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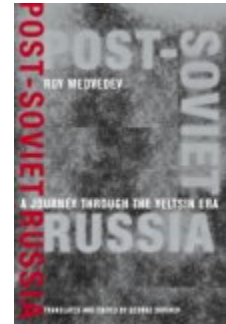
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roy Medvedev. *Post-Soviet Russia: A Journey through the Yeltsin Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. viii + 360 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10606-1.

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## A Political Chronicle of Post-Soviet Russia

Put into a nutshell, this work is, above all, an attempt at a compressed chronicle that allows for quick understanding of the last ten years of Russian political history. It is what the French call *histoire événementielle*: an account of recent political history concentrating on hard political facts. Therefore this history concentrates on events that were from the beginning conventionally acknowledged as such, that is to say the public actions of the main political players. One should not look for a heterodox understanding of the scope of the historical facts in this work, as it is political history as conventionally understood—what Yeltsin and his team did or did not do. Nevertheless, in his choice of facts and his explanations of them, Medvedev does have an interpretive framework, which he never formally states, but which can be summarized as follows.

It is not one of the smallest paradoxes in the history of post-soviet Russia that, while the political developments that led to the demise of the USSR were consciously directed by all relevant political actors towards the sheer destruction of the political and ideological structures of “really existing socialism,” nevertheless, in the telling of the setting-up of a market economy and liberal democratic constitutional structures in post-1991 Russia, comparisons with the October Revolution offer themselves readily, as it was only possible to understand post-Soviet history as under the shadow of the Bolshevik Revolution. Both processes are taken as instances of “revolutions from above,” in that in both cases the conscious action of a handful of ideologically prone and politically

organized individuals sufficed to stage a sharp turn in all things political, economic, and social, as opposed to all reasonable expectations of a more “organic” process of change. That such swift change came to imply the enormous and painful sociopolitical dislocation of masses of people, as opposed to a more gradual process of change, is something that critics of both processes were quick to point at—most critiques, however, coming not from the right (which tended more or less to accept the “state-centered” character of Russian society as a matter of fact) but from the moderate Left.

In a certain way, given that Medvedev started his international career as an author with *Let History Judge* (1971), a dissident critique of Stalin’s “revolution from above,” it is not altogether surprising to see him, when dealing with the character of the transitional process led by Yeltsin’s team in post-1991 Russia, to echo arguments strangely reminiscent of the ones used by the social-democratic wing of the socialist movement—above all, Kautsky—when criticizing the Bolsheviks. This is particularly the case in that both the Bolshevik *coup de main* of 7 November 1917 and Yeltsin’s August-December 1991 sleight-of-hand, while backed by the majority of the masses as a reaction against an authoritarian (and decaying) political order, nevertheless exceeded by far the political limits of the “mandate” given to both and eventually came to rely too much on “exclusively administrative methods”—as Medvedev states when talking about Yeltsin’s suppression of the Russian parliament in 1993 (p. 4). In both processes, pressures exerted by “particu-

lar interests”—lust for power or profit—prevailed against the general “yearning for social justice” (p. 5). Therefore also, as stated in the Introduction, the aim of the work: to offer witness (“I am merely posing the question, not giving the answer” [p. 6]) to the peculiarities of a process of political development where the actions and aims of the main individual actors ran counter to the general wishes of the majority.

As we have remarked, this “peculiarity” of Russian history of offering examples of sharp and swift turns in all matters political and social has been noted by various authors, not only those with social democratic views. When Medvedev writes about political actors relying exclusively on administrative methods, he is actually quoting Lenin’s famous remark about Trotsky. And it was actually Gramsci—surely no social democrat—who wrote the famous observation that the Bolshevik Revolution had been made “as against *Das Kapital*,” that is, as against the commonly held Marxist view that change in the mode of production cannot happen until the old mode of production has exhausted itself spontaneously and has begun to act as a hindrance to further development of the forces of production. Medvedev adheres to this view: “no social system or form of civilization can be built if it has not already taken place in the interstices of the previously existing form of civilization, or social system” (p. 51). That Russian history—perhaps since Peter the Great—has, however, “refused” to conform to this view is something that should be perhaps integrated into the “core” of this explanatory system, is an issue which Medvedev evades, as he seems to take only from the Russian case its value as an aberration from the proper rule, a pathological case, or even a felony committed as against the (Marxist?) rules of proper historical development. Bent on striking a moral point against the fundamentalism of radical change, Bolsheviks and Yeltsin’s team of reformers alike, fails to recognize, beneath the outward similarities, the differences between them.

Medvedev does point out, while describing the swift market-oriented changes in 1992-1993 Russia, that Yeltsin’s team of reformers was composed above all of intellectual and political mediocrities unexpectedly risen from the middle ladders of the *nomenklatura*; witness his comment about Yeltsin’s first premier Gaidar, who had made his first step towards preeminence by means of a candidate’s degree granted through a dissertation on economics whose central idea was “whether under capitalism or socialism, an enterprise has to make a profit” (p. 14). Of course, he does not compare this with the pre-Soviet intellectual achievements of the Bolshevik leaders,

as any comparison in quality between Gaidar’s dissertation and, say, even Stalin’s tract on the national question would be simply unthinkable.

