THE SOVIET SYSTEM IN RETROSPECT: AN OBITUARY NOTICE

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Ericson
Director, The Harriman Institute

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Fourth Annual W. Averell Harriman Lecture. As you know, The Harriman Institute was formed ten years ago on the foundation of Columbia's Russian Institute to provide clear, objective, and indeed useful analysis and understanding of the former Soviet Union. The Institute was made possible through the generous gift of Governor Harriman and has grown and thrived through the continuing support of his family. It has always striven to maintain the highest quality and uncompromising objectivity of analyses that he expected. These lectures are a key part of that effort, and a continuing tribute to the Governor.

Let me therefore extend a particular welcome to the members of the Harriman family who are with us today, Kathleen Mortimer and her son David Mortimer, Governor Harriman's daughter and grandson. And let me also make a note of appreciation to those in the family who are unable to attend, in particular to Governor Harriman's wife and partner and continuing pillar of support for the Institute, Pamela Harriman.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that but for the generosity of the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation this event and indeed the entire lecture series would not be possible.

Today's lecture is particularly significant as it is the first Harriman Lecture in the fully post-Soviet era. Ten years ago the Soviet Union was a military superpower with an apparently strong and growing economy. Although it had not buried us, as Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev had promised it would do, it was clearly a major force in the world and the leading representative of a truly alternative economic, social, and political system. It was to promoting an understanding of that system that the Harriman Institute was dedicated. That Soviet Union, with its coherent alternative
system, has now disappeared. And yet it remains very much with us. For the legacy of Soviet socialism is strong. Seventy years have molded the societies of that area—from individuals’ perceptions, values, and understandings; through social structures such as family, ethnic, and religious identities; to the institutions through which political and economic activity take place. It has molded society in ways profoundly affecting all that is now taking place in the former Soviet Union. Thus, the challenge facing The Harriman Institute has never been greater. Never has clear, dispassionate, honest appraisal been more necessary. It is a challenge we are eagerly tackling with the continuing advice and support of the Harriman family.

In this light it is most fitting that today’s lecture looks back on the Soviet system and on the legacy it has granted to the world. It is given by a man most eminently qualified to interpret that system. Alec Nove has dedicated his scholarly life to understanding the Soviet experience, an experience which his life now fully spans. In his work he has focused on understanding the Soviet economic system, as his clear and enduring monograph is titled. Yet his work is much broader, extending from the history of the Soviet economy; to the economics of socialism in both its Soviet and more desirable, feasible variants; to the economics of transition from socialism; to the broader understanding of the Soviet and Russian societies.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1915, Alec Nove was educated in London, graduating from the London School of Economics. After serving in the British Army during World War II, he worked in the civil service in London for six years, acquiring experience, I’m sure, that has stood him in good stead in his scholarly studies of that most monumental bureaucracy that was the Soviet Union. In 1958 he returned to academia as a reader at the University of London. And in 1963 he became Professor of Economics at the University of Glasgow, where he served as Director of the Institute for Soviet and East European Studies. At present he is Professor Emeritus and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow, as well as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the British Academy.

Throughout his career he has continued to make seminal contributions to our understanding of the Soviet economy and the Soviet system in general. He has come to us today to summarize his understanding of that system and provoke our understanding of the Soviet experience. The title of his talk is “The Soviet System in Retrospect: An Obituary.”
THE SOVIET SYSTEM IN RETROSPECT: AN OBITUARY NOTICE

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It all ended in 1991—not with a bang, with hardly a whimper. What was it? Where can one situate it in Russian and in world history? (And what can one say in an hour that is worthy of the memory of Averell Harriman and that probably requires a 400-page volume to do these questions justice?)

I will try to concentrate attention on three basic themes. First, what was Bolshevism in its initial Leninist phase? Second, what was the nature of Stalinism, which succeeded it. And third, there is the question of how it was that the Soviet system proved unrefomrable: Did democratization have to lead to disintegration and collapse? And could this perhaps help answer the question I put in an article written over thirty years ago, “Was Stalin Really Necessary?” (I already anticipate the objection: “necessary for what?”)

So—Bolshevism. Two basic interpretations compete. In one, Bolshevism is a product of Russian history. In the other, it is an alien import, imposed indeed by aliens. There are subplots involving the philosophy of history: Was the October Revolution inevitable or in some sense historically necessary, Gesetzmäßig, zakonomerny? (Odd that this has no precise English-language equivalent.) Let me deal with that point first. E. H. Carr once wrote: “No historian has ever said anything was inevitable until after it happened.” Of course, all major events do have deep-lying causes, but outcomes are not normally predestined. True, some outcomes can be seen as inevitable even before they happen. Thus, the Poles were bound to be overwhelmed by the German Army in September 1939 (unless the Western allies launched an offensive, which they did not), and General Noriega had even less chance to resist an American inva-
sion in 1988. However, such was not the situation in 1917. We all know that just months before the fall of the Tsar, Lenin in his Zurich exile saw little chance for his revolution. Probably few historians would dispute that Tsarist autocracy was doomed. I do not agree with Richard Pipes’s view that “nothing in early twentieth-century Russia pushed the country towards revolution except the presence of an unusually large and fanatical body of professional revolutionaries,” though, of course, they did play their part. Already challenged in the failed revolution of 1905, a case can be made—and has been made by Leopold Haimson of this university—that the outbreak of war in 1914 postponed another such challenge. At the same time, few doubt that without the impact of the war, it would not have been the Bolsheviks who picked up the pieces. The war, seen from the angle of purely Russian historical development, was a sort of external accident. And it should not be forgotten that whatever the role of defeats at the front and hardships in the rear in bringing about the collapse of Tsardom in 1917, defeats and hardships on a far greater scale in 1941-42 did not bring about the collapse of the Soviet regime. The liberals and moderate socialists who formed the Provisional Government after the abdication of Nicholas II did have a major problem of establishing their legitimacy with the non-Russian nationalities, even more than among the Russian people. But it was the war that made their task impossible. In the end, as many have noted, power was lying in the gutter for Lenin to pick up. To defend his government, Kerensky had one women’s battalion and a platoon of cadets. As Galbraith has remarked, a man who breaks through a retreating door acquires an unjustified reputation for violence—some credit should be given to the door. Any explanation of Bolshevik victory requires also an analysis of the weaknesses of their opponents, as well as a study of objective circumstances. It did not have to be thus.

