



Celeste Wallander, “Western Policy and the Demise of the Soviet Union.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 5, Issue 4, (Fall 2003): 137-177.

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Celeste Wallander is probably the wisest and most sober of the voices on American policy toward Putin’s Russia. Rather than focusing, as many have, on the social and institutional prerequisites for Russian status as a model civil society, she regards Russia as having completed the transition to a commercial state whose foreign policy is designed to serve economic goals. This state, she thinks, will coalesce one way or another with the United States in pursuit of its own national interests and even develop, if the contacts between the two societies sort out as expected, a strategic partnership. The strategic partnership is not visible today, but it certainly looked to be on the horizon between 9/11 and 11/9, the latter the date of the conquest of Mazar-i-sharif. When the Northern Alliance took that little Afghan town, it was evident that the breakup of Taliban power was going to be managed by the Afghan feudality and American B-52s. But before that, when it was thought that American troops would have to do some or most of the fighting, partnership with Russia would have been essential to the project of invading Afghanistan. In retrospect, the period between the two dates was a golden age of strategic partnership that would not have needed interpretation. But after Mazar-i-sharif, we got instead the Axis of Evil and war in Iraq. Even so, Wallander thinks those golden days may return by another route.

One can quarrel with this or that aspect of her thinking, but she does seem to have her eye on the continuing imperatives for Russian-American cooperation of the struggle against the world jihad. In this article, however, she is talking about history, specifically the premise for all of the above, the fall of Soviet power. How to explain it? She is weighing the claims of those who, like Peter Schweizer, credit Reagan with pulling the wires from the other side of the globe to effect the collapse of the Soviet bloc. She finds these claims inferior to the alternative view, as argued by Raymond Garthoff, that the fall was ultimately caused by “changes in Soviet thinking” and economic failure [1]. She thinks that one cannot attribute the fall to American policy “in any direct sense.” It was caused by many “concurrent pressures,” but mostly by the “weakness and failing” of the Soviet economy. American policy had an input, she argues, not in the “exhaustion strategy” of deliberately attempting to obsolesce Soviet defense spending by the Reagan arms buildup, but rather in the “soft power” of democratic example and staunchness in speaking up about human rights.

The article is not a history, but an intervention in a highly politicized historical debate. Should one judge it therefore as history or politics? If it is just a question of politics, Wallander’s views on this topic, as with the rest of her writing, seem more sober and sensible than the triumphalism of Schweitzer. But are they good history? I know that American power is on such a scale that its policy may succeed even without being based on the advice of officials grounded in a serious study of history. Even so, ideally at least, good history should make for good policy.

So, does it make sense to dismiss the idea that the Reagan arms buildup, perceived on the Soviet side as an “exhaustion strategy,” constrained or perhaps even determined Soviet choices and set the stage for the Gorbachev reforms? Wallander approaches this by denying, with effect, that the “defense burden” conditioned Gorbachev’s economic policy. So far so good. But is that the only way to consider the matter? If you read all of Gorbachev’s speeches in his first three years in office you find him repeatedly insisting in various ways that the SDI will not wear out the Soviet economy and will not draw it into a space race. A response, perhaps an asymmetrical one, will be found. You have to conclude that it was on his mind. General Ogarkov, a backer of his main rival in 1984, Leningrad secretary Grigori Romanov, had warned eloquently that the Soviets were faced with a fundamental challenge. He recommended that there must be a symmetrical response, that is, a vast new weapons program, even if it meant that the Soviet people would have to eat fishheads for a while [2].

Not that this would have been a first. Stalin’s Five Year Plans and Khrushchev’s decision for a war fighting line against Malenkov’s consumer goods and minimum deterrent line were eloquent precedents. Gorbachev nevertheless wanted to resume the reform initiative taken up in the twenties and again in the sixties. And his vanity told him that he could finesse the arms race diplomatically by a return to detente. In view of his competition with Gromyko, who already called for such a turn, this would have had to be detente plus. I have not seen any triumphalist account that puts the matter this way, but it strikes me as impossible to deny the role of the “exhaustion strategy” as background to reform. It is also impossible to deny that the Reagan Doctrine threatened the long range prospects of all the third world states undergoing “non-capitalist development.” Jerry Hough and Elizabeth Valkenier picked up on foreboding about this among the institutchiki in the early eighties. Of course, the challenge did not have to result in Gorbachev saying: “All right the jig is up. We’ll have to abolish Communism.” The alternative, however, was to press on in a new Stalinist or Khrushchevite Big Drive, which no doubt would have saved the system.

