

Public Discourse and Social Tolerance
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Public Discourse and Social Tolerance:
New Ideas for Russian Society

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The dissolution of the Soviet Union represents the single most significant event in world history since the end of World War II, as it signaled the end of the Cold War and caused the entry of 15 new states into the international system. With the ever-present threat of nuclear war between the super-powers removed, the world is now safer. Nevertheless, while we, as citizens of the world, are better off in a less belligerent international environment, the population of the former Soviet Union is now suffering through a difficult period of social, economic and political upheaval. What can the West do to assist Russia? The West must devote its attention to assisting Russians in institutional and legal reform to develop effective structures of social communication. Without unrestricted access to information and ideas, Russia will not develop a market or pluralist democracy.

Unfortunately, since the Gorbachev era “reform” has come to be associated with chaos and disorder. As a result, Western attempts to facilitate Russian economic and political reforms have come to be discounted by Russians and Westerners alike. Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred in the context of turbulent economic and social reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, these reforms did not cause the Soviet Union to collapse. Rather the Soviet Union as a civilization was stagnating for lack of creativity, for lack of innovation, for lack of fresh ideas. Before proceeding to develop this thesis, I would, for the sake of clarity, define the term “civilization” not in the traditional anthropological sense but rather as the total process of human activity. In order to understand civilization as a process it is necessary to examine the interplay of three sets of juxtaposed ideas that constitute the dominant spheres of human activity: culture and the transcendental in a nation’s spiritual life, the individual and the State in society, and the market and the State in the national political economy.

In the United States, neither value in any of the three spheres has ever been primary: rather their relationships have been both competitive and dynamic in response to external stimuli and internal changes. For example, the persecution of suspected Communists during the Red Scare of the late 1940’s and the early 1950’s reflects the waxing influence of the State over the individual in American social life in response to the perceived Soviet menace of the period. Similarly, the notable decline of religious sentiment in American society in the 1980’s and the increased emphasis on material

pursuits demonstrate the pervasive influence of commercial marketing and television media on society. Public values shifted towards popular culture in its present form and individuals largely abandoned religious questions of “how life ought to be.” Every generation of Americans adjusts its social, religious and political-economic thinking between opposing values based on its own unique set of past experiences and contemporary concerns. Hence, as a capitalist democracy, American society is constantly evolving and recreated in response both to the changing international environment and its developing domestic needs.

By contrast, the Soviet Union could not be characterized as a flexible, ongoing process of economic, social, and political discourse, but rather as a static structure predicated upon a sacred truth, Marxism. While traditionally in Russian civilization social and political movements had tended to present their ideas in very absolutist terms, the Bolshevik revolution and Stalin’s subsequent manipulation of it, encompassed within its Marxist gospel all spheres of Russian civilization and defined all forms of human activity in terms of the Party. The absolute subordination of all other values in Soviet civilization to the Party resulted in a critical lack of social criticism and objective analysis. The consecration of the existing order of the Party caused it, with the passing of time, to decay from within due to its ideological rigidity and inability to adapt in a dynamic world and accommodate internal change.

To understand how Marxist-Leninist doctrine transformed the Party into an inalterable truth, an unassailable idea, one must first examine that upon which Soviet civilization was predicated: Russian civilization. Historian James Billington describes czarist Russia as a primarily religious civilization in which the concepts of church and state intertwined, without any clear division of authority, to form a highly politicized type of Christianity. Insofar as at its inception the Eastern Orthodox Church served to mold the pagan Slavic tribes of the Eurasian plains into a recognizable nation and laid the foundation for the Russian nation-state, Orthodoxy was a creative force. The Church provided a sense of unity and higher purpose to which the Russian people willingly subordinated themselves.

However, once having identified themselves as Orthodox and as citizens of the Russian state, the Church discouraged further civil discourse. According to theologian

Paul Tillich, Russian Eastern Orthodoxy is “not a religion of social and political action and transformation, [rather it] transcends the given state of things without trying to change it.” The implicit stoicism of Eastern Orthodoxy is derived from its interpretation of Jesus: Christ ignored everything concerned with material civilization. Therefore, humans are compelled by their loyalty to Christ to withdraw from culture and to give up all responsibility for this world to the state in anticipation of the world which is to come. The moral concerns and practical responsibilities of the material world, society and politics were to be subordinated to those of the transcendental. Later, this came to provide the basis for the czar’s claim to absolute power and a moral justification for serfdom.

As a result, pre-revolutionary Russian civilization experienced inordinate difficulty in the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. In spite of censorship on the part of the czars, reflection of the gathering forces of social change and political conflict of the period can be found in the literary masterpieces of 19th century authors such as Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Increased interaction with the more developed nations of Western Europe caused a diverse body of revolutionary ideas to evolve among the Russian nobility and educated classes based on their dissatisfaction with the outmoded and repressive policies of the state. Although the czar and the Orthodox church succeeded in dominating the Russian peasantry, the private economic and political interests of the Russian nobility and intelligentsia who had previously served to repress and control the peasants diverged from those of the state. Ultimately, the inflexibility of the czarist regime placed it so far out of touch with the increasingly industrial and urban society that incremental change was impossible. Russian’s history of subordination precluded the possibility of evolutionary change as new ideas could not be subjected to an open social discourse. Hence change could only be manifested through revolution.