But the opposite of “predestined” is not “accidental.” Clearly, there were features in Russian history and political culture which predisposed to extremist solutions. Just as there were elements in Germany’s past which must be invoked if we are to understand the triumph of Hitlerism, and this without denying that, had Hitler failed, good reasons could be adduced from other features of Germany’s past to explain his failure. And without the Great Depression he would scarcely have succeeded.

But back to Russia. Marx was, of course, no Russian, but it was into Russian that Das Kapital was first translated. Writing at the same time (the 1870s), the Scottish traveler Mackenzie Wallace noted a feature of the Russian intelligentsia: In contrast with the West, in Russia “reformers have been trained not in the arena of practical politics, but in the school of political speculation... While we have for centuries been groping along an unexplored path, the Russians have been constantly mapping out, with the help of foreign experience, the country that lay before them, advancing with gigantic strides according to the newest political theories. Men trained in this way cannot rest satisfied with homely remedies, which merely alleviate the evils of the moment. They wish to ‘tear up the evil by the roots.’”

In the memoirs of Prince von Bülow, German Imperial Chancellor, the Russian Minister of the Interior, Count Dmitry Tolstoy, is quoted as saying in 1884 that “attempts to introduce Western parliamentarism in Russia will fail. If Tsarism is overthrown, in its place will come Communism, the fully-fledged communism of Herr Karl Marx, who died in London last year.” Points similar to Mackenzie Wallace’s were made in Milestones (Vekhi), the famous symposium published in 1909 by Nikolay Berdyaev: “All things Western were adopted in their most extreme form, and were turned into a primitive metaphysics, a special religion, replacing all previous religions.” And “Marxism with us was given a narodnik ("populist") transformation.”

2 Cited from F. Dan, Prísakhvadienie bol’shevizma (New York, 1946), p. 444.
3 Vekhi (Moscow, 1909), pp. 11, 13.
noted the contrast with the socialist parties of Western Europe, then Marxist in their ideology. While challenging the "bourgeois order," in practice they are organically a part of it, unlike the Russian radical intelligentsia. And interestingly, a contemporary Russian writer, Alexander Tsipko, citing neither Wallace nor Milestones, makes similar points, blaming the radical intelligentsia's lack of restraint in contrast to those "who had learned realism and sobriety under capitalism." They were almost wholly anti-bourgeois, given to "Messianism." "Marxism was given not only a utopian interpretation, but it became a symbol of faith," within "the traditions of spiritual maximalism."

It is also worth adding that such critics of the extremists as Fyodor Dostoevsky, and many Slavophiles too, though opposed to the revolutionaries, were also deeply unsympathetic to the Western mercantile spirit and to the concept of a legal order. (One has only to read Leo Tolstoy's Resurrection to see what he thought of judicial processes, while Nikolay Gogol had taken for granted that the Tsar must be above the law.) To quote Gogol's Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends (1850): "A state without an all-powerful monarch is an automaton. At most it can reach the level of the United States. And what is the United States? A corpse (mertoehina). Human beings there have become like an empty eggshell." And Alexander Herzen referred to the Western mercantile industrial system as a "sphyilitic chancre infecting society." And since the Tsar and the court were also unsympathetic to the logic of capitalist development, despite the efforts of Witte and Stolypin, one of the principal obstacles to the development of capitalism in Russia was the lack of social support for it both among the left-wing Slavophile intelligentsia and the conservative ranks of officialdom and the nobility. These obstacles notwithstanding, capitalism had made rapid headway in the last twenty years before the Revolution.

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5 Vechi, p. 64.
6 Ibid., pp. 88-89.

Tsipko bitterly attacks the Bolsheviks for unleashing the dark masses. And since without them the Revolution could not have occurred, they had better be added to our equations. Tsipko here echoes Milestones, whose authors wrote before the event. Two quotations will suffice. First, Bulgakov: "The destruction of age-old religious moral principles frees dark elemental forces, of which so many exist in Russia's history... In the soul of Russia's people there were always conflicts between the principles of St. Sergius of Radonezh and those [of the Cossacks] of Zaporozhe, and of the rebellious rabble that filled the battalions of Razin and Pugachev. These terrifying, unorganized elemental destructive forces seemed to the revolutionary intelligentsia to be its allies and were accepted by it as if they were revolutionaries in its spirit. In reality they are of quite different and ancient origin..." And another of the Milestones authors, Mikhail Gershenzon, in a much-quoted passage that aroused particular ire amongst the revolutionaries, wrote about the relation of the Russian educated strata in general to the dark masses: "We are for them not robbers, like the village kulak, not just alien, like a Turk or a Frenchman: They hate us all the more because we are Russian too. Such as we are, we cannot dare to hope to join with the people—we must fear them more than any state power, and we must bless this power, which with its bayonets and prisons is still able to protect us from the people's wrath."
lies in their rejection by the masses whom they idealized, just as in the 1860s, the heroic narodniki who "went to the people" were rejected. When Stalin destroyed them, the masses may even have rejoiced. Upwardly-mobile men of the people took their place.

