

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Past the Point of No Return

The Soviet leadership faces a serious dilemma, according to Professor Seweryn Bialer. The present political, economic and social crises are unendurable, but the available means for addressing them are unacceptable. The realm of Soviet action in the current situation can be found "between those two poles of unendurability and unacceptability."

Bialer, who is the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of Social Sciences and International Relations at Columbia University, discussed three propositions for defining and analyzing the situation in the Soviet Union at a Harriman Institute luncheon February 1, 1990.

### From Reform to Revolution

First, Bialer asserted that the Soviet Union has passed from reform to revolution. *Perestroika* was initially meant to be "guided reform." But along the way, the reform package changed in both substance and strategy in response to various crises. Originally, Gorbachev suffered from technological romanticism — a belief that the country's problems could be solved by a simple redistribution of investment and spread of technology. But by January 1987, Gorbachev had to concede that deeper economic and even political changes were necessary.

By late 1988 or early 1989, as a result of the inadvertent and unintended consequences of his reform policies, Gorbachev "lost control" over events and processes in the Soviet Union. Until then, *perestroika* was the core dynamic force in the Soviet Union. Now, "spontaneous processes and unguided actions and events are central to the political dynamic, and *perestroika* has become reactive to those events."

For example, Gorbachev's reinstatement of "traditional guidance" to contend with economic destabilization smacks of defensive behavior. He has imposed a "retrenchment" to prevent further deterioration. In Bialer's view, "reform of the economic mechanism in the Soviet Union today is a pure illusion." All economic activity has become defensive. It is

aimed at prevention of catastrophe rather than at promoting change.

In the social sphere, the dominant process has been the disintegration of the "mass society" based on socialist collectivism. This sense of collectivism was "inauthentic," according to Bialer, because it was not generated from within the communities but imposed from the outside. Now, "the slumber of collectivist society has been disturbed." From its ruins, certain elements of a civil society are emerging, but this development has not necessarily been advantageous to Gorbachev's guided reforms, at least in the short term, because some of these individuals and groups have been challenging Gorbachev's program.

The leadership's loss of control is "especially astounding" in the ideological sphere. The institutions supposedly in charge of ideology are "at most participants" in the process of ideological development, but they no longer control it. In the last few months, even "establishment" journals have been publishing articles questioning basic tenets of Marxism and Leninism.

The political sphere is experiencing dangerous fragmentation. The gradual shift of the political structures introduced by Gorbachev has been ineffective. Not only has revitalization of the Party been a failure, but Gorbachev's personal authority has been slipping along with the Party's. He cannot regain authority without a corresponding decline in the authority of the Party. It must get out of "the business of working within the State," and transform itself from a "semi-military organization" into a "political association." Gorbachev's challenge to the bureaucracy has been unsuccessful. "It is not being transformed into a civil service." In short, Gorbachev is not in control of the political system.

### The Obsolescence of Centrism

The second major characteristic of the Soviet Union today, according to Bialer's schema, is that the key processes in the political sphere are polarization, radicalization and



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mass mobilization. The events in Eastern Europe last fall, in particular, served to galvanize opposition to Gorbachev within the USSR. On the right, establishment conservatives and extreme nationalists began to revise their opinions of Gorbachev from a "harebrained" schemer to an enemy and a traitor. Where before there was passive resistance, open opposition emerged.

The left, too, is engaged in a mass mobilization, but it is not appropriate to assume an equilibrium between the left and the right. The left is fragile, despite its popularity among youth. Its programs lack valid solutions and do not necessarily appeal to the masses. Also, the left lacks the power base that the right enjoys within the administration. The main basis of leftist strength is "increasingly intensive anti-establishmentarian mass feelings." But insofar as this anti-establishmentarianism expresses itself in populist, egalitarian, even authoritarian terms, it is vulnerable to exploitation by the right.

In an open confrontation, the left would lose out to the right. The left persists because Gorbachev provides "the umbrella" that makes possible its survival and dynamism. Still, the left is often contemptuous of Gorbachev and his program. So for Gorbachev, a centrist position is becoming increasingly untenable.

## No Going Back

Third, the convulsions in the country are not simply points of transition to another order, but long-range trends that are likely to persist and intensify for a long time, whether

there is a return to authoritarianism or development toward a more democratic order. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks set off on a path of "cannibalistic modernization." Both the process and the outcome were antisocial. At a certain point, this modernization became counterproductive — instead of adding to the wealth of the nation, it started accentuating the weakness and disproportions of economic activity and the quality of life.

In the Soviet Union today there is the widespread perception of an urgent need for modernization. The goal, however, is not to achieve the "third industrial revolution," which the West is undergoing now, but simply to capture the benefits of the "first and second industrial revolutions": abundant, nourishing food; communications and transportation infrastructures; inexpensive and durable consumer goods; labor discipline and organization; and service and financial systems. These are goals that should have been achieved long ago but were "jumped over."

In the social sphere, the Soviet Union suffers from the destruction of a sense of community, a psychology of dependency and deprofessionalization. These factors, among others, have led to social and psychological conditions that militate against healthy economic development and foster a highly volatile political situation.

Such conditions will persist "regardless of whether the political system is radicalized in the democratic direction or experiences a reversal toward authoritarianism." In this respect, Bialer claims, "the point of no return has been reached." Not only is Stalinist Russia in the past, but it cannot be reestablished.

*Reported by Lolly Jewett*

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