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LESSONS FROM THE COLLAPSE OF SOVIET COMMUNISM SEEN IN THE LIGHT OF
HISTORICAL NIHILISM

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[This 2017 document attributes the collapse of the Soviet Union to “historical nihilism,” specifically the repudiation of the Soviet heritage by the ruling elite, leading to general social demoralization and a collapse of the legitimacy of the system. The Soviet collapse has an understandable fascination for the Chinese rulers. Only China, along with North Korea and Vietnam, survived the general crumbling of the socialist systems between 1989 and 1992, but given the structural similarities between the Chinese and the Soviet Russian systems, the Chinese rulers have to fear that what happened to the Russians could happen to them. A survey of the various Chinese explanations for the Soviet collapse, taking into account the Chinese context of the time at which they were offered, would be an interesting exercise for a student of comparative politics.]

In the opinion of the rulers, and probably in fact as well, China could have led the way in the general communist collapse in 1989. Some, especially among the Chinese ruling elite, are convinced that only the brutal suppression of the mass democracy movement of that year saved the system: the Chinese had the guts to do what Gorbachev and the other foreign comrades would not do. Some in the ruling group at that time blamed the liberal economic reforms and concurrent cultural liberalizations for provoking the mass demonstrations—encouraging, as it were, a kind of historical nihilism. But attempts to draw back on the reforms led to an economic slowdown, at a time when the only legitimacy remaining to the regime was that people’s living

standards were improving. Deng Xiaoping argued instead that the reason for the general socialist failure had nothing to do with lack of democracy and everything to do with lack of economic performance. He forced a much more radical economic liberalization on the Chinese system, while retaining the autocratic political system.

A new social contract evolved in the early 1990s: The people were free to get rich, to spend their money pretty much as they wished, on the condition that they kept their opinions about political matters to themselves and did nothing to challenge the ruling position of the Party elite. This was an improvement over the old Maoist totalitarianism, which required not only that people obey the system but also express unrestrained enthusiasm for it. The Chinese economic system succeeded spectacularly, but the polity as a whole was not a healthy one.

While Deng's reforms in principle encouraged both getting rich and a free market, the economy remained sufficiently politicized such that those with power were able to manipulate the market: the powerful became wealthy, and the wealthy could buy power. While in the 1980s (this is a subjective impression) younger educated Chinese generally held the Party in disdain, by the mid-1990s the Party had regained "popularity," not out of enthusiasm for the realization of the communist utopia but because Party membership was the path to wealth and power. This, no doubt, had been generally the case since at least 1949, but previously the reality had become covered with a veneer of idealism. Now the veneer was gone. Political corruption, which had come into the open with the onset of the post-Mao reforms, grew out of control. Disparities between the rich and the poor approached and then exceeded American, even Latin American levels. The society was demoralized: both deficient in morale and lacking any sense of personal or social morality. It might be easy to blame the rise of the market economy for these pathologies, although the vulnerability of society to the more pathological aspects of the World

Capitalist Economy is also one of the aftershocks of the Maoist radicalism of the Cultural Revolution, with its corrosive attacks on both the Confucian and “bourgeois” liberal structures of morality and the nurture of a general atmosphere of personal distrust.

Earlier analyses (for example, <https://www3.nd.edu/~pmoody/Text%20Pages%20-%20Peter%20Moody%20Webpage/Soviet%20Model.pdf>) of the collapse of the Soviet Union focused on similar trends during the later days of the Soviet Union, although the Russian system certainly did not approach anything like the economic success of China. The problem there, allegedly, was that the Party, the ruling elite, had developed into a privileged class, isolated from and lording it over the ordinary people. Xi Jinping’s harsh approach to governance continues to reflect this theme, inasmuch as the campaigns against corruption, undertaken with more seriousness than the earlier such campaigns, are directed against Party bigshots who have grown rich by translating their political power into personal wealth (although the bigshots brought down tend to be those who might at some point challenge Xi’s personal supremacy). Earlier critiques had also deplored the neglect of ideology and lack of commitment to the socialist system (whatever that would be given the current economic structure). The focus here on historical nihilism, however, does not so much look at the overall structure of power and privilege as deplore the lack of respect held toward the Party (whereas earlier analyses implicitly or explicitly conceded that the Party had brought this disrespect upon itself). The argument at hand is that while there may be defects in the system, the real danger lies in dwelling on those defects. And while the argument deplores the lack of “faith” in Marxism, the real message is that people must obey and trust the Party

