

# The Current Revolution in Russia

Seweryn Bialer

It is a difficult task to speak about the recent events that have swept through Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. Even those of us who do not know the details can feel that this is a cycle of revolution of truly historic proportions. In today's age of information, our senses are assaulted by pictures of the revolution. Our brains are overloaded by images and facts that test our ability to comprehend what is happening. We are always, now, lagging behind the events.

The revolutionary cycle occurred with astounding swiftness and an immense scope, encompassing so many countries with such enormous changes. Its impact is especially strong because for decades the landscape of those countries was frozen. Most surprising, of course, is the relative peacefulness, so far, of this revolutionary cycle.

The revolution is occurring in Russia and Eastern Europe, but its repercussions are worldwide. And not only in international relations, but also in what is happening in other countries that we would never have thought were connected with events in Russia and Eastern Europe. I am convinced that what is happening in South Africa, for example — the move toward an attempt at reconciliation — is to a large extent influenced by the general spirit of what is happening in Eastern Europe and Russia. I was recently in the Arabian Gulf states, and I was surprised to learn from some people in Saudi Arabia that they are very much worried that America and the Western European countries will no longer tolerate some of their domestic practices now that the Russian danger is declining and a spirit of democratic revolution is sweeping through the communist countries. The structure of the international situation has been changed in a radical way. This change will influence all spheres of our lives in ways we cannot even predict yet. We still live with an inertia, and our imagination is not strong enough to consider things

that may seem unthinkable. Therefore, we don't know what the structure will be ten years from now, but we know what it probably will not be. The key thing, of course, is that the danger of a cataclysmic war has receded, and the possibility of a peaceful solution to world problems has increased. There are enormous dangers still, but the vicious cycle we have experienced for so many decades has been broken, and a positive cycle has set in. I think it is a cycle to which we have enormously contributed with our steadfast opposition to communism.

The revolution in Eastern Europe is important, but I will concentrate only on the Soviet Union because what has happened there is the key to what has happened in Eastern Europe. And what is happening now in the Soviet Union is the key to the future of the whole region, the key to the future of the international system. I intend to discuss two subjects in particular, but first I want to explore what really happened in Russia, and why — and especially why it took the form it took. My first point is that the process of change in Russia, which started as a guided reform, has passed irreversibly into a process of revolution, and that this revolution is accelerating rather than slowing down. My second point has to do with the direction in which the revolution is moving. I think it is possible to make some plausible scenarios predicting middle-range developments, and I think the odds are in favor of the development of some democratic processes in the Soviet Union. At the same time, however, I believe that both the Soviet Union and the United States face an immediate and immense danger, the danger of a crisis in the next year or maybe sooner that will change the situation and lead to developments that are truly unpredictable.

What happened in Russia, and how, is different from what we thought would happen or could happen. We always said — and I think this was not only an expression of faith, but also an intellectual analysis — that the Soviet system was doomed to pass at some point in history. We saw major signs of crisis in the 1970s and '80s — and I wrote about them. But I foresaw two kinds of possible developments that were neither so swift, so comprehensive, nor so peaceful as what has occurred. One possible development, I thought, was the development of Russia in the same direction as that in Hungary after the revolution of 1956, toward what can be called "liberal communism" — an improvement in communism making it more tolerant and tolerable and perhaps in time leading slowly toward a more democratic system. The other possible development seemed to be a revolution, an explosion, a civil war. It now appears that the first line of development failed to happen because the desire for liberal communism passed almost immediately to a revolu-



tionary process. And the explosion didn't come — though it may still come. But what we have seen so far is a revolutionary process without a civil war.

I think that what happened, and how it happened, can be explained by a number of factors, but the basic framework may be provided by saying that what started as a reform for liberal communism is now proceeding as a revolution against communism. A guided reform is a gradual, segmental change in which the basic power configuration is modified but preserved. This type of reform is what happened in Hungary under Kadar and what started to happen in Poland in 1988. A revolution, on the other hand, is not simply to be equated with a *coup d'etat* — with storming the Bastille, or the Winter Palace, or whatever. The more important part of a revolution is the swift process of radical change that is not directed from above (though it may be combined with policy from above and from the existing elite) but involves a change in elites and, most importantly, a spontaneous mass movement, sometimes organized, sometimes not.

