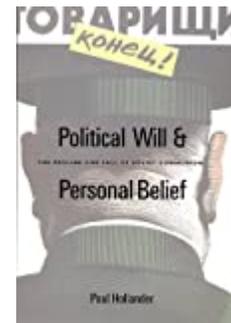




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Disillusion and the Soviet Demise

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Paul Hollander, who fled Communist Hungary after the failed revolt of 1956, is a distinguished political scientist and analyst of Communist affairs known for his conservative views. In this thoughtful if not entirely innovative work he seeks “to shed light on the connections between institutional decay and the disillusionment of leaders and political elites” (p. 4). Disavowing the customary focus on “impersonal forces of history and politics” (p. 3), he argues that “the leaders’ loss of political will, intertwined with their eroding sense of legitimacy, appears to be the crucial factor in the unraveling of the communist systems” (p. 24).

Hollander declares at the start: “More than any other of my writings this book is a product of plain curiosity and a desire to better understand something important. There was no particular point I wished to prove, no belief to vindicate, no polemics to pursue or wrongheaded worldview to expose” (p. vii). That is not entirely true. In examining the process whereby the will to power was lost among Communist elites, Hollander is by no means entirely impartial. He misses few opportunities to take

swipes at left-wing and liberal targets, lambasting liberal intellectuals for an alleged belief in “superpower symmetry and moral equivalence” (p.9) and grossly distorting so-called “revisionist” scholarship on the Stalin era, the work of Robert Thurston in particular (pp. 211-12). More important, Hollander does have a point to prove, and one that surely did not arise spontaneously from examination of empirical data. It is, however, a point worth making, even if the claims made on its behalf do not entirely convince. *Political Will and Personal Belief* is a sustained argument for the role of the individual conscience in political change generally and the collapse of Soviet and east European Communism specifically. It is a testament to the key role of ideology—and, more critically, of ideology’s failure—in bringing down the Soviet system.

One great virtue of this book is its direct and straightforward mode of argument. Hollander’s fundamental position is clearly presented and may best be captured in his own words: “The self-assurance and sense of legitimacy of the ruling political elite provide the key to system maintenance in highly authoritarian states such as the former Soviet Union and its allies. Such self-assurance

and the associated will to power must in turn be nurtured by deeply held political beliefs, as well as by the material advantages that the beneficiaries enjoy and believe they deserve” (p. 14). “Soviet communism unraveled not so much because of massive popular discontent as because of the changed attitude of those who presided over it” (p. 278). “It was the disenchantment with the failed ideals and applications of Marxist-Leninist socialism in the last generation of the political elite—together with widespread popular cynicism caused by the gulf between theory and practice—which brought the Soviet system down, against the background of endemic economic difficulties and the political institutions which suppressed innovation and rewarded conformity” (p. 280).

That the ruling elite of the Soviet Union and its east European satellites had by the 1980s, if not earlier, lost faith in the revolutionary creed is hardly breaking news. But, Hollander contends, this study is the first to examine fully “the significant decline of commitment on the part of those in power” (p. 287). It does so through a case study method. The bulk of the book is taken up by recounting and analyzing the life stories of twenty-two Soviet and east European Communists, including early defectors, leaders and functionaries, and “security specialists.” An appendix briefly summarizes results of fifty interviews with lesser figures, mainly from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but the main cases are based almost entirely on published memoir literature, most of which is available in English. Specialists and even some well-informed general readers will thus find little new information here. It is no doubt useful, however, to have the reflections of former Communists on their varied paths to disillusion so conveniently summarized. And the key point, of course, is the author’s interpretation of these accounts.

Hollander begins with the “defectors and exiles” Victor Serge, Victor Kravchenko, Arkady Shevchenko, Petro Grigorenko, Wolfgang Leonhard, and Jan Sejna. Although each of these figures broke with Communism well before the Soviet system entered its terminal phase, Hollander identifies basic similarities between their experiences of disillusion and those of later leaders: “the basic diagnosis of what was wrong with the system was shared by these apparently disparate groups: defectors and functionaries in power” (p. 86). Whether true or not, this calls into question one of the author’s basic assumptions. If, in fact, the spread of disillusion through the elite caused systemic collapse, then how can one explain without resort to “impersonal forces” the failure of similar disillusion to spread and bring down the system

at an earlier date?

Among Soviet leaders and functionaries, Hollander identifies four main groups: “those at the top who wished to reform ... the system while preserving its essential structure” (p. 90), “those who had undergone a genuine and sweeping change of attitude” (p. 91), functionaries who opportunistically served but accommodated reform, and a group opposed to major reform for fear it would lead to collapse. The first two groups are treated in one chapter, with Gorbachev representing the first and Yeltsin, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Alexander Yakovlev the second category. Here Hollander works well-plowed soil, although many will disagree sharply with his characterizations of the last Soviet general secretary and his successor. Clearly Hollander admires the latter and finds much fault with his predecessor. “The more one learns about Yeltsin and Gorbachev,” he writes, “the clearer it becomes that what separates them, among other things, is the lack of a sense of moral indignation in Gorbachev, regarding many of the moral defects of the system” (p. 114). Given the experience of the past decade this is a remarkable statement. That Hollander fails to recognize the amoral, if not immoral, will to *personal* power in Yeltsin is emblematic of one important problem with his argument.

The final two groups of functionaries are represented by Georgi Arbatov, Anatoly Dobrynin, Yegor Ligachev, and Andrei Gromyko. With such individuals, Hollander notes, we are dealing less with “political disillusionment, disaffection, and loss of ideological commitment” than with “a substantial decrease of political-moral certitude” (p. 164). This is certainly not the case with the four east European leaders—Andras Hegedus and Imre Nagy of Hungary, Alexander Dubcek and Zdenek Mlynar of Czechoslovakia—examined in a chapter of their own. It is arguable whether the Soviet and east European experiences can be considered as a single type, but these four individuals each spent time in Russia and their disillusion was based, at least in part, on real knowledge of the Soviet system and not solely on wounded national pride, although this too, Hollander acknowledges, “made a significant contribution to disillusionment” (p. 206).

