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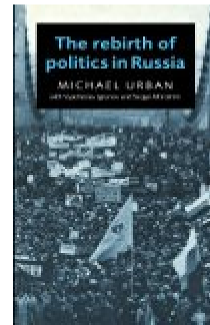

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The Grass Roots of Russia's Second Revolution

This book by Michael Urban and the Yabloko State Duma Deputies Viacheslav Igrunov and Sergei Mitrokhin is a comprehensive study of the origins and course of emergence of post-communist politics in Russia. It is, in at least three ways, a valuable contribution to the slim body of literature on the political groupings and organizations which brought about Russia's peaceful revolution.

First and foremost, it constitutes a fairly detailed and–with very rare exceptions–reliable handbook on the particulars of (a) the Soviet/Russian liberal and social-democratic dissident scene from the 1940s through the 1980s, (b) the "informals" (*neformal'nye*) movement in major Russian cities of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and (c) the altogether disappointing party building process in Russia between 1988 and 1996. The three authors list numerous new details, participant observations, and insights especially on the dissident scene and "informals" which will, even for the native Russian specialist, represent precious additions to the factual knowledge accumulated so far.

Second, the book presents an original application to the Russian case of a particular, decidedly non-elitist, pluralist concept of politics. Politics is here understood as a decision-making process characterized by a constant communication and interaction between the state, on the one side, and independent political society, and civil society, on the other. And, thirdly, the book represents a comprehensive interpretation of the major factors causing perestroika and the eventual systemic change between 1985 and 1991, and of the principal ills and missed opportunities in post-Soviet Russian politics between 1991 and 1996.

The study is fixed on Russia's anti-Soviet uprising "from below" and focuses on actors outside the Soviet state structures until 1991. This makes it a very useful supplement to other large analyses of this period which show similar ambition, but (a) are instead centred on the activities of the top-elite in their peculiar institutional setting, such as the in-depth investigation of the Gorbachev factor by Archie Brown,[1] or (b) explore the interaction between structural-institutional factors and political elite configurations, such as the comprehensive survey of the Soviet system's demise between 1985 and 1991 by Jerry Hough.[2]

Urban, Igrunov and Mitrokhin offer here a missing link with regard to these analyses. Concerning Brown's "Gorbachev-centric" approach, it becomes clear from their study that Gorbachev's and his assistants' gradual liberalization and democratization would have been much less consequential without the existence of some relevant–if dormant–extra-systemic political ideas and forces ready to fill quickly, and to expand further, the space initially opened up by intra-systemic reformers. With regard to Hough's explanatory scheme the authors provide proof that the substantial structural changes in Russian society which made a middle-class-revolution likely had first to be translated into a nascent civil and

political society in order to leave its own imprint on the reform process, and to eventually transform the initial palace revolution and attempted social engineering from above into a true, deep and societally based socio-economic, cultural and political revolution.

By the authors' own admission, their "utopian or ideal" conception of politics (p. 310) as involving the people and independent social groups as active participants, and their approach to the Russian transformation emerging from this concept constitutes both the major strength and weakness of their survey. The approach is, as indicated, certainly helpful in switching our focus from merely Kremlinological or exclusively sociological explanations to the issue of how exactly societal potentials and contradictions were transformed into political inputs and conflicts.

Nevertheless, late Soviet and even to some degree post-Soviet Russian politics remained–at least until December 1993–to a large degree a secluded intra-elite process with the top decision-makers unusually insulated from inputs of an underdeveloped political and civil society. As far as these top-heavy political conflicts do not seem to fit the authors' understanding of what "politics" is about, they ignore them to a large extent. Thus the book needs to be read in conjunction with more elite-centered studies, such as those by Brown and Hough, in order to get a full picture of the period mostly of concern here (i.e. 1985-1991). Urban's, Igrunov's and Mitrokhin's valuable, extensive and naturally sympathetic treatment of the various brands of liberally oriented segments of the suppressed civil society in the Soviet Union, leads them also to assert that "[p]erhaps the principal source of ideas contributing to perestroika's intellectual thrust was the Soviet dissident movement" (p. 61).