Alexander Bogdanov could see it coming already in December 1917. He was surely the first to use the term War Communism. He saw the Bolsheviks' support coming from "the pseudo-socialist masses of the soldiery, peasants torn from productive work and living in barracks at the state's expense." He continues: "It is amazing how Bolshevikism has been transformed. It has adopted the logic, the culture, and the methods of the army barracks." He saw War Communism as an "authoritarian, regulated organization of mass parasitism and destruction." Some Bolsheviks take this for socialism and "put their trust in soldiers' bayonets." But "soon the day will come when these bayonets will destroy their faith, if not their bodies."

What, then, did "the masses" think the Bolshevik Revolution was about? They, at least, had not read Marx, in fact many had not read anything. Of course, any generalization about any "people" can be misleading and oversimplified, but the following elements were surely present.

First, the majority of the peasantry clung to the communal (mir) traditions and opposed the Stolypin reforms, which sought to encourage the creation of a modern property-owning peasantry or yeoman farmer class. They proved this by their behavior during the Revolution, when, by their spontaneous action, they undid most of the Stolypin reform and put the consolidated holdings back into communal tenure, and Russian agriculture back into the Middle Ages. They also wished to seize land belonging to landlords, which they proved by doing so (even though they had already acquired much of it by purchase and lease).

Hatreds directed at a vaguely conceived "them" clearly ran deep, as could be seen in the spontaneous, as well as the organized, brutalities that accompanied the Civil War. Sailors in most navies may have grievances against their officers, but they do not, literally, drown them or feed them into boilers. A part of the working class of recent peasant origin was surely rebelling against what it saw as primitive capitalism. Some skilled workers (printers, railwaymen) took a more moderate line, but were swept away.

The Bolsheviks not only released elemental hatreds, but also utilized vague longings for a just society. A recent Russian commentator noted that before the Revolution many believed liberal democracy to be an unrealizable utopia, while utopian radicalism seemed realistic. (It reminds one of a contemporary story: either little men from outer space will come and make the Russian economy function, or the Russians will do it themselves. Of course it is the first of these variants that is possible, the second being clearly in the realm of fantasy...) Tsipko can be cited here: "The workers and peasants who took part in the armed revolt and the Civil Warsaw Communism in a utopian and fatalistic way, as Christians saw an earthly divine paradise." The naive longings for a just revolution were brilliantly satirized by Andrey Platonov in his novel Chevengur, where "property is not collected, it is destroyed," no one works, since "for each and for all only the sun worked, and is to be the world proletariat. Work is declared once and for all to be a remnant of greed and animal-like exploitation, because work facilitates the acquisition of property... We should liquidate the Friendship of Poor People commune, since when life becomes complicated it will be impossible to tell who exploits whom." They are not sure about women: "The beauty of women existed also under capitalism, as did mountains and stars and other non-human events." Instead of striving for Communism, women tend to prefer colored silk scarves... But meanwhile the petty bourgeoisie is extirpated, and Platonov's satire anticipates the horrors of Pol Pot in Cambodia.
In a sense, ordinary folk supported the Bolsheviks, at first, for the sorts of reasons Iranians supported the Ayatollah against modern industrial capitalist civilization.

But Lenin, of course, was not the Ayatollah. And even Trotsky had to admit that whatever the Marxist view of the role of the individual in history, the seizure of power would not have happened without Lenin's revolutionary skill, ardor, and determination. This, too, shows that it was not predestined. Perhaps what was predestined was the failure of the moderates. It was, as one Russian put it, "Lenin or Kornilov" in 1917.

What of the alternative view, that Bolshevism was an alien import? One finds it in Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and in the ideas of Valentin Rasputin, Vladimir Soloukhin, Vadim Kozhino, Vasily Belov and others. This stressed the role of Marx's ideology and of foreigners generally, Jews in particular. The view that "Bolshevism is Jewish" was widely held in the West, and not only by Hitler. Recent reports confirm that Lenin's mother was of Jewish origin, though her ancestors were baptized. To Solzhenitsyn it mattered that he could make Lenin only one-eighth Russian (see his Lenin in Zurich). And no one doubts the origins of Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and many lesser Soviet officials. Some Russian nationalists attribute specific Bolshevik policies to Jewish influences. Even collectivization. Though by then Stalin was in the saddle, Vasily Belov asserts that "Stalin was the chief Trotskyist." Also, the real name of Agricultural Commissar Yakovlev was Epshtein. (It was!)

Few would deny that Jews played a disproportionate role in the first decade of the Soviet regime. But since the individuals concerned had broken with Jewish traditions, it is hard to discern what difference their origin made to their ideas. The excesses of War Communism, under the joint impact of ideology and war emergency, destroyed the livelihood of millions of Jewish craftsmen and traders. The many Jewish parties were anti-Bolshevik. However, there was internationalism. Thus, it may not be accidental that the "right" ideologues of "socialism in one country" (Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky) were Russian, while the "lefts" who opposed them (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Radek) were Jews. Russians could imagine a Bolshevik version of "Russia the third Rome," with, in Mayakovsky's words, "Ivan leading the workers out of London slum basements." But by then it was Stalin the Georgian who decided.