So: Why did the Soviet Union fall? Well, Stalin no doubt made some errors, and there were problems with the system Stalin built. But Khrushchev, lacking any sense of political proportion,

wildly exaggerated the defects in the system; and youngsters coming of age during the post-Stalin years—Gorbachev and his ilk—took the message further, finding only evil and oppression in everything associated with the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. When they themselves grew into power they destroyed any reason to preserve the system, and they themselves lacked the will to defend it. And so the Soviet Union fell.

This may not be a fully accurate depiction of the acts either of Khrushchev or Gorbachev; but the lesson is meant for China. The intent is probably not a reversion to Cultural Revolution Maoism, but to the pre-Cultural Revolution condition, without the economic irrationalities of that period. Then, supposedly, the comrades were all honest and dedicated and the people profoundly respectful of and obedient to their leaders, all united in the process of making China great again. Whatever the Party's past mistakes, the Party is still to be held as China's only salvation; people should respect and obey the Party and, implicitly, the Party's Leader.]

General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out: “Why did the Soviet Union come apart? Why did the Soviet Communist party collapse? A major reason was intense conflict in the ideological sphere, a complete repudiation of Soviet history, of the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a repudiation of Lenin, a repudiation of Stalin. This was historical nihilism and ideological chaos. It seemed as if Party organizations at all levels had no function; the military was no longer under the leadership of the Party. In the end, the CPUSSR, such a great party, flew apart like a flock of birds. The Soviet Union, such a great socialist country, divided and collapsed. We should take this as a warning!” There are many reasons for the collapse of the CPUSSR. A major one is the proliferation of historical nihilism. The Soviet communists lost control of ideology step by step. In the end they did away with the guiding position of Marxism and eliminated the leadership of the Party.

Historical nihilism within the CPUSSR can be traced to the Khrushchev era. After Stalin died, Khrushchev took control of the state. He wanted to make some corrections and reforms to certain problems and errors from the Stalin era. However, his courage and rashness were more than enough, but he fell short in political sagacity and strategic thought and coordination. At the 20th Congress of the Soviet party [in 1956] Khrushchev “exposed” Stalin’s errors. He knocked down the myths around Stalin and objectively liberated people’s thinking. But because of Stalin’s huge influence and special status within the Party and in the international communist movement, an attack on Stalin was not necessarily the most prudent course of action, especially if one were thinking of the overall situation of the Party and state and taking into account the long-term significance of such an action. To try to make an evaluation of this historical person so soon after his death, especially an evaluation that was one-sided and incomplete, shows Khrushchev’s political immaturity. This rash but thoughtless exposure was more than an attempt to correct Stalin’s problems of character. It brought about confusion in people’s thoughts. Its indirect influence on the international communist movement was also profound, causing doubts and discontent within the socialist camp. The CPSU’s 20th Congress was a pivotal event. Within Soviet society and especially in the cultural and ideological circles there arose a demand to break through the imposition of forbidden areas of thought and for reforms, for a “thaw.” This had a certain positive function in getting rid of certain mistakes from Stalin’s later years. However, the “thaw” continued to spread, and over the long-term nourished discontents and complaints that needed to be treated correctly. It was necessary for Khrushchev and the other leaders to navigate through this complex situation with a high degree of ability and a clear strategic vision. Regretfully, Khrushchev made a mess of things after a good start.¹ The ideological realm became

¹ 搞得虎头蛇尾—drew the head of a tiger with the tail of a snake.

