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A RAND NOTE

**Restructuring and the Polarization of  
Soviet Politics**

**Jeremy R. Azrael**

**June 1990**

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**Prepared for the  
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## PREFACE

This Note was written as part of an Arroyo Center project entitled "The Political Struggle in the Soviet Elite Under the Pressure of Gorbachev's Restructuring," within the Policy and Strategy Program. The project, which is sponsored by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence of the U.S. Army, examines the impact of the changes Gorbachev is seeking to make in the USSR on the "correlation of forces" within the Soviet elite and within Soviet society at large, and the resultant implications for U.S. security interests.

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Stephen M. Drezner is Vice President for the Army Research Division and Director of the Arroyo Center. Those interested in further information about the Arroyo Center should contact his office directly.

Stephen M. Drezner  
The RAND Corporation  
1700 Main Street  
Santa Monica, California 90406-2138  
Telephone: (213) 393-0411

## SUMMARY

This Note examines the economic and political changes that have taken place in the Soviet Union since Gorbachev's accession to power and assesses the longer-term implications of those changes. Following an evaluation of Gorbachev's "first-term" performance as a crisis manager, the Note examines the current situation and concludes with speculation on future prospects. The study concludes that (1) Gorbachev has presided over, and contributed to, a deepening systemic crisis; (2) militant opposition to Gorbachev has been building on both the right and left; (3) while Gorbachev may be able to use his new presidential powers to keep things under control, the Soviet Union may be on the verge of a civil war; and (4) the existence of a clear and present danger of a violent implosion in the USSR has significant implications for U.S. policy.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the five years since he first prescribed it as the remedy for the Soviet Union's many ills, Gorbachev has succeeded in making *perestroika* a household word. Five years down the pike, however, how *perestroika* is supposed to work is as much a mystery as it was when Gorbachev came to power in 1985. While waxing eloquent about the accumulated horrors and looming perils from which he wants to save the country, Gorbachev has failed to explain where he wants to lead it or why he believes that the path down which it has been traveling under his leadership might end in a safe haven. In fact, Gorbachev has seemed quite content to let *perestroika* mean all things to all men, while himself promoting a hodgepodge of mutually inconsistent and contradictory policies.

Some Western admirers of Gorbachev have characterized this as a brilliantly conceived "strategy of creative confusion." Other outside observers have talked about pragmatic experimentation and prudent incrementalism. And still others have concluded that Gorbachev has been hemmed in by right- and left-wing opponents who have forced him to keep his own counsel, pull his punches, and bide his time. More and more Soviet citizens, however, have concluded that Gorbachev is a Nero-throwback, who has elected to fiddle while his country burns, if not actually to stoke the flames.

## II. GORBACHEV'S FIRST-TERM PERFORMANCE AS A CRISIS MANAGER

However one characterizes Gorbachev's leadership--or lack thereof--he has clearly been presiding over a deepening crisis during the past five years.

### ECONOMIC DETERIORATION

Economically, things have gone steadily from bad to worse.

- Stagflation has stubbornly persisted, along with a huge budget deficit and a massive ruble overhang.
- Per capita GNP has at best remained constant and has probably fallen--perhaps even sharply.
- The popular standard of living is widely believed by Soviet citizens to have declined--and probably has.
- Meat, salt, sugar, coffee, tea, flour, soap, and other foodstuffs and household goods are rationed throughout the country. In some areas, moreover, many of these everyday necessities are often completely unavailable due to frequent transportation breakdowns and periodic refusals by the authorities in one region to allow shipments or transshipments to another.
- The housing stock has deteriorated as the massive housing projects built in the 1950s and 1960s fall into irreversible disrepair and the building and commissioning of new units is delayed by labor, equipment, and material shortfalls, as well as by jurisdictional squabbles caused by the helter-skelter

overhaul of the so-called "command-administrative system" of economic management.

- As one would expect in this situation, strikes and work stoppages have become everyday occurrences instead of sporadic events, with the inevitable, increasingly deleterious effects on output.
- Labor unrest apart, moreover, production often grinds to a halt because of breakdowns of overaged machinery, delays in the delivery of critical parts, and labor shortages caused by "defections" to newly opened cooperative enterprises which generally offer workers better conditions and higher pay.

Despite all this, the economy still has some way to go before it approaches complete collapse. It has clearly fallen into deep trouble, however, with no early upturn in sight.