One of the most striking traits of Medvedev’s account is that most of the characters in it simply fail to make an impression; they are raised onto the scene, do something, and then sink into oblivion—which makes for painstaking reading not to be attributed to the author’s lack of literary qualities—Medvedev writes in a simple and clear style—but to the obscurity of most of the people portrayed. Even when they are plunged into the most dramatic events—such as the October 1993 storming of the Russian parliament—they fail to say or do anything noteworthy. Yeltsin himself, from the beginning to the end of the account, rises repeatedly from slumber, saves himself, and then relapses again into torpor. Reading through Medvedev’s dire and obscure chronicle, one is reminded of Marx’s comments in the opening of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) that great events first occur as tragedy, but repeat themselves as farce. However, perhaps it was Marx who could offer some kind of a key to this puzzle when he remarks that the bourgeoisie, having reached its proper level of development, could forget the Old Testament rhetoric of a Cromwell and instead put in its place Locke. The Bolsheviks had somehow to search Marx’s works for inspiration; for Yeltsin’s team, IMF working papers sufficed.

But then, for the Bolsheviks (as for Yeltsin’s reformers) the backwardness of Russia in the world capitalist system was taken for granted. Therefore it was necessary somehow to tie Russia to the international socialist movement in order to overcome such backwardness; one need not to adhere to Trotsky’s views about permanent revolution to realize this. This “internationalization” of Russian domestic politics was a feature of the views and actions of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike. For example, the early twentieth-century Russian socialist movement developed much of its debates in the ranks and papers of German Social Democracy. The Russian Marxists, however, operated from the outer reaches of an international socialist movement that was a Gramscian “historical bloc” still in the making; therefore, they had to sharpen their arguments and give them greater intellectual sophistication against an established bourgeois ideology. For Yeltsin’s team, the task was comparatively easier; they also accepted the passive role of Russia in the overall system, but they operated within a long-established bourgeois consensus. Their task, as it were, consisted only in putting the system’s ideological commonplaces into practical application.

Part one of the book deals with the course and consequences of the all-out process of privatization that took place in Russia between 1991 and 1995, which Medvedev sees as consisting primarily of a wholesale sell off of state property in shady conditions, mostly through speculation in privatization vouchers and underpriced auctioning, leading neither to the entrance of productive foreign capital into the Russian economy nor to the strengthening of its technological bases. On the contrary, it led to a scrapping process that left Russia reduced to the condition of an exporter of raw materials and cheap labor power, without regard for national interest, objective economical needs, or even ideology.

And here we stumble against a starting point for understanding the whole process. Medvedev chides Yeltsin himself, his aides, and supporters (while posing as “liberal democrats”) for providing only the crudest basis for their political stance, something easily proved by the fact that “only in recent years have books on the history of Western or Russian liberalism begun to appear in Moscow. The number of copies printed is small, and there is no great demand for these books” (p. 81). I could limit myself to noting that this did not hinder Yeltsin’s “New Russians” from reforming themselves very effectively as an emerging bourgeoisie.

However, given that it would be useless to try summarizing Medvedev’s clear, detailed chronicle of the various swindles and heterodox ways of pricing, selling, and purchasing state property that fill this part of the book, I must say that it is the above quote that struck me the most at this point. Somehow, the author believes that a ruling class, long after its ideology has become general common sense, must somehow refresh its legitimacy by perusing the work of its ideological founders. This strikes me as a very peculiar understanding of Marxist views about ideology. An emerging ruling class must create an ideological consensus by opposing the existing one; therefore, it must develop sophisticated intellectual tools in order to successfully overcome the ruling ideology. The Russian reformers did not need to read Adam Smith, Locke, Bentham, J.S. Mill, Jefferson, Humboldt, or Cavour (sic, p. 81) in order to justify ideologically their actions any more than they needed to have read Lenin’s *Collected Works* in order to operate functionally as the ruling bureaucratic caste in the pre-Perestroika era; as long as a centrally planned economy could operate functionally in the outer periphery of a world capitalist economy, it did not need to elaborate ideological justifications to become accepted as such; it offered concrete opportunities for a career, and that was all. The fact that it did not function anymore

could have offered the opportunity for a new, more sophisticated socialist ideology to emerge; however, in the absence of an international socialist movement, such an ideology did not develop. Also, the development of such an ideology would have run counter to the concrete interest of the bureaucracy as a privileged stratum.