What very often happens in history is that the revolution comes after an unsuccessful reform. Indeed, the revolution grows out of unintended consequences of the reforms. The reformers have some intended consequences, but in many cases there is an added value, something unintended that turns out to be destructive of the reform itself. In such a situation, the reformers have two options. First, they can become counterrevolutionaries. This is the option the Chinese leaders chose in Tiananmen Square. (We must remember that reform began in China before it did in Russia, and much of what Gorbachev sought to achieve through *perestroika* was being done in China in the late 1970s.) Second, the reformers have the option of becoming revolutionaries — of trying either to stay ahead of the revolution or to push the reform into a revolution. I believe this is the option Gorbachev is now taking, and I hope he will continue on this course.

(I must say parenthetically that what I am saying about China and Russia cannot be applied in the same way to Eastern Europe. The regimes in Eastern Europe were hollow, kept in place by the power of the Soviet Union, which could preclude radical changes. For the Eastern European revolution, the crucial factor was very simple: it was Gorbachev's decision to permit the disintegration of communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the Soviet empire. This was a conscious decision, made because he saw the alternative as even worse — the end of reform in Russia and the restarting of the Cold War. For this decision alone, Gorbachev will go down in history as a great man.)



There are various theoretical frameworks that might be applied to help us understand the recent events in Russia. One framework I like was developed by a group of professors at Yale and is reflected in Gabriel Almond's book *Crisis, Choice, and Change*. Almond demonstrates, by analyzing historical precedents, that such changes occur because of a deep crisis in the society, in the system. Without such a crisis, such things do not occur. Revolutions are not made because people want a 20-percent raise in their wages. They are made for some very fundamental reason. The crisis that brings on a revolution is a crisis of faith, an existential crisis, not merely a crisis of some institutions. Then comes the question of choice, the response of those who have power to influence the crisis. Through successive choices, they may institute reforms or impose repressive measures. The response of the masses to these measures in its turn influences the crisis and thereby produces other choices. I like this framework because it is not deterministic while at the same time it recognizes what are called the blind forces of history. It provides a very important place for human actions, decisions, and leadership, while not exaggerating the range of options available to leaders.

What, then, was the crisis that made the current revolution possible? We have had a picture of a Soviet Union with enormous military strength, a superpower, and suddenly we see a Soviet Union prostrated. Was it really as strong as it looked before? Is it really as weak as it looks now? I think it is neither, but its strength and stability were based on very shallow foundations. In the 1970s especially, the Soviet Union became internally torn by a deep, multidimensional crisis. In economic terms, it was not simply (as Gorbachev said initially when he came to power in 1985) a decline in growth. It was a crisis not only of the economic system, but of the economy itself. It was a crisis of ecology, of exhaustion of resources, of unbelievable waste. For example, the Soviet Union produces two or three times as many combine harvesters as the United States does, yet there is an agricultural crisis because of a lack of machinery. It produces almost twice as much steel as the United States, yet it has less than 40 percent of the U.S. gross national product. Forty percent of the agricultural production is wasted between the field and the market. Two-thirds of the vegetables produced never reach the consumers.

The crisis was exacerbated by the incredibly low quality of manufactured goods. The Soviet Union produces three or four times as many shoes as the United States, but the Soviet shoes last for perhaps only six to eight weeks. And they are not stylish, so you don't want to wear them. But think of the waste of raw material and labor. Numerous other examples could be cited, but essentially we



are looking at a country where wages and salaries make up only 32 percent of the gross national product, compared to 68 to 75 percent in the United States and other western countries. We are looking at a country where capital investment makes up the highest share of the GNP of any major country in the world, but this investment merely eats up resources without producing them.

