

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Independent Political Movements in the USSR Since 1985

Democratization dealt a death blow to the Soviet Union. The explosion of popular discontent unleashed by *glasnost* and *perestroika*, though somewhat unexpected at the time, in retrospect seems only natural. On 5 February 1992, Geoffrey Hosking, Professor of Russian History at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, examined the proliferation of new social movements in the USSR in what he called "the scorched earth of Soviet totalitarian society."

Though rooted in the processes of socioeconomic change familiar to most countries, the multiethnic nature of the USSR and its totalitarian legacy imparted a unique dynamic on Soviet democratization. As Hosking noted, one of the many paradoxes of Soviet development was that "even while it extolled modernity, the totalitarian regime artificially preserved mentalities derived from traditional society by prolonging the shared poverty, the limited mental horizons, and the personal dependencies inherited from the past. One looks at those enormous blocks of apartments in Soviet cities and what you have are as close to a reproduction of village communities as you can get in the modern world." Despite these "preserved mentalities," however, the significant changes in Soviet society in the 60s, 70s, and 80s *did* produce a different outlook on the part of the Soviet population, but in a much different direction than Soviet leaders had "planned."

### Soviet (Banana) Republics

During 1988-89 nearly all political issues in the Soviet Union suddenly took on an ethnic dimension, or became redefined in ethnic terms. This was in part a consequence of the inherent contradictions in Soviet nationalities policy. While paying lip service to national sensitivities by creating a federal state structure, at the same time Lenin

laid the basis for an extremely centralized political system. But the Bolshevik regime also encouraged the spread of literacy throughout its heterogeneous population, and in many cases created alphabets for ethnic groups with no previous system of writing. In addition, Lenin established nominally sovereign state structures for even the smallest ethnic groups, staffed by largely indigenous cadres. All of these things, according to Hosking, "encouraged the emergence of national awareness in ways that the tsarist state had not. In these circumstances old nations were given a new mass basis, and new nations were created out of what had been tribal or clan formations."

But the price paid for the benefits of Soviet-style modernization was high as well. The command economy quite clearly made some regions of the Soviet Union "the Soviet equivalents of banana republics, turning out one or two raw materials or different types of products for the entire Soviet economy." Overall, Hosking noted that "the Soviet regime has acted energetically both to create nations and to suppress nations, and it's not surprising that the long-term results have proved quite explosive."

Hosking characterized contemporary political groups in the former Soviet Union as "national liberation movements." The beginnings of many of the new political groups can be traced to the counterculture movements of the 60s and 70s; various hippie, rock, and heavy metal movements which existed in the interstices of Soviet society. The human rights movement of the mid-60s provided another important pillar of support for independent political groups. In the case of non-Russian activists, almost inevitably their concerns articulated incipient national and religious concerns of whole peoples.

Inhibiting the success of these activists was that "they had no common channel of activity with the mass of people; they might have been articulating sentiments



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with which people agreed, but they had no means of common activity with them. So the human rights movement, in the sense of gradually reforming people's consciousness, was very important, but in the immediate political sense it did not and could not achieve very much."

A third pillar of the independent movements Hosking identified was what he called groups of "discreet and non-conformist scholars," of which there were considerable numbers throughout the USSR. While outwardly professing loyalty to the existing system in their public life, at home or at semi-tolerated, unofficial seminars at their institutes and places of work they engaged in studies that did not appear in any state research plan: studying market economies, Western literature, medieval ecclesiastical history, etc. Over the past twenty years a whole alternative culture was formed, without which Hosking claims "the sudden explosion of discussion of issues which we see today in the Soviet and ex-Soviet press would be totally inexplicable. If you look at any Soviet newspaper or journal, we're obviously dealing with a highly cultivated, extremely educated and well-informed public." These activities assumed an even greater importance in the non-Russian republics, because "these discreetly non-conformist scholars were actually rescuing the history, culture, and folklore of their nations, and gradually preparing the way for the otherwise very sudden and inexplicable burst of nationalist activity in the last three or four years."