The racial origins of Lenin's mother seem totally irrelevant to all but extreme racists. But Lenin's personal characteristics did matter. All civil wars are brutal, but far from restraining his comrades, Lenin goaded them on. In his On Reading Lenin (Chitaya Lenina), Soloukhin lists many instances of Lenin's ruthlessness, his support for cruel measures and coercion of many kinds. Recent evidence gleaned from Lenin's unpublished notes show him advocating the killing of priests, of hostages, and of course the Tsar's family. And if it is thought this can all explained by the exigencies of a desperate Civil War, here Lenin is at the Eleventh Party Congress after the Civil War had ended and the New Economic Policy had been introduced; speaking of his former comrades in the Social-Democratic Party, the Mensheviks: "If they, the Mensheviks, say: You are retreating, we were for retreat, let us retreat together, we must reply: For open expression of Menshevism our courts must shoot you, or they are not our courts, but God knows what." And he repeated the same sentiments a few minutes later in the same speech. When asked whether he thought Lenin or Stalin was the more severe (survy), Molotov replied: "Lenin, undoubtedly... He could not stand opposition."

But surely Lenin himself, and most of his associates, were educated men who, while unscrupulous as to means, genuinely believed that they were building a new society. "We are blackssmiths, and in the smithy we forge the happiness of mankind," went a revolutionary song of the period. They were inspired by a utopian interpretation of Marxism.

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8 V. Lenin, Sochineniya 5th ed. (Moscow, 1964), vol. 45, p. 89.
9 V. Chuyev, Slo sovet besed s Molotovym (Moscow, 1991).
which did indeed contain utopian elements, for Marx was a revolutionary romantic. But Lenin’s Marxism was a Russian translation in more ways than one. As was noted by Berdyaev before the Revolution: “Russian Marxists were committed exceptionally to equality and had a unique faith in the imminence of the socialist millennium, which would come in Russia even sooner than in the West.”

In 1921, when Lenin saw the necessity of beating a retreat on the economic front, “seriously and for a long time,” he tightened the political grip, finally banning all other parties and suppressing factions within the Bolshevik Party. For he believed, correctly, that it was the essence of Bolshevism that, having seized power in a backward and largely peasant country, it was necessary to hold onto power to engineer a social transformation from above, to create the missing preconditions for socialism. Lenin saw parallels with the French Revolution, and in his notes he underlined the dates 1794-1921. He would not be overthrown, as was Robespierre, in a Russian Thermidor.

And, by subordinating to Moscow the many national republics, sending an army to subdue Georgia, he preserved the bulk of the Russian Empire.

As for his view of the peasants, I cannot resist using again a remarkable observation by H. G. Wells, who spoke with Lenin in 1920. After citing Lenin’s ideas of introducing state farms and large-scale agriculture, he commented: “It may be difficult to defeat the Russian peasant en masse, but in detail there is no difficulty at all. At the mention of the peasant, Lenin’s head came closer to mine. His manner became confidential. As if after all the peasant might overhear.”

A most profound analysis of Lenin came from the pen of Vasily Grossman in his Forever Flowing, written in Moscow in the late 1950s. He sees Lenin in the context of what he calls “the thousand-year chain which bound together Russian progress and Russian slavery. Every move towards the light deepened the black hole of servitude.” Lenin smashed the old system, yet “he preserved the curse of Russia, the link of its development with unfreedom, with servitude. It so turned out that his revolutionary enthusiasm, his fanatic belief in the truth of Marxism, and his total intolerance towards dissidence vastly strengthened that very aspect of Russia which he himself hated... and facilitated a new enslavement of peasants and workers.”

He went on: “Lenin’s narrowness, vigor, contempt for liberty, fanaticism in faith, cruelty to enemies—all that brought victory to Lenin’s cause—and were in fact born and forged in the millennia depths of Russian servitude.”

Grossman goes on to make the link, which we, too, must now make, between Lenin and Stalin. The Revolution was a “Babylonian chaos, born out of a mixture of Western-style revolution with Russian traditions. Not only the sailors and Budyonny’s cavalrymen, not only the Russian peasants and workers, but Lenin himself was helpless, could not understand what was really going on... Fire, rebellion, raging violence arose out of Russian society, the fury born of centuries of serf suffering. And out of revolutionary romanticism, drunken orgies and peasant risings, there arose a mighty yet unknown Master Policeman.”

In 1830, the poet Mikhail Lermontov wrote what he called “a prophecy”:

A black and hideous year will come to pass,
The Russian crown will fall into the dust,
The old allegiance will the masses shed,
The land will groan from pestilence and death,
The rivers will turn red with human blood.
And then a mighty Leader will arise,
Whom you, the common people, recognize
And bow before his dagger-wielding hand.

But back to Grossman: “Lenin used the peasants’ passionate desire to become masters of the land, but that was
incompatible with the state Lenin founded.” Stalin took the land away. He turned the Bolshevik Party into the Party of the national state. “With the help of Stalin, the revolutionary categories of dictatorship, terror, struggle against bourgeois freedoms, which had seemed to Lenin temporary, were made basic and fundamental and were combined with traditional millennial Russian unfreedom. Stalin turned these categories into the realities of statehood, while social-democratic remnants became formal stage decorations.”

There have been disputes in both the East and the West on the theme whether Stalin was the executor of Lenin’s policies or the executioner of Lenin’s comrades. What of his evident love of uniforms and hierarchy, graded privilege, expressed by his reference to the Party itself as a sort of order of knighthood with military ranks? Was this not a contrast with the personal modesty and simple or even ascetic life led by the Bolshevik intellectuals, including Lenin himself? Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow, remarked that if Lenin were alive, he would be in prison. And it is alleged that one of Stalin’s police chiefs said that if Marx fell into their hands, within a week he would admit that he was an agent of Bismarck. One also recalls the fate of Christ in Dostoevsky’s brilliantly imaginative “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.” Lenin’s idea of a good society was surely quite different from Stalin’s. Let us agree that Stalinism in some vital respects would have horrified Lenin. But also that the system that Lenin created facilitated, even rendered probable, the rise of a Stalin.