## POLITICAL DISORGANIZATION

Turning to the political realm, one finds that many of Gorbachev's initiatives have been counterproductive. Gorbachev's political reforms have obviously been far more successful than his economic reforms in freeing the Soviet system from the stranglehold grip of the past. Even among those who have welcomed the chance to catch their breath, however, most would have preferred a better designed and managed process of depressurization.

It may have been too much to expect Gorbachev to come forth with a perfectly conceived plan for restructuring the *ancien regime* into what he calls "a rule-of-law state." But many of the institutional changes

he has introduced make him look more like Hamlet (or Rube Goldberg) than like Moses or Solon. For most of the past five years, for example, Gorbachev has seemed utterly unable to decide whether he wants to be the head of a refurbished single party dictatorship, the leader of the dominant party in a European-style parliament, or a French- or American-type "executive president." In fact, within the space of only five years, he has tried to be all three and thereby thrown everyone concerned into uncertainty and confusion.

What has been true at the center has been true in spades locally. Outside of Moscow, no one has had the remotest idea who is supposed to make policy regarding what, or, once policy is somehow made, who is supposed to be responsible for implementing it. In many localities, the party committees on which communities had formerly relied to get things done, however badly, have virtually suspended operations. In some cases, party officials have been removed *en masse* and not replaced. In other cases, officials have simply been paralyzed by fear of violating Gorbachev's oft-repeated injunction to cease their former practice of exercising "petty tutelage" over what were now supposed to be fully independent, popularly elected organs of local government.

Unfortunately, however, the local soviets or councils to which authority and power were supposed to have been transferred early in Gorbachev's "first-term" are in fact only now beginning to get their acts together.

Some of this delay can be attributed to strong bureaucratic resistance. However, Gorbachev's failure to take more effective steps to overcome the resistance is also to blame. In fact, Gorbachev made it easier for opponents of "people's power" to slow things down. For

starters, he gave indecipherably mixed signals about whether or not it was necessary for local soviets to have local party secretaries as their chairmen. In addition, he insisted on postponing local elections until he felt more confident about his own ability to control them, even though this often meant keeping unreconstructed holdovers from the Brezhnev era in office for the duration. The unholy mess that resulted is sometimes described as a system of "dual power," but "power vacuum" would generally be more apt.

#### DISORIENTATION AND VIOLENCE

In a number of non-Russian communities, the vacuum of power left by Gorbachev's poorly sequenced political reforms was quickly filled by nationalist organizations with enough authority to preserve at least a semblance of normalcy. Thanks to their successful cooptation of the majority of local officials, including party cadres, some of these organizations were able to prevent a disruption of essential public services and a breakdown of basic law and order. Lithuania's Sajudis is the clearest example. Elsewhere, however, the situation became increasingly anarchic, as disgruntled and disoriented citizens throughout the country began to fend for themselves and, in many cases, to look for scapegoats.

To make matters worse, Gorbachev often spoke and acted in ways that raised expectations and encouraged people not only to vent their long suppressed grievances openly but to insist that their grievances be fully and quickly rectified--or else. The result turned out to be just what Samuel Huntington and other social scientists have said we should expect whenever political participation grows much more rapidly than the

effective institutionalization of participatory procedures--namely, the outbreak of a great deal of violence. This is precisely what happened not only in the Caucasus and Central Asia but also in many parts of the country's Slavic heartland.

### III. THE CURRENT SITUATION

#### GROWING DISENCHANTMENT WITH GORBACHEV

After five years of disappointed hopes and unfulfilled expectations, it is not surprising that Gorbachev has come to be seen by a rapidly growing number of Soviet citizens as part of the problem, not the solution. By now, in fact, it is doubtful that he has the approval or support of anything like a majority of the Soviet people. Indeed, he himself tacitly admitted as much when he refused to run for the newly created presidency of the USSR in a general election. As an astute and ambitious politician, Gorbachev was obviously keenly aware of the enormous benefits he could have gained from overwhelming popular endorsement of his rule. Allegedly, he decided to sacrifice these benefits in order to avoid unnecessary "distractions" during a period when affairs of state required his full attention. In fact, he was probably afraid that so many people would vote against him that he would either fall short of the majority needed for election or win by such a narrow margin that his "victory" would turn out to be an acute political embarrassment.

Absent a popular mandate, Gorbachev's addition of yet another title before his name is unlikely to persuade either his right-wing or left-wing critics to continue to give him the benefit of the doubt, as they were generally inclined to do until late in his "first-term." On the contrary, since his new office comes with enormous (albeit still somewhat hypothetical) powers, his critics will become more insistent that he stop temporizing and do something decisive to prove his mettle

as a "real leader"--the sort of leader *they* think is required. Furthermore, these critics are likely to have not only more bark but more bite.