This situation was not only an economic crisis; it was also a social crisis. Let me give you some examples of how deep it was. Today one woman in five of childbearing age in the Soviet Union has an abortion every year. One in five, statistically — some have more, some have less. The divorce rate of young couples in some large cities is 80 percent within three years. The countryside has been devastated. If you look at a satellite map of Russia, you can see that hundreds of thousands of square miles, especially in the north, have been denuded. Thirty-five percent of the villages in the north of Russia — that is, north of Moscow — have been abandoned. Thirty-five percent! More than 40 percent of the work force on the collective farms are women over the age of forty. There is also a health crisis. For example, almost half of the hospitals do not have running water.

I could go on and on. When Gorbachev came to power, 20 percent of the state budget of the Soviet Union was being spent on alcohol. Twenty percent on alcohol! This was a moral crisis of emptiness of life, of lying, even of inventing words to define different types of lying. *Vran'yo* is public lying. A mother will teach her child, "You have to say this thing, and you know it's not true, but you have to say it." This lying is *vran'yo*; it is for the outside, what you say in school. But you must not lie to your mother. That would be *lozh'*, private lying. These terms indicate a split personality, public and private. In private, everything is not permissible, stealing, lying, cheating: private people shouldn't do these things. But the public morality eats up the private morality. The private standards were destroyed by the public standards.

The crisis was an ideological crisis. It was also a political crisis of corruption, of inequality, of stagnation in leadership. Can you imagine that in 1985 when Gorbachev came to power there was one minister in the Soviet Union government who had held his post since 1938?

This crisis was cumulative. The system had to bear a greater and greater weight of disintegrative processes, but the problems had existed for so long that people were hardly aware of them. They were felt but not consciously perceived. The elite knew something was wrong but didn't realize how deep the crisis was. Conditions were ripe for change, but a catalyst was needed. This catalyst came



with the succession. Not that Gorbachev fully understood the crisis. At the beginning he said, "If we don't do something, we will have a crisis" — and he was saying it in the midst of the deepest crisis in Soviet history without knowing that he was in the midst of such a crisis! He didn't know then. He knows now. Nevertheless, the succession was the catalyst. In a centralized system when you have a succession of leaders — especially after a leader who has been in office for seventeen years and for the last six or seven was simply non-active, merely a figurehead — when you have an elite with a security of office unprecedented in Soviet history, then a change in leadership that overlaps a generational change, with younger people coming to power, provides a catalyst for reform.

Gorbachev's *perestroika* was such a reform. Gorbachev has responded to charges that it was merely improvising by insisting that he had a plan for reform when he came to power. He is absolutely right. He had a plan at the beginning, and he has a plan every year, but these plans differ widely from one another. The plan he has today is not the plan he had four or five years ago. In fact, they are diametrically opposed in some respects. In the process of editing a volume of Gorbachev's speeches, I have read through about four thousand pages of his writings. As I arranged the material chronologically and by themes, I was astounded by the extent to which his views have changed — and I think they were sincerely held views, not camouflaged. His perception of the crisis has changed. Now he knows that there is a deep systemic crisis, but I think he understood this only in 1988 or 1989.

His prescription for dealing with the crisis has also changed. When he began, his ideas were far less radical than those of a Kadar, Rakowski, or Gomulka — the liberal communists of Eastern Europe. He basically wanted a rejuvenation, a revitalization that would have two elements: greater discipline and a speeding up of technological growth. His goal of greater discipline included a fight against alcoholism without eliminating the source of this alcoholism, which of course is impossible. And his ideas about technological growth were tinged by what one very good Soviet economist calls "technological romanticism." Gorbachev is impressed by the technology of Japan and America, but he doesn't see that their success depends not on what the computers are doing, but on what the people are doing and what the system is doing. In other words, the technological explosion of the West cannot simply be borrowed. Conditions have to be created for it to occur.

This technological romanticism led Gorbachev to do the worst possible thing, which deepened the crisis in the Soviet Union. He diverted investment away from consumer goods, from agriculture,



from development of raw materials, and put it into the machine-building industry, with the goal (still being proclaimed by him as recently as the beginning of 1988) that by the year 1995, 90 percent of the Soviet machine-building industry should produce machines, including computers, equal to the world standard in their class. It required an incredible imagination — or lack of imagination — to make such a statement. So Gorbachev put the money into the machine-building industry — and these investments take enormous time in the Soviet Union. But even then they are a waste of money because the industry will waste material, money, and labor to produce machines that are completely outdated the moment they are produced.