The longest and probably most insightful chapter recounts the gradual disenchantment of four leading specialists in “state security”—the Soviets Pavel Sudoplatov and Oleg Kalugin, the Hungarian Vladimir Farkas, and the East German Markus Wolf—prefaced by an extended treatment of “The Attributes of Political Violence in Communist States.” The discussion here is intended also “to

narrow the gap between what we know about the two most repressive political systems in this century: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin” (p. 211).

Hollander usefully distinguishes four types of specialists in state-sponsored political violence. “In the first group are the ideologically driven, putatively incorruptible, puritanical executioners.” The second type, personifying Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil, “were people who ... followed orders without being driven by strong convictions.” The third type, most common in the KGB, “were well-educated, often suave careerists who found satisfactory employment and mobility opportunities” in the political police. The fourth group were those “amoral or unmistakably malevolent individuals” driven by power lust or simple sadism (pp. 212-15). Focusing mainly on the first and third groups, Hollander is interested in the interaction between “idealistic commitment (at least as a starting point)” and “its seeming opposite: the love of power” (p. 227). Yet in analyzing the four individual security specialists his conclusions highlight similarities between their mind set and that of the leaders and functionaries previously discussed.

In the course of presenting the case studies and in a chapter of conclusions, Hollander makes a number of observations about the nature of political disillusion and the loss of political will. One “surprising and cheering conclusion ... is that human beings are sometimes capable of changing their beliefs and behavior for the better in unexpected ways” (p. 287). Hollander also identifies a series of similar experiences that helped define the loss of political will: “To the extent that the leaders articulated their loss of conviction it has taken three forms. First, they argued that it was the weakness or moral corruption of particular human beings (such as Stalin or Beria) that frustrated the grand design, that the wrong people grabbed power and were the source of the decay. Second, the retroactive questioning of the system began, and often ended with, an awareness of its economic malfunctioning or inefficiency—it did not deliver, it lagged behind the West. Third, and least frequent, they connected disillusionment and questioning to the recognition of some basic flaw in Marxist-Leninist theory or the communist ideals, which resisted implementation (Yakovlev made this argument). Sometimes their questioning was connected to specific, personal experiences. However, disillusioning experiences were neutralized as long as the overall structure of belief, routinized commitment, and the associated acceptance of privilege were in place” (pp. 278-79).

While these observations are supported by the case

studies, it is unclear whether such a restricted universe of evidence can sustain the book’s broader argument. For one thing, much of the memoir literature on which the study is based is notoriously self-serving, if not dishonest, and replete with examples of hindsight projected on the past. Hollander recognizes this and reads his sources with sufficient critical distrust, but the problem cannot be made to disappear and at times he is compelled simply to acknowledge that we cannot know his protagonists’ true sentiments.

More important, the narrow group of individuals examined can hardly be taken as representative of the Soviet elite as a whole, even if one ignores the host of problems associated with defining that elite. What, for instance, were the attitudes of men like Vladimir Putin or of any of the numerous high-level economic managers now transformed into prosperous capitalist executives? Hollander’s conclusion that the system collapsed because those in charge had lost the will to defend it is really more heuristic hypothesis than proven argument. For wouldn’t it be at least equally plausible to argue, as have David Kotz and Fred Weir, that much of the Soviet elite, especially economic managers, sought to dismantle the system from neither ideological cowardice nor disillusion but material self-interest?[1]

Hollander describes a steadily eroding commitment to ideology and places this erosion at the core of his interpretation of the Soviet collapse. But, as he acknowledges, commitment to revolutionary Marxism had become mostly formal long before 1989. To be sure, widespread cynicism about revolution within the leadership was itself an important measure of disillusion, but it could also be taken as a sign of the impending evolution of the ideology itself. There is good reason for Hollander to be skeptical about the prospects for success of Gorbachev’s revitalization efforts. But it is hardly a proven proposition that some sort of reform could not have worked in the Soviet Union at least as “well” as the more radical path actually taken under Yeltsin’s lead. And had such reform proved at least modestly successful, it is more than likely that shifts in ideology—no doubt self-contradictory and even cynical—could have resolved the kinds of doubts exposed by Hollander’s case studies at least sufficiently to perpetuate some version (however transformed) of the Communist system.

Hollander devotes considerable space to explaining why few observers, Western and Soviet, were able to predict the Soviet demise. But he fails to consider that sudden collapse might really have been one of the least likely

outcomes to the political crisis that emerged in the Soviet Union with the passing of the Brezhnev generation, even if it was the denouement that actually occurred. When people ask me what will happen next in Russia I sometimes respond whimsically: "I haven't the faintest idea, but as soon as it takes place we Soviet experts will be sure to tell you why it was inevitable." This is the historicist error to which Hollander falls victim. His argument underestimates the contingent character of the Soviet collapse and of history in general.

Still, this is a provocative and thoughtful study that deserves consideration by those trying to comprehend the momentous events of the late 1980s. Although Hollander may exaggerate their significance, his focus on the personal beliefs of Soviet decision-makers and the cast

of mind of the former Communist elite is both useful and significant. One hopes that others will find ways to broaden the effort so as to more fruitfully explain the remarkable turn of events that brought to a remarkable end the twentieth century's defining political experience.

Notes.

[1]. David Kotz with Fred Weir, *Revolution from Above: The Demise of the Soviet System*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

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