Tsipko writes: “Stalinism is above all the tragedy of the Bolshevik old guard, its pain, its historic guilt. It is the old guard that created the political mechanism, the weapon of absolute power, which Stalin utilized for his own purposes.”

Let us return for a moment to the role and fate of the Jews. In the national Bolshevism of Stalin the radical intellectuals, and especially the Jews among them, were, as the Russians say, a kind of white crow. It is no accident that their numbers in the Central Committee, in the secret police, in the government, declined sharply through the thirties. This is reflected not only in statistics but also in literature. In Mikhail Bulgakov’s short story “The Heart of a Dog,” a local commissar named Shvonder persecutes a professor, using for the purpose a former dog turned humanoid holldum, and Bulgakov prophetically wonders why Shvonder could not see that the holldum would, in due course, turn on him. The same Bulgakov in his novel White Guard invents another Jew, “Abram Pruzhiner, ladies and gentlemen, tailor, commissar of the Podol District, Kiev. And thirty years later a (Jewish) poet, Naum Korzhavin, imagining his fate, pictured him lying in a prison cell in 1937. Exactly the same fate awaited another fictional Jew, Lyova Mekler, invented this time by Vasily Grossman. Mekler had been “preacher, apostle, and fighter for world socialist revolution.” The future worldwide kingdom of righteousness seemed totally beautiful, and for this Mekler was ready to use pitiless violence, and even denounced his own father.” But now, he too was in prison, with his teeth kicked out by secret-police boots. At that time, not because these real and fictional characters were Jews. Again citing Grossman: “People were destroyed by statistical method, according to certain social and ideological categories.” Consciously directed anti-Semitism came later, in Stalin’s last years.

What, then, was the essence of Stalinism? What was its relationship to Leninism, to Marxism? In one sense, it was a negation of the utopian elements of Marx. He had imagined an economy with no market and no money, run in some mysterious way by comradely discussion, although he could also see the need for central direction. He imagined a temporary “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which would in a classless society be replaced by total freedom; the state would wither away, since Man (and woman) would have no difficulty in unanimously deciding
whatever was for the common good. One sees a reflection of such ideas in Lenin's "State and Revolution." Every cook would take a turn at managing and ruling. In fact, there would be no professionalism, the division of labor would be transcended. The real world could never be like that. The "dictatorship of the proletariat" was an impossible contradiction in terms. The logic of a marketless economy requires the creation of a hierarchical bureaucratic apparatus. Unanimity is unattainable in real life, unless it is an imposed unanimity. Of course, the isolation of the Soviet Union, its own economic backwardness and Russian political culture, provided further justification for a strong state. Stalin has been blamed for his doctrine that the state's coercive powers require to be strengthened on the road to a (stateless) socialism. But Trotsky had earlier expressed the same thought in a more colorful way: "Like an electric light bulb that flashes brightly before being extinguished, so the state, prior to its disappearance, takes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, of the most pitiless state, which coercively controls the life of its citizens in all aspects."13

Does Marx or Russian history bear primary responsibility for Stalinism? The poet Maximilian Voloshin wrote: "Peter the Great was the first Bolshevik." Berdyaev wrote: "Peter's methods were purely Bolshevik." Alexander Gerschenkron too pointed to this parallel. And in my own work, "History, Hierarchy, and Nationalities," published in 1969, I noted the similarity of Stalin's nomenklatura (hierarchy of officialdom) to Peter's Table of Ranks (tabelia ran-gakh). Both mobilized all of society to catch up with the more developed countries. Both used serfdom in the countryside and forced labor, Peter in so-called possessorial factories, where the government planned output. True, Peter "opened the window on Europe" through St. Petersburg, while Stalin tried to close it (and deeply distrusted Leningrad). However, Stalinism was, among other things, a way to achieve barbaric modernization. Or in more Marxist terms, he was engaged in a ruthless form of primitive socialist accumulation, a process Marx had not envisaged. But what Marx did envisage could not be.

The revolutionary intellectuals of the old school did not know what hit them. Trotsky, looking for Thermidor in terms of class, thought not Stalin but Bukharin was the enemy, supposedly representing the better-off peasantry and the so-called NEP bourgeoisie. Rakovsky, in exile, did begin to realize that ex-workers in positions of authority cease to be workers and value their privileges. Early editions of the Bulletin of the Opposition (Byulleten' oppositsii) reflected Trotskyist perplexities. Was this still a "workers' state"? Was it a new form of class society? If so, what class was ruling? The "bureaucracy"? But then how was it that Stalin was killing so many of them? Oriental despotism, perhaps? Did not some Chinese sage remark that a truly total despotism requires a classless society, for otherwise at least the ruling class would have some rights? Actually, this may help to explain Stalin's murder of so many of those who rose to high positions: he did not wish to see them coalesce into a new class. Seen in this light, Stalin was an Oriental despot, though also a modernizer with a hammer-and-sickle badge, compelled to cite Marx, but ready to kill anyone who truly believed Marxist doctrine. This is Valery Chalidze's view in his Victor Over Communism (Pobeditel' kommunizma). And who can doubt that Stalin killed more Communists than anyone before or since?

With his clear, catechism-like phrases, he earned the plaudits of the semi-educated cadres. And all, including his future victims, were conscious that they were a minority ruling in the name of the proletariat in a largely peasant country. The Molotov interviews are full of references to this. Some commentators, including for instance Otto Lattis, attribute Stalinism to the petty-bourgeoisie nature of the Party cadres. This, surely, is erroneous, as Tsipko and others have pointed out. The real petty-bourgeoisie, that is, the better-off peasants and small tradesmen, were pitilessly

13 L. Trotsky, Sochineniya (Moscow, 1925), vol. 12, p. 161.
exterminated under Stalin, which would be odd behavior by their “classmates.” More to the point, surely, was the low level of education of the bulk of the cadres, especially in the provinces, the narrow stratum of genuine Party intellectuals, the narrowness of which deeply worried Lenin in his last years. War and Civil War had destroyed or driven out of Russia the majority of those who embodied “Europeanization”: businessmen, lawyers, in fact, most graduates. The Bolsheviks had to make do with what was left. Most of those who stayed (the so-called byoshiye lyudi) did not survive the Great Terror of the thirties. Those who rose with Stalin may have had “petty-bourgeois” tastes in art, but they in no sense reflected “petty-bourgeois” interests.