These disastrous measures only deepened the crisis instead of improving it. Then when Gorbachev saw how the system prevents technological innovation, he came to the conclusion that there had to be political change. This change started formally on 9 January 1987 with the plan of *glasnost*'. And this was his most important step, not changes in the political structure, but *glasnost*', permitting people to start saying and writing what they think. This was the most revolutionary change. He introduced this change as a man who really believes in the superiority of socialism but thinks that socialism was cannibalized by Stalin and his successors. He expected that with *glasnost*' the people would come to find the real faith and the real socialism. This step was fatal for the reform because the people didn't want simply to improve the system; they wanted to change it radically.

And then, of course, things started to unravel. Spontaneity entered — unintended consequences — and things could not be kept within the framework of gradual change Gorbachev had envisioned. And the economic and social crisis deepened. It is sometimes said that leaders initiate reforms too little and too late. In this case, Gorbachev did too much too late: too much in the sense that wanting to preserve a Leninist system was too much. *Glasnost*' and the Leninist system — if one is serious about *glasnost*' — cannot coexist. And the reform came too late because the crisis was too far advanced. I believe that if Gorbachev and his associates, his generation, had not instituted some reforms, by the mid-1990s there would be an explosion and a collapse in the Soviet Union. In other words, if the government had continued without mass terror but in the modified totalitarian way of Gorbachev's predecessors, the economy and social system would have reached such a crisis that they would have been transformed through an explosion, not in the gradual way they are being transformed now.



Where is the system now? I think it has moved into a revolutionary process. Gorbachev has lost control over its dynamics. *Perestroika*, the guided reform, is no longer the core activity in the Soviet Union. The crucial events now occur spontaneously or are organized outside the power structure, against the power structure, against the limits of *perestroika*. Gorbachev responds as a clever politician, a great tactician, sometimes saying, "I am your leader; therefore I will follow you." But he is responding to developments, not directing them. Politically, the situation is out of control, with participation moving completely outside the official structure or destroying from inside the official structure that preserves the party. Ideologically, the attack today is not against Stalinism, as it was in 1985, '86, and even '87. It is not even against Leninism. It is against Marxism. The best analysis I have read of Marxism and its contribution to Soviet ills was published only a few months ago in the Soviet Union. It is better than any analysis I have read in the last few years in the West. And it was published in hundreds of thousands of copies and read and discussed throughout the Soviet Union.

You have a social situation out of control, where the conflict of nationalities is rampant, where class conflict is rampant in an old-fashioned way. There is no economic reform anymore. To speak today, or in the last year, of economic reform in Russia is absolutely wrong. There is no reform. There are decrees about reform; there are laws against reform; there are instructions about reform and discussions about reform. But there is no reform. There is nothing. It is impossible to make a reform in a situation of total economic chaos. There are not even preconditions for reform being created. The whole guided process of '87 and '88 has really been — some say reversed — I would say stopped.

Gorbachev's chief preoccupation in the last year has been not how to improve things, but how *not* to make things worse. He doesn't see a chance of improving the economic situation or the social situation. He is struggling to keep them from sliding deeper. And he is right; they can slide deeper; they can be worse.

Gorbachev has changed in a dramatic way, has become radicalized. By the end of 1988, he crossed what I would call the Leninist parameter. Selectively, at least, he has ceased to be a Leninist. We are speaking here about changes that are really fundamental. We are discussing articles of faith, not of faith as something simply written, but something that was internalized by the individual from the beginning. This man was brought up in the Leninist spirit. He was nurtured by the party apparatus (which today considers him not merely a mistake, but a traitor, and the danger is that he will be assassinated by them). Only a year ago he called the idea of a multi-party system in Russia "rubbish." He had apparently



never questioned in his own mind the idea that the Communist party should rule.