In my opinion, this is–in contrast to what one might say about the importance of dissidents to the demise of communism in Poland and Czechoslovakia–a clear overestimation of the Soviet dissidents' impact on pre-1985 society, and an altogether misleading indication of the causal chain leading to the collapse of the Soviet/Russian Empire. Although personalities like Andrei Sakharov, Valeriia Novodvorskaia, Boris Kagarlitskii and Sergei Kovalev all played in their ways important roles in the formation of post-Soviet Russian political discourse, they became able to do so only by the late 1980s. The only case where a prominent representative of the Soviet dissident movement managed to reach out to the Soviet mass public before Gorbachev, occurred when *Novyi mir* was given permission to publish Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in the early 1960s. And even then the partly nationalist and traditionalist political views later expressed by Solzhenitsyn would seem to put him outside the camp of those dissidents who have, according to Urban, Igrunov and Mitrokhin, provided perestroika's "intellectual thrust."

Among the principal ideological sources of Gorbachev and his team's reforms one would have to mention instead pre- and post-Stalinist Bolshevik thought (Lenin, Bukharin, Khrushchev); imaginative–if still Marxist–analyses of Soviet society by Soviet academics; exposure of the Soviet political and academic elite to Western media and social science (including sovietological) literature; and the top elite's confrontation with various brands of non- or anti-Soviet Marxism, such as the ideas of the Prague Spring, Eurocommunism and West European social democracy. To be sure, some writings by Soviet dissidents, such as Andrei Sakharov, were circulated more widely among the Soviet intelligentsia than others. Nevertheless, it was institutions such as the editorial boards of Moscow's *Novyi mir* or Prague's *World Marxist Review*, the Central Economic-Mathematical Institute, a number of further institutes of the Academy of Sciences, the law and economics departments of Moscow's and Leningrad's research universities, and even some CPSU Central Committee Departments which provided the central ideas and blueprints for perestroika and, later, for more radical reform attempts. If the output of these institutions was indeed been significantly influenced by Soviet dissident writing, Urban, Igrunov and Mitrokhin do not provide evidence or even hypotheses for how this may have happened.

Concerning "moral" impetus of perestroika and the later reforms, the impact of the abortive Soviet dissident movement was probably more significant. Yet this influence would still have to be seen within a wider picture of large-scale criticism of the Soviet system from an ethical point of view by a considerable number of outspoken representatives of the official Soviet cultural scene including many famous artists, writers, film-directors, publicists, and so forth after 1985. This qualification is not meant to diminish in any way the sorrow and deprivation endured, and indeed the heroism shown, by the Soviet dissidents. Rather it aims to draw light on a peculiar feature of the second Russian social revolution–namely that it had its origins and drew its main actors from within the Soviet *ancien regime*. Given the pre-1985 Soviet state's effectiveness in suppressing political dissent, there was little possibility that a comprehensive systemic change could have happened differently in a peaceful way.

In so far as Urban, Igrunov and Mitrokhin do not regard the conflicts within the Soviet political top elite as politics proper, they are also unable or do not even try to conceptualize the ideologies which were competing with each other over what should be the exact course and aims of the Soviet system's renovation. Instead, the authors detect in the Soviet leaders' motivation to embark on comprehensive reforms an element of "[…] subjectivity [which] would appear in pre-political form, suspended somewhere between a technocratic consciousness expressed in the dialectic of objective factors and a moral concern particular to individual actors" (p. 65). Such a characterization, or formulas like the "subjective, moral factor" and "subjective notion of morality" (p. 64) might be a way to express in general terms what was an essential driving force for some prominent CPSU leaders to initiate ever deeper reforms, and for others to go along with that for a surprisingly long time.

However, these formulations hardly provide useful concepts for the construction of a, for comparative purposes, informative semantic field capturing the socio-political visions of such actors as Aleksandr Iakovlev, Eduard Shevardnadze, Yegor Ligachev, Anatolii Luk'ianov or Boris Yel'tsin, and the factions in the CPSU and state apparatuses they represented. It was the multifarious conflicts between high ranking Central Committee officials such as these, and the constituencies they represented rather than a conflict between the Soviet state (infiltrated by "moral" concern) on the one side and the dissidents and "informals" on the other that determined, at least until circa 1990, what "perestroika" would entail. In addition one should mention that the evocation of precepts claiming implicitly or explicitly to be "moral" was not only characteristic of liberal dissidents and intra-systemic liberalizers, but also for the Stalinist and traditionalist-ultranationalist opposition to perestroika, and Westernization.