But the revolution that occurred also stifled any opportunity for an open discussion of political and economic ideas. Bolshevism quickly fell back into the forms of the past. Like Eastern Orthodoxy, Marxist doctrine preached a gospel of subordination of human activities to a transcendental, universalistic vision. Whereas the mystic vision of Eastern Orthodoxy was beyond man’s grasp in this life, Marxism spoke of a future

world united under the benevolent scientific justice of Communist rule. Hence, the Communist Party supplanted the Church in its dominant role over Russian society and assumed many of its outward forms. The mummification and entombment of Lenin, for example, can be likened to the traditional display of the uncorrupted corpses of Russian saints. Under Soviet rule pictures of Stalin replaced icons in the home and workplace as an ever-present reminder of the Party's supreme authority. Art and literature were recruited to the glorification of the Party and building socialism whereas they had previously glorified the Russian church and czar.

But the critical difference between pre-revolutionary Russian and Soviet civilization resulted from the Marxist rationalization of state ownership of the means of production, the de-facto subordination of private economic and political interests, which had generated the revolution, to those of the Party. In economic terms, the October Revolution represented the radical conversion of Russian civilization from the feudal ecclesiastical hierarchy of the czarist regime to the Marxist-Leninist religion of industrial social justice. Communism extended the dominance of the Party over all three realms of Russian civilization and, through nationalization and collectivization policies, extinguished the creative interplay of ideas simulated by competing economic and political interests. The Soviet state gained monopoly rights over the national economy and thus established the Communist Party as the only relevant concept in every sphere of Soviet civilization: social, religious and political-economic.

As the oracle of absolute ideological, social and political-economic truths the Party labeled objective internal analysis as subversive and counter-revolutionary and discounted any external criticism of Communism as further proof of hostile capitalist intentions. Thus sheltered from meaningful evaluation, the Party prevented or co-opted analytic discourse which critically impeded the Soviet Union's flexibility and responsiveness to shifting domestic needs and international change. The dire economic conditions of the former Soviet Union prior to its dissolution bear testimony to the state's inability to adapt to the globalization of the capitalist world economy. In the Soviet economy investment and consumption were primarily determined by the state's national plan. Lacking domestic competition, Soviet industry, like its citizens, was not stimulated to be creative, and Soviet enterprises had no incentive to expand their international trade

ties. Instead, the majority of the Soviet Union's trade was conducted with COMECON nations of Eastern Europe. Market forces were not taken into consideration. Rather, the Soviet Union's international trade constituted a means to the political ends of the Party. However, the dynamism of Western economies forced to adapt in a world of increasingly free trade and accompanying high rates of economic growth caused the Soviet economy to lag behind the industrialized capitalist nations and the emergent NICs (Newly Industrialized Countries) which continuously modernized their productive techniques, pursued practical applications of their technological discoveries and experienced high rates of export driven growth. Because the Party elite was unable to diverge from the traditional Communist/bureaucratic mindset Soviet industry did not respond to new economic opportunities in the world market. As a result the Soviet Union's national productive capacity and standard of living declined relative to the United States, Western Europe and Japan.

The Party was similarly unresponsive to internal change, specifically the increasing cynicism with which the Soviet people regarded Communist ideology and the Party bureaucracy. By the 1980's Marxist-Leninist doctrine had ceased to be as meaningful for younger generations as it had for their parents. The defeat of the Red Army in Afghanistan, the infiltration of alternative viewpoints from abroad, open corruption in the government and Communism's unfulfilled promise of a world-wide workers' revolution called the people's acceptance of the Party's authority into question. The consequences of the Party's political-military and ideological failures and its inability to secure a humane standard of living for the population led to mass disillusionment as reflected in ever-increasing rates of absenteeism, divorce and alcoholism among the Soviet populace. In an effort to avert imminent social and economic collapse, in 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated his reforms of "glasnost" and "perestroika." While Gorbachev was unable to settle on a course for economic reform, "glasnost" (openness) initiated a social discourse so long repressed that the weak institutional and legal structure of the Union was unable to provide a forum in which the population's grievances could be addressed and resolved.

There exists a fundamental difference between the role of ideas and conception of how one reaches truth in the United States and the former Soviet Union. In the United

States opposing political, economic and social interests are integrated into institutional and legal frameworks that allow for discourse and their creative resolution. Conflicting social, religious and political-economic values force individuals to integrate new information and ideas into a shared conception of truth. Out of this ever-changing mix of shared values emerge new and, it is hoped, better solutions, to contemporary problems and ultimately social progress.

However, both in czarist Russia and the former Soviet Union truth was “revealed” to the people in the form of an absolute idea above criticism, outside of human history. Over time both the czarist regime and the Communist Party ceased to evolve in response to environmental pressure and to adapt to shifts in domestic perceptions and attitudes. As George Kennan had predicted some 40 years earlier, the inherent inflexibility of the Party would eventually cause the Soviet Union to collapse from within. Without fundamentally changing the way in which the Russian people address problems—from a single strategy to an interactive and incremental approach—revolutions and absolutism will prevail. It is unrealistic to hope the competitive forces introduced by transition to a market economy and changing social structure will prove sufficient for Russia to progress beyond its traditional experiences of subordination to an absolute ideal. The Soviet Union has disappeared, but the Soviet citizen remains. While an individual is the product of his society, he also reproduces it in his daily interactions. The pattern of social interaction in Russia must be fundamentally changed. This can best be achieved through the creation of legal frameworks and viable institutions that encourage public discourse, dialogue and debate—the free exchange of economic, political and social ideas.