The option chosen by the bureaucracy, through its individual members, was to accept the existing ideological consensus as a thing in itself, and for that there was no need of sophisticated ideological justifications; ideological commonplaces sufficed. Medvedev unwittingly strikes this nail on the head when he tosses off the remark that most people who adhered to protest movements during Perestroika were “people whose careers had not been particularly successful and who saw a chance of advancement through activism in protest movements” (p. 83). I could add that, in entirely changed circumstances, most of the individual members of the major Latin American bourgeoisies, when hit by the economic crisis of the 1980s, came to forswear the efforts at economic modernization made by the populist and authoritarian governments of the preceding decades in favor of positions as compradors and junior partners in the globalized world economy of the 1990s, with no more effort at intellectual understanding than accepting Thatcherite commonplaces as common sense.

The account of the political crisis of October 1993 offers nothing that is altogether new, as it argues that it was ultimately a crisis within the Russian political establishment, which ultimately failed to involve actual ideological issues. Since Medvedev’s history centers on the Russian political elite, such an appraisal is entirely reasonable. To find an account of October 1993 “from below” in English, one should read Boris Kagarlit-sky’s *Square Wheels* (1994), or Buzgalin’s and Kolganov’s *Bloody October in Moscow* (1994). Part one closes with a denunciatory account of the prevailing mores of the “New Russian” bourgeoisie—which are more or less the same mores of all peripheral bourgeoisies, “emergence” excesses notwithstanding—and an account (written by Medvedev’s brother Zhores) of the demographic catastrophe borne by Russia during the 1990s, with reduced life expectancy and a diminished population.

Part two is an account of the events that led to Yeltsin’s first election to the presidency of a post-Soviet Russia in 1996, and above all of the role played in this process by the leader of a rebuilt Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Gennadi Zyuganov, whose political views are analyzed in detail in chapter 7. Here

Medvedev's strengths and shortcomings as an historian offer themselves more readily. As a chronicler of Russian political life, Medvedev does well with the unsavory material he chooses as his subject, but, intriguingly for a Marxist, he fails to integrate this material into an ideological whole. He makes it clear that Zyuganov, consistent with the position of a Stalinist bureaucracy long cut from any actual ties with the working class, is ideologically a right-wing populist aiming at making a nationalistic (and petit bourgeois) response to the wounds inflicted on Russia by globalization. This is an ideological framework very close to that of some right-wing Latin American populists of the early twentieth century.

Latin American nationalists operated in societies that were mostly historically multiethnic and monolingual; there enlightened despots were more successful in the task of imposing a common language. Zyuganov's brand of nationalism suffers from the common bane of East European nationalism: it is based on ethnicity and anti-Semitism. However, that does not mean that Zyuganov is removed from his original ideological outlook; his notions about "a cosmopolitan elite of international capital" bent on destroying Russia over the last thousand years (p. 262) have, of course, their roots firmly in the High Stalinism of Stalin's last years. But then this is a connection which Medvedev does not emphasize. As Stalinism lost contact with its international socialist roots, the prospect that it should more and more become plain petty bourgeois nationalism is hardly inspiring. Such a program could at best point to the stabilization of post-Soviet Russian capitalism under the aegis of a more or less benevolent authoritarian order that would proceed to Russia's "latinamericanization" as a more or less closed economy and a nonentity in world affairs. At worst, it could lead to open warfare with the "near abroad" (by the way, the two wars in Chechnya are barely mentioned). Perhaps it is the unappealing character of such an alternative that explains the general political passivity of the

Russian masses and not, as Medvedev notes, the fact that "a substantial number of those who have been impoverished in the last few years are marginal types, people who are not very capable or energetic" (p. 272)—which is an intriguing outburst of elitism.

Finally, Part three deals with the 1998 economic collapse, which is described somewhat hastily, mainly as the cause of Yeltsin's appointment of Primakov as premier, followed by a brief interregnum between Primakov's dismissal by Yeltsin and the appointment of Putin as premier (and afterwards presidential candidate) before Yeltsin's resignation on New Year's Eve 1999. Given that both Primakov and Putin favored the continuation of Yeltsin's politics and economics by milder means (above all a relaxation in the application of economic IMF orthodoxy), the account closes with a lull under the stabilization of an institutionalized quasi-authoritarian order and a diminished presence in world politics. And Medvedev ends with the resigned remark that "let us hope that inevitable changes will not take the form of a new 'cult of personality'" (p. 362). Medvedev's book exposes the quiet acceptance by the former nomenklatura of Russia's new lower status in world affairs as a backward capitalist society. Whether this shall be accepted by future generations, or if Russia will choose again to align itself with new international social movements, only actual historical developments can tell.

Medvedev's book is a first-rate political chronicle that will undoubtedly figure as one of the best accounts of the events described, displaying qualities of both clearness and brevity. At the same time, it displays little interest in a theory-based discussion of the meaning of the same events; its strengths as an historical account are at the same time its shortcomings as a work of either Marxist or *marxisant* history. Nevertheless, it is a work of reference that will endure for quite a long time, especially for graduate-level studies.

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