confused. At times, it was as if the prison gates had been thrown open; at other times, stricter restrictions were imposed with a slamming on of the brakes. All this left many bad consequences. It can't be ignored that this kind of thaw led gradually to a loss of control. The exposure and criticism of Stalin was done without historical analysis. The criticism was biased and unfair. It traced the root of the errors to the personal character of Stalin, piling on the vilification. This abrupt and drastic change could easily give rise to doubts and confusion, giving space for non-Marxist and anti-Marxist thinking to enter in. What was even more important, and cannot be underestimated, is the enormous influence it had over the long term on the thinking of young people. The spirits of a whole generation of young people received a huge shock. Some people's faith in communism began to waiver, producing a crisis of faith and of confidence. Traces of this can be found in the later behavior of persons such as [Mikhail] Gorbachev and [Alexander] Yakovlev. At the 22nd CPSU Congress in 1961 there suddenly emerged a new criticism of Stalin, going to the extent of removing Stalin's remains from his tomb on Red Square. The names of all towns, streets, factories, and establishments named after Stalin were changed. Some people began to raise objections to the entire structure of socialism, bringing new confusion to the ideological sphere, leading to a relatively widespread crisis of faith. Some of the young people growing up during this period, such as Gorbachev, later became what were called the "products of the 20th Congress."

When Gorbachev took control of the state it was in the guise of a "reformer." This gave rise of eager expectations and attention. However, Gorbachev, one "insufficiently prudent, easily led astray, given to vainglory" (as Margaret Thatcher once said), promoted reformist policies that were completely divorced from reality, hasty and rash, lacking in any depth of thought. There was no coherent system for carrying them through. From one extreme they jumped to another,

from the previous transitional centralization jumping directly to loss of control in a democracy-gone-bad, without any guideline or bottom line seeking to set up an absolute “openness” and “democratization.” This produced chaos in the Party’s thought, leading to anarchy and the proliferation of historical nihilism. The swarming of opposition factions inside the Party. In the end the Soviet Party was washed away in the flood of “democratization” and “openness.”

Democracy and openness are necessary requisites for a proletarian political party, but there is no such thing as absolute democracy or openness. In the process of reform, Gorbachev more and more came to treat democracy and openness as panaceas and keys to everything. Democracy and openness were assigned greater significance than they were able to carry. This blind faith in the spontaneity of the masses and in a one-sided, absolutized, taken-to-the-extreme democracy and openness produced serious consequences. First of all, it encouraged the emergence of all kinds of extremist thinking and mistaken theories, proliferating malignancies. This goes back to when Yakovlev took power in the ideological sphere and began to express doubts about and denials of Marxism. (As early as December 1985 Yakovlev said to Gorbachev: “Marxism is nothing other than a revival of religion. It grovels before the interests of despotic power and the demands it requires.”) Representatives of the liberal tendency took over as responsible persons in the news media. Going along with this, in society all kinds of unofficial publications rapidly proliferated, serving as the vanguard of public opinion in exposing the “errors” of Soviet socialism and the Communist party and their historical “crimes.” In this way, rational public opinion within the Party and society was abandoned, replaced by fanaticism and vilification. Tradition was overthrown, heroism mocked, the mainstream diverted. There was negativism toward honor and ideals, while made-up secret histories and digging out of the dark side of things became the fashion of the times. Within a short time all the major Party papers and

periodicals were publishing so-called “rethinking” essays. Under the color of “not leaving any historical blank spots” there were destructive criticisms and attacks on Stalin and the Stalinist model of socialism. Stalin was described as capricious, a cruel tyrant, a despot addicted to cruelty and bloodshed. Stalinism became another name for fascism and totalitarian despotism. The Soviet Union under the Stalinist model was described as a slaughterhouse, a terrorist political instrument used for the liquidation of nations. In June of 1985 *Izvestia* described Soviet historical textbooks as “lies passed down from generation to generation.” In the summer of 1988, the journal *Novy Mir* carried an article saying, “Stalin’s oppression had a methodological precedent.” “The origin of this is in Lenin.”² The October Revolution separated the Soviet Union from the “normal civilization” of capitalism, leading the country along a mistaken road. Faced with the great number of attacks on the Communist party, Soviet socialism, and Marxist thinking, Gorbachev remained silent, tolerant, and supportive. He even went so far as to say, “Let’s have more diversity in our discussions! Bring the whole of society into it.” Later on Yakovlev admitted that the most advanced task of his essays on Glasnost was to “protect certain people,” to “accord tolerance to some people.” During the process of reform Gorbachev gradually moved from repudiating the Stalinist system to repudiating the practice of Soviet socialism. The CPSU’s 27th Congress [in 1986] declared that the socialism set up by Stalin was “formalistic socialism”; it was an “autocratic bureaucratic administrative system.” Gorbachev took the lead in advocating unlimited inner-Party democracy and social democracy. He blamed the social crisis brought on by the failure of his reforms entirely on other people. He declared:

