis and Social Awakening"). The concluding chapter ("Passing into History: The Final Act of the Soviet Drama") reviews the final days of Soviet power.

At the end of each chapter there are "questions and controversies" the author offers commentary on and then leaves it up to the reader to mull over. This makes for important and interesting discussion. Some of the questions Strayer leaves us with are as follows: Was the Soviet collapse historically unique? Was the USSR doomed from the start? What held the Soviet empire together? Did Western pressure push the Soviets over the brink? Who acts in history–great men, elites, or the masses? Why did the USSR experience a peaceful death? What is beneficial by the sum total of this analysis is that Strayer presents differing views and acts as a wise facilitator rather than

a judge handing down verdicts of history.

While thoughtful in presentation, the reading is never dogmatic. Some of the organizing concepts used in the book include: great power conflict, imperial decline, revolution, ethnic conflict, colonialism, economic development, totalitarian ideology, and democracy building. The book is also augmented by extracts from documentary and literary sources, giving the reader additional perspective, as well as material to follow up on.

The book, not surprisingly, credits Mikhail Gorbachev for setting into motion the events that would lead to the end of the Soviet Union, although some mention (but not enough, it seems) is given to Yuri Andropov who "provided Gorbachev with a more positive model for many of his own early reforms" (p. 91). According to Strayer, the Gorbachev factor discredits the "fatal flaw" argument because it does not explain "how a person of real reformist inclinations could rise to the top of a system that normally filtered out anyone who might pose a threat to it" (p. 87). But what could have been elaborated on and explained more clearly is the long line of reformist tradition extending far back in Russian history. The views of Strayer regarding Gorbachev are compatible with those of Gail Sheehy[1], whom he fails to mention in his bibliography.

The title of Strayer's book, while typical and formulaic, is unfortunate.[2] "Collapse" is suggestive of the "fatal flaw" argument Strayer brings to discredit: a system that collapses implies a structural defect in which certain events were predictable. To argue that the Soviet Union collapsed is as problematic as to report that it disappeared, another word circulating in book titles.[3] The government obviously changed, but the new system is forged out of the old. If there had been a collapse, then Russian society would not have been able to continue as well as it has. (What took place in Russia, for example, was less disruptive than what happened in Liberia around the same time.) In Russia there was not collapse or disappearance, but a transformation –a process which is still being worked out. As Richard Pipes has noted, "The new coexists with the old in an uneasy symbosis. No fresh elites have emerged: the country's political, economic, military, and cultural institutions are run by ex-communists..."[4]

>From my own personal observation, having lived in Russia from the end of 1992 to the middle of 1997, I know that at the everyday level the Soviet system did not simply disappear. Soviet money was still in use in Russia through the summer of 1993; Soviet passports were not replaced until 1997. *Propiskas* (residency permits) are officially no longer Russian policy, but today's reality is that not having such documentation makes finding a job very difficult and the access to public health care nearly impossible. Many bureaucratic forms continue to have "USSR" printed at the top and many of the government workers shuffling the paperwork were on the job prior to 1991, enforcing more or less the same regulations.

In many respects (but not always) the overall ideology has changed, of course, but the structure was never dismantled and rebuilt. One flag has replaced another, the old national anthem has been scrapped but not yet replaced. There is a new constitution, which is enforced to the same standard as was the the Soviet one. The fact is, many things are the same today as they were during the Soviet period. Meanwhile, discussion ensues about finding an "idea" for the country to live by. As the Czarist regime extended into the Soviet one, so now the Soviet system extends into the Russian Federation. This talk of "collapse" or "disappearance" is a type of fiction, which should be seen for what it is: Western discourse consisting of Cold War victory ritual.

In any analysis of why the Soviet government ended, one needs to keep foremost in mind that it was an internal change that took place. The Soviet Union, unlike the Roman Empire, was not conquered by outside forces. During the August coup it was Russian citizens, not foreign invaders, who erected barricades around the White House and stood firm against a potential reawakening of totalitarianism. We can recall the front-page headlines of the *New York Times* after the Communist Party was stripped of power: "SOVIETS BAR COMMUNIST PARTY ACTIVITIES; REPUBLICS PRESS SEARCH FOR NEW ORDER" (30 August 1991). That headline is accurate, more so than much of the subsequent scholarship, because it indicates that it was forces within the Soviet Union that brought about change. What outside pressures (if any) these powers were responding to is a matter of debate, but this not the same as Goths and Vandals sacking Rome. Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a popular citiation by scholars attempting to make sense of what happened to the Soviet government, is a less than suitable analytical aid because the parallels are more imaginative than actual.

Strayer writes a moving account of the failed August coup, showing how, other than foreign media being broadcast into the country, it was a Russian people's resistance that doomed it to failure (pp. 190-194). In Moscow, fifty thousand to seventy thousand people

manned the barricades at one time. In Leningrad, over a hundred thousand people gathered outside of the Hermitage to show their defiance of the coup, significantly more than the number of revolutionaries that "stormed" the Winter Palace in 1917. Boris Yeltsin, the only nationally elected official at the time, barely escaped getting arrested by the coup plotters and afterwards encouraged the massive resistance. George Bush, vacationing in Maine during the time of the coup,looked small and insignificant, as well as confused, when talking with Yeltsin over the phone on live television. If this was the beginning of the "collapse" or the "disappearance" of the Soviet Union, it was Russians who were totally in charge of the situation.

One other aspect of Cold War victory ritual that is apparent in Strayer's book is the discrediting of socialism. The significance of such victory ritual is that by proclaiming socialism a failure, capitalism gets affirmed. This is scholarship acting as hegemony's servant. But Strayer's reflection on socialism is superficial: "It was a grand prophetic, utopian vision of human freedom and the end of history, and it inspired socialist movements of workers and intellectuals amid the grim harshness of Europe's industrialization in the ninetheenth century. Nowhere, however,did these movements come to power, save in the most unlikely of countries, tsarist Russia. . . ." (p. 5). Such an overview fails to recognize the influence of the socialist movements which prompted reform, and it dismisses examples such as Sweden where such movements did come to power and left a lasting (and positive) legacy. Nor does that overview reveal the cold and bloody reactions that stopped socialism in its tracks when it otherwise might have been born, as was the case in Europe in 1848. Furthermore, Strayer fails to consider whether or not the Soviet Union actually practiced socialism. As has been suggested, the Soviet Union was an example of state capitalism.[5]

These two main criticisms aside, they do not diminish the value and importance of Strayer's book. In a relatively short amount of space, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?* covers a lot of confusing history and presents it in a clear and manageable manner. While there may be no new insights offered, they are nonetheless presented in a framework that takes into consideration the context of global history. This book should prove to be a useful text for the college classroom, whether the class be history, political science, or sociology.

Notes

[1]. Gail Sheehy, *The Man Who Changed the World: The Lives of Mikhail S. Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

[2]. Other books marred with titles perpetuating this cliche include: Manuel Castells, *The Collapse of Soviet Communism* (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, University of California, 1995); Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus, *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995); William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); William E. Watson, *The Collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1998); Paul A. Winters, ed., *The Collapse of the Soviet Union* (San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 1999).

[3]. For example, Wisla Suraska, *How the Soviet Union Disappeared: An Essay on the Causes of Dissolution* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

[4]. Richard Pipes, "Is Russia Still an Enemy?" *Foreign Affairs*, 76 (September/October 1997), p. 67.

[5]. See Patrick McGuire and Donald McQuarie, eds., *From Left Bank to Mainstream: Historical Debates and Contemporary Research in Marxist Sociology* (Dix Hills, N.Y.: General Hall, Inc., 1994), p. 3.

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