Given this background, the explosion of popular protest movements under glasnost and the Party's inability to contain them is more understandable. The initial protest movements that arose in the autumn of '86 focused on single issues: saving historic buildings, the environment, etc., and the first demonstrators were people from the youth and hippie movements, the people with the least to lose and the least to risk. Gradually, however, both the issues and the types of peoples involved became more variegated. Membership rapidly spread from young scholars and research students to more established people in the institutes and other professional strata, and to people from the old human rights movement recently released from prisons and labor camps during the spring of 1987. Unofficial, or underground, newspapers contributed to the growth of these movements, because glasnost was severely limited in the early stages, and the rivalry of the unofficial newspapers helped spur editors into bolder and bolder statements.

During 1988 the movements began to confront the central tenet of Marxism-Leninism: the leading role of the Communist Party. The climax of this stage was the formation of popular fronts in many of the non-Russian republics. Though pioneered in the Baltic republics and

Armenia, they spread rapidly. In Hosking's view, the popular fronts represented an alliance between the "non-conformist intelligentsia and reformist republican apparatchiks." Although senior republican apparatchiks on the whole did not join the popular fronts, they did agree to work with them, and indeed encouraged their formation. Their rationale for doing this was quite simple: by 1988, republican leaders' traditional role as mediators between Moscow and their own people was becoming irrelevant. Therefore, the "the leading people in the party-state apparatus had to redo their calculations, they had to broaden their political power base among their own peoples . . . by encouraging the formation of popular fronts, and by working with them."

There was no coherent or uniform pattern to the emergence of popular fronts in the USSR. They emerged relatively quickly in the Baltic republics, Moldova, and Armenia, but more slowly in Ukraine and Belarus because the national consciousness of their populations is much more divided. Lagging behind the rest of the USSR in this regard were the Central Asian republics, where the popular fronts or movements of popular front-type were relatively weak.

## The Irreconcilables

Thus, the playing field of Soviet politics was considerably different after the emergence of the popular fronts, with republican leaders playing a "more ambiguous double-game from about 1988 onwards." Some acted out of conviction, others out of calculation. The essence of their policy, according to Hosking, was "to combine with these more popular movements, and to use existing Soviet institutions in their republics to move either to autonomy or to actual independence as a basis for securing their own future power." In some republics the popular fronts emerged as the dominant force in the political constellation. In others, however, they faced a challenge from what Hosking called "the irreconcilables": people from the old human rights and dissident movement whose attitudes made cooperation or collaboration with the Soviet state or its institutions impossible. Such "congress movements" were particularly strong in Estonia, Latvia, and Georgia, all of which had forcibly been annexed to the Soviet Union. The underlying premise of the irreconcilables, guiding all of their actions, was that their republics had never juridically been in the Soviet Union at all.

Georgia provides an example of the irreconcilables coming to power and obtaining the support of the majority of the population. What Hosking considered decisive in that process was the Tbilisi massacre of April 1989, which enflamed popular sentiment in Georgia to a greater

extent than had happened in any republic up to that time. The Communist Party there had proved too inflexible, and the popular front really too moderate to express the Georgians' intense desire for independence, and intense rejection of anything Soviet, which gripped the Georgian population after April 1989. The man who best expressed this sentiment among Georgians was Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia had to use the Soviet electoral process (which was held in Georgia only in October 1990), despite the fact that he was an irreconcilable, in order for his party to come to power. The subsequent turn of events in Georgia shows the dangers inherent in a total breakdown of the existing apparatus, leading Hosking to conclude that "a degree of continuity with existing Soviet institutions is actually a stabilizing factor in this very turbulent situation."

In Azerbaijan, the most urbanized of all the Muslim republics in the Soviet Union, the popular front was quite strong, with a higher working class membership than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. During the winter of 1989-90, there was a distinct possibility that the Azerbaijani popular front would seize power. In January 1990, a pogrom of Armenians living in Baku began, forcing the Soviet Army to intervene; however, the Soviet Army only went in after the pogrom was finished, leading many observers to surmise that the Soviet Army was sent into Baku not to prevent the pogrom from taking place, but to prevent the popular front from taking power. The outcome was that the popular front was very seriously weakened. In the aftermath, the Communist party made a sharp revival, albeit under a new name after the August coup.

