AT THE
HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 5, Number 3

Behind the Soviet Coup: A Tale of Three Cities

While the world's attention was focused on the dramatic events played out before the Russian Parliament building during the "August days," little is known about what was happening in the Russian hinterland. On October 3, 1991, Mary McAuley, fellow of St. Hilda's College, Oxford, and Tutor in Politics, reported on reactions to the coup in three Russian cities — Leningrad, Perm, and Archangelsk — and how the differing reactions reflect deeper changes in the Soviet body politic.

The reform process in the Soviet Union, according to McAuley, has gone through three important phases. From 1987 to the first Congress of People's Deputies in the summer of 1989 she calls "the period of perestroika," characterized by attempts at reform under communist party rule. Summer 1989 to summer 1991 McAuley calls "the Soviet period," when power and legitimacy shifted to newly formed legislative institutions. A new phase is apparent from mid-1991 onwards, one McAuley calls "the period of a final dispersal of power," specifically, over the key resources of ideology, political authority and legitimacy, the economy, and coercion.

Thus, to understand fully how different cities reacted to the coup, one must look beyond the individual heroics of a Yeltsin or a Sobchak, and examine the broader context in which Russian/Soviet politics are being played out at the local level. For McAuley, this centers on the existence, or lack thereof, of a "politically active community." From 1990 onwards "individuals are largely irrelevant as political actors. For those aspiring to power are going to find themselves in positions where they are forced into wars of manuever, desperate attempts to gain control or regain control of resources, and it is largely irrelevant with what means they approach that, or indeed, with what perceptions they have." The success or failure of individual politicians, therefore, depends on the political milieu in which they operate.

To show how the political environment in which individual politicians operate matters, McAuley compared the levels of political activism in the three cities under discussion. Leningrad, a city of five million inhabitants, is what McAuley terms an "activist city," with a very large professional intelligentsia active in political life, and from 1987 onwards a proliferation of informal political groupings. Smaller cities such as Perm or Archangelsk notably lack such active political communities. What distinguishes these smaller cities, however, is how tightly knit their elites are. As McAuley noted, in cities such as Archangelsk, the "academic, party, and economic elite operate very closely together. They all went to school together, they went to college together, they all know each other in a way that doesn't happen in a city the size of Leningrad."

Despite these differences, the election results in 1989 in the three cities were the same: the old party apparat was defeated. How to account for these similarities? McAuley argues that political activism does not matter "... when electoral choices are so clear to an electorate. For or against the nomenklatura, for or against Yeltsin ." In more complicated situations, however, political activism is of greater salience. In the 1990 elections for the RSFSR Supreme Soviet and for local soviets, for example, with hundreds of candidates running for various offices, confusion reigned among the voters. In Leningrad, however, informal political groups provided voters with lists of reform candidates, helping the democrats defeat the conservative opposition. The election results in Archangelsk and Perm offer a different result. In Perm, many nomenklatura candidates stood and won their elections. Democratic candidates made a good showing but lacked the resources to fight a strong campaign, and none of them won a seat in the RSFSR Supreme Soviet. In Archangelsk the democrats fared even worse. Thus,

THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY • 420 West 118th Street • 12th Floor • New York, New York 10027

while the Leningrad democrats were able to oust the party apparat, in Perm and Archangelsk the old elites managed to regroup and maintain control of the local Soviets. In McAuley's opinion, it was the size of the active political community that played a decisive role in these elections.

Sulking in Smolny

Symbolic of the transfer of legitimacy in the period 1989-91 is the situation in Leningrad, where "the Leningrad Soviet is in the hands of the democrats, [and] the obkom is now sulking in Smolny," after having lost control of the city government. A similar phenomenon has occurred in Perm and Archangelsk. In Archangelsk, a regrouping of the old elite takes place, but while the same people are still in power (albeit in different positions), the locus of activity has changed: the center of the action is now at the local soviet and not the local party headquarters. McAuley noted that this became clear to her after the coup, while talking to the deputy chairman of the oblast soviet: "I said to him, didn't you call the obkom first secretary? . . . and he said I didn't need to call him — he was here all the time during those two days."

But the transfer of political legitimacy was only the beginning of the struggle. In her view, the real struggle is now over control of resources, "Because if we say when does political authority actually translate into power, it does if the political authority can control the means of coercion, and if it has control over economic resources." Unfortunately, the new political institutions control neither. The economic resources available to these bodies are fast disappearing as the funds they previously received from the center have dried up, and the poverty of the local population makes it impossible to raise taxes. What makes the Party a continuing force in Soviet politics is its links to the KGB and the militia. How the economic elite sides in the struggle for resources may determine the ultimate outcome of the political struggle; hence, the importance of the big industrial directors. As a group, they have adopted a very ambivalent position. According to McAuley, they are deciding whether they should "still retain their ties with the old CPSU apparatus, [or] should their loyalties lie with the central industrial ministries from whom they draw a large part of their resources still, or should they be thinking of the RSFSR and Yeltsin, or should they be trying to go independent?"

By August 1991, the situation facing the elites in the three cities differs considerably. In Leningrad the elite is fragmented due to its sheer size, the impact of the elections, and the importance of the politically active community; as a result, part of the elite sides with Sobchak while the other supports the coup. In the smaller cities, however, the elites remain relatively united, with the authorities voicing neither their support nor their resistance to the coup, at least in the early stages.

In sum, in the Russian hinterlands the old nomenklatura appears to have been successful in transferring its power base to the new legislative institutions. The coup's failure suggests that other institutions, such as the KGB and the military, are beginning to distance themselves from the Party as well; witness the very neutral role they played in Leningrad, Perm, and Archangelsk. In fact, quite the opposite occurred — both institutions came out fairly quickly on the side of the democratic authorities. What McAuley finds most troublesome is whether the "dispersal of power" that has accompanied the collapse of the party can be halted, or whether it will turn into a war between "bands of armed men striving to settle the outcome of power at local level, or finally at central level."

Reported by Gordon N. Bardos

Columbia University
Harriman Institute
420 W 118th Street
New York, NY, 10027

Non Profit Org
US Postage
Paid
New York, NY
Permit #3593