## INCREASING POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND POLARIZATION

One reason Gorbachev will find his critics harder to handle from now on is that they have become spokesmen for increasingly coherent and mobilized constituencies. It would be stretching the point to speak of the formation of fully consolidated right-wing and left-wing "combat parties." However, the past few months have seen the emergence of right-wing and left-wing alliances that show definite signs of evolving from loose coalitions of "informal organizations" into much more potent "organizational weapons."

### The United Workers Front

On the right, the most formidable umbrella organization is the United Workers Front, which is headquartered in Leningrad and has branches and affiliates all over Russia. The Front's ideology is basically neo-Stalinist, with a heavy emphasis on unity, discipline, patriotism, and the need for vigilance against efforts to roll back socialism and undermine the territorial integrity of the USSR. Although we know relatively little about the Front's social composition, the available data leave no doubt that its supporters and sympathizers number in the millions and come from all age groups and all walks of life. It is also clear that the Front enjoys more than a little high-level patronage. Boris Gidaspov, the defense industry bigshot whom Gorbachev unwisely installed as head of the Leningrad party

organization, is actively involved in the Front's operations, and Yegor Ligachev and many other party *apparatchiki* of his conservative persuasion are almost certainly involved behind the scenes. In addition, there is every reason to believe that the Front is supported by many high-ranking officers of both the armed forces and KGB. One could have safely inferred as much from the fact that the notorious Nina Andreeva, a longtime favorite of the KGB, and the well-known publicist, Alexander Prokhanov, whom the army newspaper, *Red Star*, has dubbed "the nightingale of the General Staff," are among the Front's founding fathers. Further confirmation has now been provided by the unprecedentedly sharp criticisms of Gorbachev's policies that have recently been voiced by Defense Minister Yazov, General Staff Chief Moiseev, and KGB Chairman Kryuchkov. The striking resemblance between these criticisms and the views expressed by the Front is almost certainly not coincidental.

#### **The Movement for a Democratic Russia**

The left-wing counterpart of the Front is the so-called Movement for a Democratic Russia, which is committed to the establishment of a multiparty system, a market economy, and a federation from which the constituent members can freely secede. Although an outgrowth of organizations that once attracted only "fringe" intellectuals, the Movement is supported by what is probably a majority of the mainstream intelligentsia, including most of the faculty of the elite Higher Party School in Moscow, as well as by many (mostly younger) military officers, party officials, and economic managers. It is also supported by millions of rank-and-file workers, many of whom, it turns out, are far

less eager to "escape from freedom" than most observers once supposed. This is clear, among other things, from the landslide victory of the *de facto* leader of the Movement, Boris Yeltsin, in the recent elections for the Russian republic Supreme Soviet, and from the almost equally impressive victories of numerous other candidates endorsed by the Movement.

The escalating cross-pressures to which Gorbachev is being subjected now that the core population has organized itself (and been organized) to exercise "people's power" is indicated by the most recent public statements of Yeltsin and Ligachev. Ligachev took the occasion of a lengthy interview with the Moscow correspondent of the *Los Angeles Times* to issue a thinly disguised warning to Gorbachev that his continued promotion of "centrism and centrist positions" at the expense of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy would expose him to a punishing backlash. Not to be outdone, Yeltsin has recently given a number of interviews in which *he* gives Gorbachev until the end of the year to turn his halfhearted, so-called "revolution from above" into a genuine (i.e., system-transforming) revolution. Otherwise, according to Yeltsin, Gorbachev will be confronted with a radical "revolution from below"-- a revolution, that, by clear implication, Yeltsin himself will be prepared not only to condone but to lead.

#### IV. PROSPECTS

The question, of course, is just how seriously to take these ominous warnings--warnings that, when taken together, clearly point to the early onset of a period of severe political instability not only in the already troubled borderlands of the USSR but in its very center. How realistic a prospect is this?

#### CONTRASTING WESTERN AND SOVIET VIEWS

Until quite recently, few Western analysts (and even fewer Western policymakers) took the prospect of a more or less imminent political upheaval in the Soviet Union at all seriously. Even today, moreover, forecasts of really stormy weather tend to be heavily discounted. Most Western observers, for example, seem to take it almost for granted that Gorbachev will be able to serve out his "second term." What scant risk there might have been that Gorbachev would be unseated is widely assumed to have all but disappeared now that he supposedly has the powers of the "executive presidency" at his disposal. Whether a growing schism in the Russian body politic makes these powers largely illusory is a question that is rarely asked in the West. The preferred question among Western analysts is whether, having acquired the requisite powers, Gorbachev has enough time left to achieve results before he must run in a genuine presidential election five years hence. If not, power could presumably come up for grabs in 1995. The United Workers Front and the Movement for a Democratic Russia could then conceivably become forces to be reckoned with. For the interim, however, according to mainstream

Western opinion, the United Workers Front and the Movement for a Democratic Russia are unlikely to function as anything more than pressure groups or lobbies to which Gorbachev can respond more or less as he sees fit.