Then there is the “national question,” the desire of many nationalities in the Soviet Union for independence. Two-and-a-half years ago, Gorbachev went on television. I was in Russia at the time, and I remember the speech. It was after some disturbances in Kazakhstan, and he began the speech by saying, “Comrades here have to understand — we all know it — the national question in the Soviet Union has been solved once and for all.” I am convinced that he deeply believed this was the case. Even today, Gorbachev doesn’t fully understand the national question because he was brought up in the idea that the real social emotions are expressed in class warfare and Marxian rationalism, not in the emotion of ethnic dissatisfaction or nationalism. But he recognizes now that the desire for independence is not simply emotion and that it will not pass. When he went to Lithuania in December to try to convince the Lithuanian party and people not to proceed with their plans for secession, he didn’t say, “You have no right to secession.” He said, “It will harm perestroika; we will all go under if you do it. It is not practical now. We have to create a constitutional mechanism, which means three to four years’ time.” But he knows Lithuania will be independent. In other words, from a question of faith, it became a question of practicality; from a normative problem, an instrumental problem. And this shift is happening in many areas, though not in the economy. Gorbachev still does not understand that private property doesn’t mean exploitation — and that exploitation by state property is a hundred times worse than exploitation by competing private property. He doesn’t understand these concepts yet, but I hope he will come to such a realization. There are many people around him who do understand.

The most important change in Gorbachev’s ideas over the last three years is in his view of the balance of political institutions in Russia. At the 19th Party Congress in 1988, he still had the idea of an even balance between the party and the citizenship, the elected legislatures. But now the balance has shifted radically in the other direction, and I think Gorbachev is now betting on citizenship, the legislature, and his presidency. I think he now understands that the party cannot be reformed. A Leninist party cannot be reformed; it has to be transformed. When the party was created, Lenin called it the party of a “new type” to distinguish it from the parliamentary parties in the West. The party of the “new type” now has to be transformed into a party of the “old type.” It cannot be reformed, and what is happening now will lead to the destruction of the party. I do not know how quickly, but probably quicker than we think since we are not used to the swiftness of these processes.



It is a revolutionary situation, and the question for Gorbachev is whether he can keep up with the revolutionary process and whether the disintegration of the old order will at least be followed at some speed by the creation of a new order. Some of my colleagues in California have written a major article about the creation of a "civil society" in the Soviet Union. I see elements of such a society being created, but this is not the key process at the present time in the Soviet Union. The key process is the disintegration of the old society without the creation of new institutions, and the question is how the gap will be bridged. And here the role of Gorbachev is crucial because new institutions are not simply created by a spontaneous mass movement. There has to be some kind of form that comes from the elite, from the leaders. How quickly the disintegration will be accompanied by the creation of new institutions is the most important question in Russia.

I wanted to discuss the outcomes, but of course I have no time. I don't believe in planned systems, planned economy, and unfortunately, by default, I don't believe in planned lectures, and I always run out of time. I can say only a few words about possible outcomes.

This is not the first time in Russian history that democratic reforms have been attempted. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 was not against a czarist autocratic government; it was against the first democratic government in Russia. The czar was overthrown in February 1917 without the participation of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks took power in October-November 1917. The revolution of 1917 came after a long period of reform, begun by Stolypin, Bytov, and others after the revolution of 1905. This reform was moving in the direction of a constitutional monarchy and major social reforms. The first Constituent Assembly, the assembly that was to develop a democratic constitution for Russia, was meeting in St. Petersburg when the Bolshevik Revolution interrupted it. The Bolsheviks didn't want this assembly to take place. It was Trotsky who went with his Bolshevik colleagues and dissolved it, destroyed it. There was a great leader of the Social Democrats (the moderate socialists) named Martov, who was very popular among the workers. Martov said to one worker who was with Trotsky, "You will remember when you are old what you did, how you destroyed the future generations, your children and your grandchildren. By what you are doing now, you are destroying it for a century."

