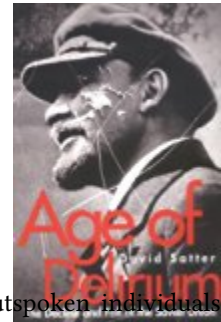


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Satter. *Age of Delirium: The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. 448 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-08705-5.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Ward (Clayton State University, Georgia)
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Satter, a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation and Hudson Institute, is also a visiting scholar of the Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute and served as Moscow correspondent for the *Financial Times* of London from 1976 to 1982. Satter has also been a special correspondent on Soviet affairs for the *Wall Street Journal* and a senior fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. Given these qualifications, the reader expects a first-hand account of the last days of the Soviet Union in which various reasons for the state's precipitous collapse are laid bare. Instead, *Age of Delirium* is a vignette-driven tale that lacks focus and teases the reader with tidbits of insight far too rarely.

Satter's purpose is to chronicle the last fifteen years of the Soviet Union (1976-1991) by looking not at the activities of such high-level political actors as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, but rather at a handful of less glamorous but nonetheless important Soviet citizens whose stories have yet to be told. These historical actors are, in the author's mind, indicative of the mass population who lived in a world where reality and fiction were one and the same.

One of Satter's most salient points is that the Soviet Union was unique in that it was "the first state in history to be based explicitly on atheism." With its commitment to godlessness, Satter argues, the Soviet elite also embraced an ideological surrogate, namely Marxism-Leninism, that would replace religious piety and devotion with a blind confidence in science, dialectical materialism, and above all "single-mindedness, amorality, and blind fanaticism." Even before his narrative begins in earnest, the author links the Soviet Union's demise with its leaders' slavish devotion to ideas rather than morals.

The rest of this work is a case-by-case study of the

lives of several courageous and outspoken individuals who, although they did not achieve the notoriety in the West of such figures as Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, clearly played a role in the dissident movement. For some reason, Satter carefully avoids the use of the word "dissidents" but nonetheless identifies his subjects as Soviet citizens who were not single-minded, amoral, or blindly fanatical. Instead, they possessed what the author terms a "moral center" and provided an alternative to the misguided Soviet regime, which Satter describes as the "crowning achievement of a godless religious faith." Here Satter presents Soviet godlessness as a form of idealized secular zealotry (certainly not a novel concept, but Satter deserves credit for characterizing Soviet ideology in this manner) that, somewhat ironically, paralleled the shrillness and narrowness of fundamentalist Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, the very ecclesiastical institutions that Soviet atheistic propaganda routinely excoriated.

Satter eschews a strict chronological framework and instead chooses to bring his story to life through a series of vignettes from a number of disaffected and disenfranchised Soviet citizens. Through more than a dozen separate narratives, Satter strives to demonstrate that, because Marxism-Leninism rejected traditional religion in which an afterlife is often promised, the Soviet state had to mold its own godless religion into a theology that promised a better future in this world rather than in the next.

Religious imagery and vocabulary abound in *Age of Delirium*. By characterizing the Soviet leadership as a church, Satter is able to portray Soviet society in hierarchical terms that allow the reader to understand why a societal experiment that was so flawed survived for

nearly eighty years. Satter notes that, though it could not deliver on its promises of a better tomorrow, the regime could hoodwink much of the population into thinking that believing that such a utopian life was just around the corner.

Although this work's date of publication is now some eight years past, many of Satter's observations about the daily lives of those who lived outside the strictures of the state are as germane today as they were in the mid-1990s. Specifically, there are still those in Russia (the recent case of the controversial "oligarch" Mikhail Khodorkovsky comes to mind) who struggle against the efforts of recentralization under the aegis of President Vladimir Putin. Satter makes one of his most profound and provocative statements in describing the "Truth Seekers," a group of thousands of Soviet citizens who came to Moscow to seek justice when the clumsy administrative apparatus failed, as it often did, to punish such crimes as bribery, rape, and murder.

The author undertakes a cradle-to-grave analysis of the typical person's life and concludes that the creeping Soviet bureaucracy extended into every facet of one's public and private life, from receiving one's internal passport to the type of rug a married couple is permitted to purchase. While Satter's estimation of the complete control of the state in people's lives may be convincing to the nonspecialist, the author's lack of sufficient evidence fails to convince those in the know. While it is undeniable that the party-state apparatus was nearly omnipresent during certain episodes of the Soviet period, Satter's tacit assertion that no personal volition existed at any point during the 1917-1991 period is an overstatement.

Unfortunately, Satter's all-too-prevalent bias overtakes the impartiality that the reader expects of a journalist with the author's qualifications. A quote by former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger reveals Satter's true feelings about the Soviet state that he experienced so personally: "[*Age of Delirium*] lays bare the evil behind the 'Evil Empire.'" Former Ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock echoes these sentiments: "[Satter] gives one a visceral feel for what it was like to be trapped by the communist system." While Weinberger and Matlock are certainly entitled to these opinions, Satter's professed journalistic objectivity does not square with his consistently polemical tone. The story of the "Truth Seekers" mentioned above is a good example of Satter's myopia. If the

author is to be believed, these individuals utterly failed to change an inert bureaucratic system. The author's thesis appears to be that Gorbachev and others occupying the highest echelons of the state system were the only agents for change in the last decade of Soviet communism. History tells us a different story than Satter's top-down perspective on reform in the USSR during the mid- to late 1980s and early 1990s.

Another major problem here is that of organization. Satter's journalistic pedigree serves him well in some specific instances in this book but on the whole the narratives skip and jump from paragraph to paragraph. At one moment the author is discussing events in 1991, while in the next he catapults the reader back to the late 1970s with no warning whatsoever. Those who enjoy a semblance of order in their reading will be sorely disappointed with *Age of Delirium* in this regard. This rambling style appears to stem from a lack of thorough editing as much as any stylistic infelicities on Satter's part.

One also wonders if Satter was actually present for any of the events he describes and if he personally conducted all of the interviews with the many individuals who appear in this book. My curiosity was piqued when I noticed that Satter defined the Russian word *maiak* as "rudder," when in reality the best English translations for this word are either "lighthouse" or "beacon." Admittedly, this is a small quibble, but Satter's imprecise translation does introduce a kernel of doubt into the mind of the Russian-speaking reader. If the author's linguistic skills are indeed questionable, then one must doubt the veracity of the interviews that drive this work's narrative.

In sum, Satter's work fails to deliver the goods as promised on the back cover: why did the Soviet Union fall? The breathless dust jacket praise of Satter's "splendid and eloquent and impassioned book" aside, one who seeks a new perspective on the demise of the USSR will be left disappointed. While the author succeeds in producing a first-hand narrative that lays bare the inhumanity and frequent missteps of the Soviet experiment, the wide strokes of his analysis fail to cover the entire canvas of Soviet history, a canvas on which more than a modicum of humanity did survive and upon which a colorful story, not monochromatic as the author would have us believe, of survival and perseverance was painted by the population of the USSR.

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