Was there an alternative? Could NEP and its milder policies have been continued, for instance, under Bukharin’s leadership? My feeling is, no, and this for two reasons. First, not under Bukharin’s leadership, because he was incapable of leading. Here Stalin’s qualities as an organizer and the way in which he used the general-secretaryship of the Party put him head and shoulders above all his rivals. He not only won, he won with consummate ease. But more fundamentally, Bolshevism and NEP were inherently incompatible, as such historians as Afanasyev and Getter have stressed. The peasants were the key. If even Bukharin felt compelled, as he did in 1927, to advocate a campaign against the kulaks, then even he had no viable policy. A kulak is a successful peasant. One cannot in a peasant country base the key sector of agriculture on the less-successful peasants (and treat the successful as class enemies), especially as industrialization called for a much larger volume of marketed farm produce. Of course there were alternatives—for the non-Bolsheviks. Ideological commitment limits choice. Most people, presented with a cheese and a ham sandwich, can choose either. An Orthodox rabbi can not. The Bolsheviks could not choose to revive the Stolypin reform, or long tolerate a mixed economy.

The very essence of Bolshevism was precisely that it would create the preconditions for “socialism” in a country plainly unripe for anything of the sort. Particularly so when the hoped-for European revolution failed to materialize. This implied a long haul, a one-party state, the denial of democratic rights to the majority, and the turning of the Communist Party into “the party of a national state,” a party of rulers. In the words of Grossman, “the merging of party and state found its expression in Stalin’s person.” His qualities and his methods fitted. And, naturally, it was not possible, while eliminating dissent in society, to preserve freedom within the Party, for then the “enemy” would find ways of expressing their views. At the Thirteenth Party Congress, Trotsky expressed fears that impure elements would penetrate the Party if there was too much freedom. His later pleas for democratization contrasted greatly with his authoritarianism when he was the “prophet armed.”

NEP was in crisis by 1927. Stalin used the crisis to prepare his “great turn,” the Soviet leap forward, collectivization and industrialization, and the ruthless imposition of authority, his authority. Here a distinction between Stalinism and Stalinshchina can be made, and was made in a recent paper by Sergey Mikoyan. The former represents the latter, less the pathological excesses. I had advanced a similar argument thirty years ago in “Was Stalin Really Necessary?” There were strong objective reasons, given that the Bolsheviks were in power, for a strong authoritarian government and enforcing the priorities of heavy industry in the name of national defense or the survival of the Revolution. Bolshevik survival required some degree of repression, to impose a high level of forced savings, to prevent the emergence of local nationalisms, to complete the task of streamlining the institutions through which the Party ruled, while mobilizing the people in the task of “catching up and overtaking.” It is worth recalling that the first five-year plan coincided precisely with the Great Depression in the West, and the worst peacetime year for the

Soviet people, 1933, was also the low point of our own downturn—and the year Hitler came to power in Germany. All this could explain much of "Stalinism." Stalin's policy—the last two syllables are highly pejorative, implying what I would like to call "excessive excesses"—is another matter. Millions of dead peasants, the arrest of highly scarce engineers and technologists, the slaughter of most trained staff officers on the eve of war, the vast scale of the Great Terror, its effect on paralyzing much-needed initiative. How can these things be explained in terms of some sort of historic necessity or logic? Grossman has argued that "the bloodshed in 1930 and 1937 was needed by the state... Blood had to be shed to overcome freedom, a task already begun under Lenin."

Yet surely Grossman himself would not deny that excessive excesses occurred, bloodletting on a scale unnecessary to ensure Stalin's personal despotism. Forty percent of the entire Kazakh population died in 1931-33, when collectivization was imposed on pastoral nomads. Between four and five million Ukrainian peasants perished in 1933. The purges snowballed out of control. To show their vigilance, zealous local comrades competed to overfulfill arrest plans. If Stalin had reasons to kill Marshal Tukachevsky, Yakir, and Uboevich, surely the arrest of thousands of colonels and majors, the large majority of the army's political commissars and the bulk of Soviet agents abroad, to name but a few of the victims, suggests irrationality, a terror machine that in the end had to be restrained by its creators. The odious Beria was appointed to do the restraining. The following official figures highlight the so-called Yezhovshchina, that is, the period (1937-38) when, under Stalin's guidance, Yezhov headed the NKVD:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Execution Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>2,056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1,229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>1,118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>353,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>328,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>2,552</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Over 80 percent of all "political" executions occurred in two years. Some have put the numbers very much higher, but the archives, now open, do not support them. The victims in 1937-38 constituted so high a proportion of officials, officers, and intellectuals, that it must have seemed that millions were being shot.

Much has been written of Stalin's deal with Hitler and his role in the war, including his much-criticized refusal to believe that Hitler would attack. The dearly bought victory brought him prestige, both inside and outside the country. Many hoped for relaxation, but already in 1946, that is, with the Cold War still in its infancy, one got instead the tightening of controls over everyone from intellectuals to peasants. It is said that Stalin saw a dangerous parallel with the Decembrists, that is, the officers who had seen "Europe" in 1813-15 and brought back with them subversive ideas about freedom and constituions. Soviet officers in 1945 saw another world, and peasant soldiers, too, could not fail to note the contrast with their own primitive villages. The Iron Curtain was Stalin's answer, and renewed repression extended again to Party cadres—for instance, the so-called "Leningrad Affair." It seems that worse was to come, so Stalin's death was fortuitous.