## Infection through Osmosis

In Ukraine and Belarus popular fronts developed more slowly, and their organizations were still incomplete as of the March 1990 local Soviet elections. Nevertheless, they were the strongest elements in a "democratic bloc" which won a substantial minority of seats in the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, and somewhat less in the Belarus Supreme Soviet. With the political reforms enacted in the summer of 1988, however, the political fortunes of the popular fronts took a significant upturn. The new institutions created by these reforms, most notably the All-Union Congress of People's Deputies and the equivalent republican bodies, played important roles during this transition period. Hosking drew several historical parallels between these bodies and similar ones in previous revolutions, and the roles that they played: "institutions from the old regime actually proved to play a crucial role in changing their direction and aggregating and articulating grievances from society . . . things like

the Long Parliament in England in the seventeenth century, the Estates-General in France in 1789, and to some extent the Duma during the period of 1906-1917 . . . A new center of power, derived from the old regime, but with a capacity to lead through a transition period." Though actually gaining a majority only in the Baltic republics, Armenia, and Moldova, the democrats "at a fairly early stage began to infect the majority by a process of osmosis." Gradually, the views of the radical minority became more mainstream, most dramatically, perhaps, in Ukraine during 1990. Despite a substantial nomenklatura majority in the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, within four months of the March elections the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet had passed a radical sovereignty declaration, claiming, for example, the right to military neutrality, and the right to set up its own army. The alliance between the radical democrats and the nomenklatura was, however, only a marriage of convenience. For the democrats, a declaration of sovereignty in the summer of 1990 meant fulfilling dreams of national independence and democracy. For the apparatchiks and the republican leadership, sovereignty meant real power at last, including the power to fend off unwelcome measures of perestroika and liberalization coming from Moscow.

## Mixed Emotions

Hosking noted that the RSFSR provided the most complicated and confusing picture. More than any other nation within the Soviet Union, Russians were filled with mixed emotions about the USSR. Those who adhere to what Hosking termed "ethnic Russian nationalism" considered Russia as much a victim of the Soviet experiment as any other nation, and that "[Russia] could not have a proper national existence unless it freed itself from the Soviet Union."

Those who identified more with "imperial" Russian sentiments felt that "without the union there was no real Russian nation either." The most prominent of the Russian "imperial" groups was "Soyuz," an organization of deputies in the all-union Supreme Soviet. While widely identified as being simply conservative, the members of Soyuz were in fact apolitical and non-ideological. Hosking noted that "they would have nothing to do with Marxism-Leninism. They didn't exactly oppose it . . . but if you read their documents, they had nothing to say in favor of Marxism-Leninism, and the real focus of their activity was the preservation of the Soviet Union, the state and its economic and political structure." During March and April of 1991, quite a number of the leading deputies of Soyuz called for a proclamation of a state of emergency and the suspension of all political parties, including both the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

and the Russian Communist Party. The iconoclastic stand of Soyuz, in this regard, was, according to Hosking, "a mark of the extent to which the conservative political opinion had already reformulated itself by the spring of 1991."

The overall effect of this ambivalence in Russian political sentiment was a serious division within the Russian political constellation. Although there were movements in individual cities called popular fronts (which Hosking considered to be more "voters associations," i.e., organizations whose aim was to mobilize voters for the purpose of defeating specific nomenklatura candidates), no nationwide organization developed. According to Hosking's definition, popular fronts "by their nature articulate national feeling against outside domination, and the Russians had no obvious oppressor whom they could target." Although the voters associations had some small-scale successes in 1989 and more impressive ones in 1990, democrats still failed to obtain majorities in most cases.

Unfortunately, the democratic movement in Russia and throughout the former Soviet Union is still very fragmented. Hosking noted that this is partly the result of its origins: "they grew out of informal coterie, informal working groups, discussion groups, *kruzhki*, study circles, and in many respects they've never been able to outgrow those origins because they've never been able to feed into a properly functioning electoral system with full-scale parliaments." These embryonic "protoparties" in large measure revolve around one or two dominant personalities, which often makes collaboration and cooperation with kindred parties difficult. The creation of a stable democracy has a long way to go institutionally as well, for "the present parliaments in all the republics represent an earlier stage in political evolution than we have now reached." In this sense, it is still unclear whether current politicians and political institutions are the harbingers of the new system, or the leftovers of the old.

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