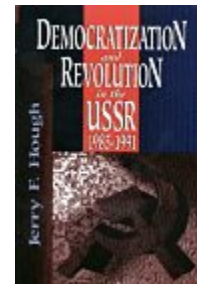


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Reviewed by David R. Stone (History Department, Kansas State University)
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Bourgeois Revolution or Incompetent Revolutionary?

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev took over one of the world's two superpowers as its first healthy reformer in decades. Six years later, that superpower disintegrated as his efforts at reform ended in disaster. How could good intentions go so disastrously awry?

Jerry Hough, in an always provocative and insightful survey of Gorbachev's years in power, answers this question by seeing Gorbachev's revolution as part of a pattern. What happened in the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991 was nothing less than a bourgeois revolution to rank with the great revolutions of European history. The Soviet bourgeoisie, those who controlled and managed the means of production, destroyed their political system in order to create a new one that would transform their *control* over the means of production into *ownership*.

Hough's middle-class revolution requires a middle class to carry it out, and here he builds on his previous work. Hough begins his book by conceding that "In retrospect, every Western scholar—certainly including me—understood parts of what happened and why but completely misunderstood other parts" (p. 3). In the essentials of his argument, though, Hough returns to familiar ground. In asserting that the fall of Communism was essentially a middle-class revolution, Hough also argues that the Soviet Union had developed by the 1980s a pluralist and differentiated middle-class made up of groups capable of recognizing, articulating, and defending their institutional interests (pp. 8-10, 19). This growing elite, familiar from much of Hough's earlier work, saw an op-

portunity to alter the Soviet Union's political system to its own advantage.

Hough's book systematically questions the conventional wisdom of what happened to the Soviet Union. To criticize Gorbachev as strategically and tactically inept, which Hough does at length, is now hardly a radical view, but Hough goes beyond that to find Nikolai Ryzhkov, Gorbachev's prime minister, to be perhaps the sole figure in Gorbachev's Kremlin with the realism and political savvy to reform the Soviet Union without destroying it in the process. Though Hough has few kind words for Gorbachev, when he does compliment him it is in a way utterly alien to the standard literature. Archie Brown, for example, a scholar far kinder to Gorbachev than Hough is, concedes that "one of [Gorbachev's] problems ... was that he underestimated the intensity of nationalist feelings and assumed too readily that an extension of political and economic liberties within the framework of a genuinely federal state would lead to a resolution of the national question."^[1] Absolutely wrong, argues Hough. Non-Russian nationalism, as Gorbachev recognized, posed little threat to the integrity of the Soviet state. Gorbachev correctly perceived the real danger to the USSR as *Russian* nationalism (pp. 216, 238).

By focusing his broad claims on Soviet elites, and his narrative on Gorbachev himself, Hough deliberately neglects many of the issues central to more standard interpretations of the fall of communism. Foreign policy is almost entirely irrelevant—Hough devotes one chapter to

US-Soviet relations and Eastern Europe, but it has little to do with his overall argument. The issue of nationalism hardly appears at all, except (as mentioned above) in the context of Russian nationalism. Hough also cares nothing about the revelations glasnost provided on the dark side of Soviet history, or the growth of civil society around such issues as environmentalism. Elites made this revolution, so elite politics are what truly matter.

Hough introduces and concludes his book by stressing the importance of a small group of Soviet elites, the bourgeoisie of this bourgeois revolution. His actual text concentrates on a much smaller group—Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and a handful of advisors around them. Readers should be aware that despite his description of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a bourgeois revolution, Hough talks little about socio-economic groups. His book is instead high politics at its height, and though he at times reverts to his initial concept of the beliefs and attitudes of a broader Soviet middle class (see, for example, pp. 449), his story is essentially that of Kremlin politics.

As a result, Hough relies for his source base on exhaustive knowledge of the memoir literature produced by Gorbachev and his lieutenants, supplemented by the Soviet press and personal interviews. Few come off well from this: Gorbachev is fatally indecisive, and Yeltsin is a power-hungry demagogue. The heroes, as it were, of Hough's story, are the conservative opposition to Gorbachev. No high-ranking apparatchik—Yegor Ligachev and Ryzhkov, to name just two—could seriously question the need for reform. Soviet conservatives, however, correctly saw the dangers inherent in the pace and manner of Gorbachev's reforms. Gorbachev's response to opposition was to vilify it to serve his own needs, to use the Stalinist bogeyman to discredit advocates of a slower pace of reform.

Hough rejects the interpretation, one Gorbachev himself endorses, that entrenched conservatives and bureaucratic resistance are to blame for Gorbachev's failures. Those with positions of power and influence under the USSR's Brezhnevite system, this argument runs, had no interest in seeing a more open society and fought Gorbachev at every turn. Hough utterly rejects this portrayal of Gorbachev as simply powerless to force through his initiatives against hide-bound Stalinists. On the contrary, according to Hough, Gorbachev was always solidly in control. Responsible for personnel under Yurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, Gorbachev had built an enviable network of solidly loyal clients throughout the Soviet political elite, and most importantly in the

Central Committee. He was in no danger from party conservatives, even Yegor Ligachev. The danger of a Ligachev-centered conservative opposition was "grossly overdrawn" (pp. 63-4, 92).