This widespread Western assessment of the current and emergent correlation of forces in the Soviet Union may be correct. The acquisition of the presidency could turn out to be a big step forward in Gorbachev's consolidation of power. Likewise, the political militancy that surfaced during the run-up to the just-completed local elections may abate now that the elections are over. Before signing off on this prognosis, however, it is worth pondering an alternative that haunts many thoughtful Soviets. According to this, much more pessimistic assessment, political polarization is accelerating so quickly and has gone so far in the USSR that further and more violent confrontations between right- and left-wing forces are almost inevitable. Suffice it to cite the opinion of Academician Dimitrii Likachev, the doyen of Soviet historians, who just a few weeks ago implored his fellow liberals in the Supreme Soviet *not* to pressure Gorbachev to hold a democratic presidential election, because any significant increase in political mobilization would plunge the country into a repetition of the fratricidal/genocidal civil war that tore it apart between 1917-1921.

#### **CIVIL WAR INGREDIENTS**

Academician Likachev may well have exaggerated the incendiary effects of a presidential election. However, a strong case can be made that most, if not all, of the necessary ingredients are present for the outbreak of domestic violence on a massive, even warlike, scale.

Three of these ingredients have been discussed in the preceding pages:

- A president in whom large parts of the general public and key elements of the elite have lost confidence;
- A sharply divided political class;
- A politically mobilized and politically polarized population.

Three more such ingredients can be briefly noted:

- A militarily trained population that has fairly easy access to large supplies of arms and in some regions has already armed itself and formed paramilitary groups;
- A conscript army in which morale and discipline are very low and signs of fragmentation along political, as well as ethnic, lines are growing;
- An officer corps that is publically debating whether the employment of Soviet troops against Soviet civilians can ever be justified and that is so internally divided on this and other issues that its members have formed what in effect are competing politico-military organizations, some of which are allied with the United Workers Front and others of which are allied with the Movement for a Democratic Russia.

Finally, Gorbachev has now introduced yet another ingredient in the form of a new constitutional order--one that is characterized by a good deal of uncertainty and disagreement about the legitimate scope of

presidential powers, and about the agencies, instrumentalities, and procedures through which those powers should be exercised. Furthermore, this uncertainty extends to issues of military command and control. This is clear, among other things, from General Staff Chief Moiseev's anguished complaint that the law establishing the new presidency says nothing about the composition or subordination of the Defense Council or about its relationship to the newly created Presidential Council that Moiseev amazingly identifies or nominates as "the supreme permanent organ of the country's defense." What makes this attribution so amazing is that the Presidential Council, which is supposed to be a strictly advisory body, includes a distinctly motley collection of novelists, academics, and freelance politicians, as well as such luminaries as Yazov, Kryuchkov, and Shevardnadze.

In combination, these are clearly the ingredients of a recipe for big-time trouble. In a worst case scenario, they could even combine to produce something approximating a full-fledged civil war--a protracted armed conflict pitting Russians against Russians, as well as Russians against non-Russians and non-Russians against each other. Fortunately, there is nothing "fatalistically inevitable" about such a dire outcome. At the brink, the clear and present danger of massive bloodshed often has a way of calming the passions of even the most diehard militants. Nevertheless, passions are currently running very high, and there are good reasons for believing that they might stay on an upward trajectory for some time to come. In consequence, it is not farfetched to suggest that *perestroika* may end with a bang instead of a whimper. This is especially likely if (to invoke another Irishman) *perestroika* continues to be governed by Murphy's Law, as it has to date.

## V. POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Even if one takes the possibility of a violent implosion in the USSR very seriously, it is not self-evident exactly what it implies for U.S. policymaking and policy planning. What is clear is that there are likely to be substantial differences between policies and plans that make due allowance for such a possibility and those that ignore this possibility or dismiss it as a remote contingency. In consequence, the issue of how much weight to attach to the evidence that the USSR is not only in the grip of a deepening crisis but on the verge of a catastrophic systemic breakdown is of far more than purely academic interest.