In fact Wallander does not think the Soviet economy was in any particular difficulties, except for its relative standing in the world. There was no terminal economic crisis. Then how did the economy end up in free fall by 1990? Wallander, I think correctly, blames Gorbachev himself, but she ends up complaining that he did not release the controls decisively enough. She calls the early tinkering of 1985-7 a failure with “meager results” and says Gorbachev “changed course” sometime between 1987 and 1990-- she is not sure just when or how. Yet the Goskomstat, CIA, and PlanEcon estimates all indicated increased growth during the years of uskorenie (acceleration) in 1985-7. The typically Soviet strategy of exhortation was enjoying success in 1988, when Gorbachev suddenly took the party out of the economy. A command economy faltered when the commands were no longer forthcoming. Gorbachev was listening to economists like Abel Agenbegyan who thought that decentralization would unleash the workers’ and managers’ “spontaneity.” The removal of controls produced the opposite, a regime of local embargoes and the start of a tailspin to oblivion.

The problem with Wallander’s explanation (although it works well enough for her polemical purposes) is an economic determinism that has to explain its way around political history by interpolation. Often the politics simply disappear. Gorbachev’s policy turns are simply assumed

to be the result of the failure of his old policies. We are looking at Soviet politics through the lens of an innocence fallacy, an assumption that they do not struggle for power as others do. One does not get any sense that Gorbachev was struggling against the old Suslov system of collective leadership that had succeeded in bringing down Khrushchev and hemming in Brezhnev. Egor Ligachev, whose name is hardly mentioned here, was the second secretary, the “ideological” secretary, whose job was to restrain Gorbachev. Moreover, Andrei Gromyko was the most authoritative voice on foreign policy, committed to détente, and centrist as far as the Gorbachev-Ligachev rivalry was concerned. Both of these men threatened to bring down Gorbachev until he brought them both down. The fateful economic decisions of the nineteenth party conference in spring 1988 were taken in the midst of a struggle touched off by the Stalinist letter of Madame Andreeva. The conference itself was prepared by a feverish competition between the factions for the selection of delegates. On this occasion, as on others, Gorbachev intensified the radicalism of his decisions to outrun opponents.

But Gorbachev’s struggles with opponents do not figure very much in Wallander’s analysis. Shouldn’t Boris Yeltsin’s name be mentioned in an investigation of the fall of Communism? Wallander thinks too much has been made of his role. He was only “one of many” impatient with Gorbachev. But, of course, in this case, he was the pivotal one. Can anyone deny this today? She hardly mentions the glasnost campaign, for me the key to understanding the political struggle and much else.

Wallander reflects on the whole story at the end and concludes in a rather elusive paragraph that George Kennan’s advice about Containment was sound. Kennan said that fifteen years or so of Containment would bring on an ideological erosion. Well, the erosion certainly showed up forty years later. By that time, however, Containment had been broken repeatedly. We rolled them back to the Chosen reservoir; they rolled us back to the thirty-eighth parallel. We defended Berlin; they advanced in Cuba. They advanced in Vietnam, then Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Ethiopia, Congo Brazzaville, South Yemen, Nicaragua, and other places, including Afghanistan. For a while in the late seventies, it was: they take a country, we build a missile. Containment may be seen retrospectively as perhaps the best of the alternatives, certainly better than “rollback.” But when Gorbachev took power, the Soviet Union was at its height of power and pretension. Gorbachev’s reforms were not forced by the west, certainly not by Containment, which had been breached on three continents. They were, on the contrary, the product of an overweening Soviet confidence, not to say arrogance.

In this regard, Winston Churchill’s plea on Stalin’s death in 1953 might also be considered. He spoke then of possibilities for a deal in the post-Stalin era. He said that the Soviet Union had internal and spontaneous tendencies toward reform that would be enhanced by an easement of tensions with the west. Of course. There was always a rightist program of easing up the controls, producing consumer goods, slowing the pace, struggling for co-existence with western countries. Bukharin advocated something like that in the twenties, Malenkov in the fifties, finally Gorbachev in the eighties. This was not, except in a rather indirect and figurative sense, imposed from without. Wallander in her way seems to recognize this. To argue the opposite can produce the worst kind of mischief. Those who argue the misbegotten historical thesis that the Soviet bloc was destroyed by a few well placed taps on its walls from the outside include Osama

bin Laden, who thinks he did it by armed struggle in Afghanistan. And for him it follows that, if it could be done to Soviet Russia, it could as easily be done to the United States.

Notes:

[1] Peter Schweizer, *Victory: the Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994); Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994).

[2] N.V. Ogarkov, "Zashchita sotsializma" (Defense of Socialism), *Krasnaia zvezda* (Red Star) (9 May 1984), 3. On Ogarkov's response to the "exhaustion strategy," see my *Gorbachev's Revolution, 1985-1991* (New York and Basingstoke: Macmillan/NYU Press, 1998), 81-5.

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