But could his system survive his death? Could it in fact operate under normal conditions? Oskar Lange has described the Soviet economic system as "a war economy sui generis." The same could be said of the political system, too. In a real sense it was geared to permanent civil war. The historian Geifer expressed the view that Stalin deliberately adopted policies that made him and his regime necessary. Molotov, asked what he thought of the relatively relaxed regime of Brezhnev, replied: "In relaxed times Bolshevism is not needed. Absolutely not needed."15

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15 V. Chuyev, Sto snyk besed s Molotovym, p. 312.
In his own crude way, Khrushchev was still a campaigner, even a believer. His criticism of Stalin in the so-called secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 was an act of rare political courage, which heralded a period of thaw that proved to be a false spring. To discuss the origins of Stalinism, or to be frank about the scale of the terror, was to put into question the legitimacy of the entire Soviet regime. This can be seen in the views that Vasily Grossman was expressing at this very time, which have been cited above and, of course, could not then be published. So Khrushchev called a halt, while Brezhnev put the process into reverse.

Nonetheless, it was not altogether a false spring. A part of the truth was told. Furthermore, the terror itself was ended. No political executions occurred after the execution of Beria and his associates. Critical voices were beginning to question various aspects of the system. Cultural and trading links with capitalist countries expanded. The censorship let through some works that raised real and deeply felt issues, including the conditions of the peasants and agriculture, as well as the deficiencies of centralized planning. Indeed, the economic discussions led to the adoption in 1965 of what on paper seemed a major reform, though in practice little changed. Khrushchev allowed the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which described life in a labor camp. The "Men of the Twentieth Congress," whose tongues were ( Partially) untied, were to play a major role in the reform movement under Gorbachev. They were largely silenced under Brezhnev. A harder line on intellectual freedom was signaled by the trials of Sinyavsky and Daniel in 1965. Attempts, however, to revive the Stalin cult also failed to take off.

Brezhnev was the quintessential Party functionary. Surely it was then that the party-state bureaucracy became a real ruling class with privileges enjoyed in secret, no longer threatened by arbitrary arrest. But would those who no longer trembled still obey? Perhaps the regime was sustained for decades by the memory of the Stalin terror. Soviet society, like any other, contained many interest groups, competing for scarce resources, power, and influence. Given the nature of the system, they did so within and through the Party, while showing a front of unanimity to outsiders. But there was no longer a supreme arbiter. "Administrative markets" developed, what I called "centralization pluralism" and others have labeled "polycentrism." Power became diluted. The burden of the arms race was superimposed onto that of trying to satisfy the consumer and dealing with the long-neglected problems of agriculture. In the West the scientific-technical revolution was in full spate. The centralized planning system failed to cope with these challenges. Even Brezhnev realized that "in an age of scientific-technical revolution a fundamental change in our methods of management is needed," but he was able only to tinker with the old system. Growth rates declined, stagnation threatened. "Stability of cadres" generated corruption. The aging rulers had been formed under Stalin. As the poet Alexander Galich noted, they had learned that "silence is golden"—they were in command and had nothing to say ("molchali'ni kryshli v nachal'ni'ki"). Petrifaction threatened. The system was degenerating, but was unrefordable. Or was it? Writing in 1980, I speculated as to whether "a younger man, hiding his light under a bushel might base his career on a far-reaching reform program." At least I was prepared to contemplate the possibility, while the prevailing view held that even the attempt would not ever be made.

So—enter Gorbachev and *perestroika*. He surely recognized the magnitude of the task. It is my conviction that history will treat his efforts more kindly than do his contemporaries. True, he did not know just how far his own reforming logic would take him. True as well, he wished to preserve the Soviet Union. But it was to have been a very different place. I wholeheartedly disagreed with those who, like Richard Pipes, believed that Gorbachev had no greater

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ambition than to modernize and streamline the old system, that he was a younger Brezhnev, better dressed and with a more attractive wife. The advances in freedom of speech and of the press were astonishing indeed. He clearly wished to use glasnost to sweep away institutions and colleagues that stood in the way of change. His foreign-policy initiatives were far-reaching. But the skeptics obstinately refused to see that any fundamental change was in process, apparently in the belief that since this was impossible, any change that was actually occurring could not be fundamental because it was occurring. Even the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the willingness to allow Eastern Europe to go its own way did not convince these inveterate skeptics, who now say that it was Reagan's speed up in the arms race that "won" the Cold War.

Anyhow, Gorbachev failed. Perhaps the mix he was seeking between democracy and Party rule, between the market and planning, was unattainable. Many of us thought that failure was possible, or probable, but none foresaw its consequences. Gorbachev's measures, especially in the economic sphere, were contradictory and incoherent. He shied away from radical change in the price system without which market forces could not operate. Private enterprise remained illegal for far too long. He was unable to understand the centrifugal force of nationalism. And, fatally, he and his associates were unable to cope with the basic problem of power. The one effective political instrument was the Party acting through its full-time functionaries. As Gorbachev's reform program became radicalized, he saw that the Party apparatus was an obstacle to change. He therefore, especially at the Twenty-Eighth and last Party Congress, sought to weaken and downgrade this apparatus, hoping to rule as president and through elected soviets. Yet no alternative power structure emerged, so that by 1990 the process of political disintegration was well under way. By then it had become possible publicly not only to expose Stalin's crimes, but also to relate them to Lenin and Leninism, and so to put into question the October Revolution and the very existence of the Soviet state. Evidence was presented that the USSR was as far behind America economically as the empire had been in 1913. So the sacrifices of millions had been in vain? Popular discontent was fueled by inflation and chronic shortages, and Gorbachev became increasingly vulnerable. The legitimacy of the Soviet regime was undermined. There followed a period of fatal hesitation: a move to conciliate the Party conservatives, which led to the appointment, at the end of 1990, of the men who would plot against Gorbachev the following August. He had planned an emergency Party Congress to be held in the fall of 1991, where he was to propose a change in the Party's nature and even in its name, which could have been his last act as the Party's general secretary. The Party would surely have split. But the coup came first, and then with Yeltsin's help, the end of both Gorbachev and of the Soviet Union. The Communist Party, nominally still with over fifteen million members, just vanished in a puff of smoke.