More broadly, the *nomenklatura* stood to benefit, not lose, from Gorbachev's reforms, and so could hardly have presented a serious threat to perestroika. Hough, arguing here with the benefit of hindsight, asserts that the *nomenklatura* as a group saw the opportunities for quasi-legal and fully illegal seizure of state property that the dissolution of a command-administrative economy would offer. This is the bourgeois revolution at work; with such a lucrative possibility looming, what good apparatchik could reject radical reform?

Even Boris Yeltsin, the *bete noire* of Gorbachev's final years in power, is for Hough a Gorbachev creation. Yeltsin, like Ligachev, served as the bad cop for Gorbachev's good cop. Just as Ligachev had provided a safe means of frightening Soviets into recognizing the need for continued reform, Yeltsin personified the dangers of irresponsibly rapid reform. By aiding Yeltsin's push to become chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev put a face on Russian nationalism, giving it a (supposedly) safe outlet while frightening other republics into backing Gorbachev's moderate alternative to Yeltsin's radical populism (pp. 329-32).

It is Hough's tight focus on Gorbachev that gives this book its chief flaw. Though practically every chapter contains an unexpected insight, or turns established wisdom on its head, Hough's explanations rely on a man who remains, essentially, inexplicable. Gorbachev was evidently intelligent and skilled enough to rise on his merits from Stavropol peasant to General Secretary, but utterly incapable of governing capably once he had done that. Hough's book is a litany of incomprehensible mistakes and oversights in Gorbachev's management of perestroika.

For Hough, then, Gorbachev is both a shrewd political operator, putting himself in power through the adroit use of patronage politics and Kremlin maneuvering, and at the same time staggeringly naive about the importance of institutions to managing a modern state and economy. Gorbachev's utter neglect of the importance of getting institutions and incentives right as a precondition of reform, a neglect he shared with myriad Western Sovietologists, stems from a number of sources. First, Gorbachev lacked a theory of transition, a plan to direct his effort to change the Soviet Union. Instead, he improvised a series of increasingly desperate and confused strategies

that ended in disaster.

This did not have to happen. Gorbachev had available, Hough argues, a number of concrete models for reforming Marxist-Leninist systems that he simply neglected. The Chinese precedent of carefully-controlled, state-led reforms of agriculture and the economy was one alternative; Hungary's goulash communism another (pp. 16-22, 491). Rather than carefully thinking through the institutional requirements of transition, Gorbachev simply torched existing institutions of party and state in the hope that a new Soviet society would rise from the ashes, never anticipating the dangers of demolishing institutions without constructing others in their place (pp. 103-106).

Behind this neglect of institutions lay a streak of anarchism. Gorbachev, like Yeltsin, "came to accept Karl Marx's assumption that the state does not play a crucial or even useful role in economic performance, that it is parasitic and that planning can be achieved as it withers away" (p. 2). This, combined with an irrational fear of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy, made Gorbachev demolish the power of the state in a misguided attempt to thereby revitalize a stagnant system. He surrendered the Communist party's leading role in Soviet society, but never created the mechanisms to replace the party's essential administrative functions (pp. 269-73).

Hough also notes Gorbachev's weird reluctance to use judicious force to maintain the cohesion and authority of the Soviet state, though the citizens of Vilnius and Tbilisi might differ from Hough here on the extent of Gorbachev's willingness to use force. Over the course of 1989 and 1990, when disintegration had not yet passed the point of no return, Gorbachev's actions seem so confused and paradoxical that Hough observes "it seemed Gorbachev was deliberately fostering chaos to liberate himself from the Politburo and Central Committee control and build support for a strong presidency with emergency powers" (p. 250). Having created just such a strong presidency, however, Gorbachev then never used his powers to halt the disintegration of the Soviet Union. He held back from controlling Soviet mass media or re-

publican elections, and the use of force was intermittent, spasmodic, and largely ineffective (pp. 249-54).

Hough finds Gorbachev's indecision so puzzling that he even seems at times to agree with Nikolai Ryzhkov's contention that "there was a concerted plot to destroy the Communist party and the Soviet Union" (p. 254). In looking at Gorbachev's handling of the Union Treaty and Shatalin's 500-Day Plan, Hough can come up with no rational explanation for Gorbachev's behavior. "Many conservatives," he writes, "could think of no better answer than that he and his chief advisers were CIA agents, and one can understand their problem in finding another explanation" (pp. 368-69). Hough argues that Gorbachev had every opportunity in early 1991 to build on a societal consensus around some decentralization of power and moderate economic reform. Gorbachev rejected this opportunity; Hough does not explain why (pp. 399-400). From March through December 1991, Gorbachev neglected numerous opportunities to salvage the Union. Hough concludes that "even today many of those closely associated with him remain mystified by his thinking, and Westerners too can only guess" (p. 405).

It is Hough's reliance on such a puzzling and contradictory central character that makes his book fall short as a master narrative of the collapse of the Soviet Union. If most events are explained by the poor choices of a misguided reformer, what explanation do we really have? Hough's book is no less valuable for that; at every point Hough aggressively and provocatively asserts new interpretations of the key events in the fall of communism. No scholar of Gorbachev's revolution can afford to neglect what Hough has to say.

Notes:

[1]. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, 1996), p. 30.

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