And that was the truth. Will events transpire again the same way? Will what is going on now have another October, a return to tyranny? There are those who say a democratic revolution is possible in Russia, and those who are doubtful, who believe that because the past was of a certain nature, the future must be also. Of



course both are right. With such a past, the Russian future is very dim. But that doesn't mean the future has to be a repetition of the past. I believe there is a good chance for democratic processes to develop in Russia. Those who are so pessimistic about Eastern Europe and Russia think too much in terms of ideal types. Whether there will be stable democracies in Eastern Europe and Russia I do not know. Only those who believe that political science is real science (and I hope you don't believe that) can think that one can really predict what will happen in such terms. Maybe there will never be stable democracies there. After all, there are many countries on the verge of totalitarian regimes.

But it is not so much the product but the process that is important — whether these countries will move in a democratic direction and for how long. Every year that they move in this direction, the chances will be better. Every year, the process will take further root. And I think the chances are good that the process can continue. The probability of the restoration of the totalitarian system seems to me very low. A military *coup d'etat* is still possible, but not likely because the military is disintegrating, too. It is no longer the professional military that it was. Given another year, I will be certain that a coup cannot happen.

The best hope, in my view, is that democratic institutions may develop out of the conflict between democratic and authoritarian elements. The conflict will sometimes be very sharp, but on the whole it will move the democratic processes forward. The key phrase here is *democratic institutions*. Democracy cannot occur in a mass movement, a mass society; there have to be institutions. Trade unions are a key institution, democratic trade unions, as are the legislatures, political parties, and professional associations.

A second, less desirable but quite plausible scenario would be a populist development. The current mood in Russia is a populist mood, not a democratic mood. What is the difference between a democratic institution and a populist development? Populism is a quest for justice. Populism is a quest for justice that wants to achieve it through a redistribution of goods. It is a quest for equality. Populism looks for quick solutions and is impatient with democratic procedures. It can also be very nationalistic. Populism lacks institutions. In populism you have a direct relationship between a leader or a group of leaders and the masses — as in Peron's Argentina. You do not have the institutions that make a leader responsible to the people and enable the people to act upon the leader.

A populist development in Russia would be much worse than a democratic development, but it would not mean a return to totalitarianism. If there is an economic catastrophe — and I want to



tell you that such a catastrophe is now on the horizon — it could unleash the populist sentiments currently widespread in Russia. We don't have much time. In half a year, nine months, a year at most, there may be a total collapse of the Soviet economy. Today the deficit is 120 billion rubles. The sum of money in the hands of the population doesn't have a cover in goods — it is double the sum of goods that exist in the market. That is to say, for each ruble's worth of goods in the store, you have two rubles in the hands of the population. This means that not only is there inflation, but there are also no goods. Only a few days ago, I saw a calculation in a Soviet newspaper that thirty-seven million people a day are standing in lines in the big cities. That is equal to the number of people who are working in industry. But the thirty-seven million people don't work — they are standing in lines. The Soviet Union is on the verge of a collapse of the type that occurred in the Weimar Republic after the First World War — or that occurred after the Second World War, but much worse, in Germany and Western Europe before American aid. If such a collapse occurs, a likely development is a conservative managerial regime, where people will vote for the certainties of the low level of the past rather than for hopes for the future. There are very few hopes for the future if the economic crisis continues, and then not from the party, but from managers and a guided administrative system. There may be some pluralism, but pluralism without a multiparty system.

Let me emphasize again that what is happening now is a revolution. The middle-range outcomes are likely to be drawn from among those I have outlined. But this is more than a political or economic revolution. Especially among the Soviet youth, there is a fight for human dignity, for the meaning of life. Where people are looking for the meaning of life, they look to personal redemption — not through an organized church, primarily, but through their own thinking, through their friends, and sometimes through political action. This is the deepest and most profound kind of revolution that can occur in a society, and this is why I say that this revolution cannot be reversed. I don't know what will come of it, but I don't think it can be reversed.

For us in the West, the danger with which we have lived for so many decades has declined, and there is the danger that isolationism will therefore grow. We have no right to turn our backs on what is happening in Eastern Europe and Russia. If we do not participate in the process that is now changing Russia, we will be betraying our ideals, we will be betraying our interests, and in the long run we will be betraying our security and our future.