Russia was back to its seventeenth-century borders, remarkably similar to those envisaged in 1941 by Alfred Rosenberg, Hitler's associate. This was the end not just of the Soviet empire but of the Russian empire, too. Leningrad became St. Petersburg, but its founder, Peter, had occupied what are now Latvia and Estonia; Kiev had already been Russian territory in his father's reign. No wonder the opposition to Yeltsin includes such strange bedfellows, the remnants of the Communists and the Russian nationalists. We surely have not heard the last of them, especially the latter.

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How will the Soviet period be seen by Russians in fifty years' time? Much depends on who will write the history. Maybe as a gigantic and costly aberration, with Lenin as a criminal fanatic who forcibly removed Russia from the high road of Western civilization. Or, there could be a neo-Slavophile interpretation, hostile to Western civilization, which would condemn Lenin for destroying traditional
Old Russia in the name of an alien internationalist doctrine. Stalin would appear in both versions as a sanguinary tyrant, but there could be a nationalist view that would see him as a latter-day combination of Napoleon and Peter the Great, empire builder and war leader, whose legacy was squandered by his successors. But did he not destroy anyone capable of succeeding him, thus ensuring that his successors would be incapable of preserving his empire? ("The survival of the fittest.") Stalin could be seen as a ruthless Marxist, but also as a ruthless killer of Marxists, who did more than anyone to discredit the very idea of socialism. Should Russia be seen as a victim of Marxian socialism or was Marxian socialism a victim of Russia? Stalin certainly turned the Comintern into a branch of the Soviet Foreign Office, and subordinated foreign Communists totally to his internal purposes, hanging them if they did not obey.

Finally, how will future historians interpret the causes of the system’s collapse?

In 1973, Sir William Hayter, former British ambassador in Moscow, wrote: "The Soviet rulers believe, and history provides little evidence to contradict this belief, that Russia can only be governed as an isolated autocracy." In my book Stalinism and After, I put the following (imaginary) thoughts into the mouth of Brezhnev: "We must keep control. We are a country without democratic traditions. Your people are inoculated by centuries of exposure to conflicting ideas, ours are too susceptible to oppositionist demagoguery. Then we have problems with nationalities. Look what happened between Croats and Serbs in Yugoslavia when they foolishly allowed too much freedom of speech. [Much worse has happened since!—A.N.] As for our economic system, I know its weaknesses better than you, my critics. But what would you have me do? Our oligarchic and hierarchical system is not quite what our revered leader Lenin had in mind, but at least it enables us to govern Russia. What if the only alternative is disintegration." 17

The arms race doubtless contributed to economic overstrain, but paradoxically the Cold War may have helped the system to survive, by providing a raison d’être for its continuance—the dominant role of the military-industrial complex. The centralized economy, Party control, censorship, and the KGB were justified in the eyes of the leaders, and of many of the led, by the need to combat enemies, internal and external. But, already in Brezhnev’s time, ideological commitment was decaying. Combat whom, in the name of what? Communism? All, even Brezhnev himself, seemed increasingly wedded to normality, when, as Molotov remarked at that very time, “The Bolsheviks are not needed.” Nearly 150 years ago, Herzen wrote: “Dictatorship can be very strong, absorbing into itself all forms of power, but it cannot be stable. It will remain in existence only so long as do the circumstances that gave rise to it and as long as it is faithful to its purposes.” After Stalin and Khrushchev, what were its purposes? What was there to hold the multinational state together? Force? But, as Tallyrand remarked, you cannot indefinitely sit on bayonets.

Gorbachev set out to prove that Sir William Hayter and Leonid Brezhnev were wrong. He would show that the USSR could survive without being an “isolated autocracy,” that the only alternative was not “disintegration,” that a democratized and reformed Union could flourish. He has been proved wrong. Glasnost undermined the regime’s legitimacy and freed the centrifugal forces of nationalism, while failures of economic perestroika fueled discontent and speeded the processes of dissolution. The demoralized and confused Russian people ask yet again the eternal question, kto vinovat? (who is to blame?).

What now? A new Time of Troubles, analogous to the anarchy that followed the death of Boris Godunov? Maybe. The only thing we can say for sure is that, unlike in 1611, Polish troops will not occupy the Kremlin. And then, in 1613, the first Romanov tsar imposed order. Who will do so tomorrow? And over what territory? Perhaps that will be the theme of the Harriman lecture in the year 2000.

I can best end by quoting the national poet of my adopted country, Robert Burns's address to a field mouse:

But, mousie, thou art no’ thy lane\textsuperscript{18}
In proving foresight may be vain.
The best-laid schemes of mice and men
Gang aft agley
And leave us naught but grief and pain
For promised joy.
Still thou art blest compared with me.
The present only touches thee.
But och, I backward cast my ee
On prospects drear,
And forward, tho’ I canna see,
I guess—and fear.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Lane}—alone.