² 始做俑者—“the first to make effigies” was Lenin. Mencius quotes Confucius as saying, “Whoever first made effigies [straw figures of humans to be burned at a funeral or be buried with the dead] should die without posterity.” That is, Confucius was appalled even by a symbolic representation of human sacrifice. The phrase about effigies, however, has become a general way of referring to the first one to do anything.

The sufferings of the Soviet people today are the consequence of the former implementation of “Stalin’s autocratic socialism,” saying “there must be a complete break with this past history.”

“We must completely eradicate Stalinist ideology and everything associated with it.”

Gorbachev’s words caused extraordinary confusion among the general members of the Party and the broad masses.

Going along with this, some people completely disregarded Party discipline. “With no limits at all” they propagated western bourgeois thinking and attacked the Stalin system in both words and deeds. They did not use a dialectical method in opposing the Stalin system; they regarded the Soviet Party as a “historical criminal.” They treated the Soviet socialist system as the “source of all evils,” vilifying the forms of socialism and sabotaging the reputation of the socialist system.

This caused great wavering in the thinking of the general Party membership and the masses.

Anti-communist forces took the opportunity to examine all sorts of historical issues, calling for the liquidation of the Party’s “historical crimes.” The era of the victory of the socialist revolution was declared an “age of darkness.” The Party was unable to launch an effective counterattack.

Among the popular masses the image of the Party and of socialism had been darkened. The Soviet Union was heading toward a total crisis of political culture and of faith. According to the American political commentator Michael Davidov (迈克尔达维多),³ “The one-sided, utterly negative depiction of the hundred-year history of the Party and state as totalitarianism provided fertile soil for anti-communism. Not many parties or states have been painted in such dark colors. There are many dark chapters in American history and in America today—slavery, the extermination of the indigenous Indians. But this has not provoked a similar one-sided

³ There are other Chinese references to this article, but I have been unable to find the English version or to identify the author.

negation . . . While previous distortions of fact came from foreign anti-Soviet sources, today they are provided to the Soviet people by the main Soviet newspapers and magazines and by prominent Party people on Soviet TV stations . . . All of the activists, from nationalists to anti-communist elements—are operating openly and without any restrictions. In the United States there is nothing like this kind of freedom, whether in newspapers or television (nor is there that kind of irresponsibility). The pendulum has gone from the previous strict supervision over the instruments of public opinion to the other extreme. Currently there are more anti-communist stories in Soviet newspapers and magazines than are being run in the United States. Some TV programs are also the same way. This sort of anti-communism is really something quite extraordinary, in that it is setting the basis for the domestic understanding of the Party and of the Soviet history.” On October 3 1989 the CPUSSR Party Center convened a conference of historians to discuss confusions in public and social opinion brought on by the “historical reflections” of certain writers, commentators, and a minority of historians. The famous historian and academician [Yuri] Kukushkin [库库什金] pointed out that without respect for Marxism reform lacked theoretical preparation and it would be hard to hope that it would succeed. Reform cannot fly the banner of historical nihilism and denial or ideology. The mass media and extremist forces cannot force the deideologization of history. The CP Center should stand by its own principles. However, the critical and constructive proposals of those historians were not accepted.

In sum, the profound lesson of the problem of historical nihilism in the CPUSSR is that the weakening and abandonment of Party guidance in the ideological field serves the schemes of western powers to divide, westernize, and vilify the system, and leads to the proliferation of all kinds of erroneous thought tides. Loss of control over the media and public opinion, the

promotion of political pluralism, abandoning the leading position of the Party and of Marxism leads directly to the development of tendencies toward the loss of proper development.

CPC History Web, December 12 2017 <http://www.zgdsw.org.cn/n1/2017/1219/c398751-29716651.html>