This brings me to a final critical remark on the implications of the authors' particular conception of politics for their interpretation of post-Soviet political conflicts; a critique which also applies to other writings on the 1985-1996 period. This concerns the attention and seriousness with which the various forces of opposition to perestroika and more radical reform and their varying strength, strategies, failures and successes are treated. By way of linking their concept of generic politics closely to its sub-type of a pluralist and open political contest, the three authors come to the conclusion that an explicitly anti-democratic grouping such as Pamiat was above all an *anti-political* organization that functioned on the political field primarily as an objection to the fact that politics was becoming possible. In relation to the informal phenomenon, groups such as Pamiat constituted something of a parallel universe. Their activities–organizing discussion circles, staging rallies, leafleting in public places–outwardly resembled those of many informal groups. Yet the content of their discourse, to say nothing of the results of the June 1991 presidential elections and April 1993 referendum did not.

In view of their dismissive attitude towards the ideologies and proponents of ultra-nationalism in and outside the Congress of People's Deputies, some of the central questions of the political conflicts of that time are explicitly left unanswered by Urban, Igrunov and Mitrokhin. The National Salvation Front's "red-brown" program, for instance, is presented as "undiminished by the qualifications of logical relationship" (p. 276); the September-October 1993 uprising is seen as "incongruously fusing the most extreme elements of the red-brown coalition with the cause of parliamentary democracy" (p. 288); and "the KPRF's 'patriotic communism' or the Congress of Russian Communities' purported syntheses of liberal economic and "traditional Russian mentality" are interpreted to have generated "contradictory and nonsensical messages" (p. 300). An analysis which does not to try to make sense of these "irrational" agendas and constellations, and does seemingly not take seriously Russian ultra-conservative and fascist resistance to Westernization is–somewhat naturally–bound to end up with a rather unflattering evaluation of both Gorbachev's and Yel'tsin's contribution to Russia's liberalization and democratization.

Apart from these and some other omissions and misinterpretations, the only factual vagueness I could detect also concerns this particular aspect of the "rebirth of politics" in Russia. Namely, an "overtly fascist" organization called "Russian National Union" (RNU) is listed among the "[National Salvation] Front's principal components", and Gennadii Ziuganov is identified as "one of the RNU's most visible leaders" (p. 277). It remains unclear whether "RNU" means Aleksandr Sterligov's ultimately abortive ultra-nationalist umbrella organization *Russkii natsional'nyi sobor* (Russian National Assembly), or Aleksandr Barkashov's successful neo-Nazi para-military party *Russkoe natsional'noe edinstvo* (Russian National Unity). In any case, contrary to the above statement, neither of these organization became a component of the National Salvation Front.

Although Ziuganov has indeed for some time been,

together with Barkashov, a prominent member of the leading body of Sterligov's Russian National Assembly, he could have, for various political and ideological reasons, never led an "overtly" fascist organization (although both umbrella organizations, i.e. Sterligov's Assembly and the National Salvation Front included some clearly fascist–although largely not mimetically–fascist organizations). To be sure, I agree with what Urban, Igrunov and Mitrokhin seem to imply: Ziuganov himself should be handled with more caution and scepticism than that is sometimes done in Russian and Western evaluations of his political agenda. However, associating Ziuganov with *overt* fascism and thus apparently with neo-Nazism, confuses some principal issues in the rise, ideological differentiation and consolidation of the post-Soviet Russian extreme Right.

In spite of these criticisms, *The Rebirth of Russian Politics* should be singled out as belonging to the few truly exhaustive and innovative narratives on a particular aspect of the Soviet-Russian transformation published so far. Its outline of the emergence of the liberal, social-democratic and moderately nationalist components of the nascent civil and political societies of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, and their impact on the reform process will remain an essential piece in the mosaic of the second Russian revolution.

Notes:

[1]. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996.

[2]. Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-1991*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 1997.

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