Russian Leadership in Crisis: Russian Reform is Dead, Long Live Russian Reform!

The process of reform in Russia moves back and forth from political crisis to economic crisis. All the while, the West struggles to understand the course of change and to help it along in directions that will bring about the desired end of a democratic, market-based Russia. All too often, however, analysts unfamiliar with the traditions and goals of Russian politics misunderstand the day-to-day machinations. By giving voice to a quorum of the former Soviet Union's leading reformers, *Voices of Glasnost* hopes to set the record straight.

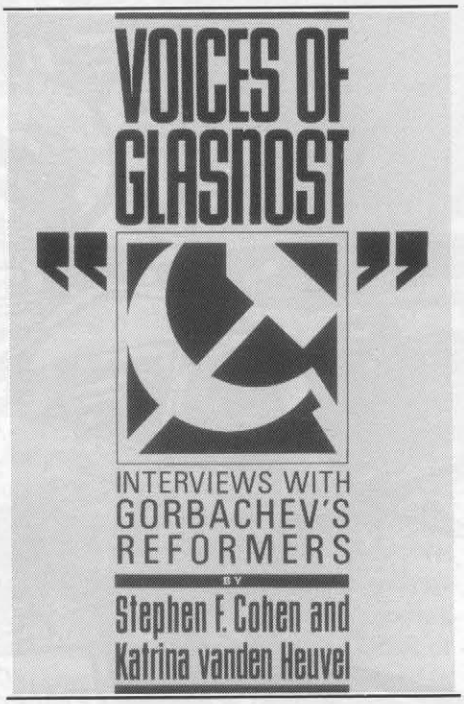
Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers.
by Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina Vanden Heuvel. W.W. Norton & Co., 1989. $17.95.

By Nicholas Breyfogle

On the cover of *The Economist* not more than a few weeks ago was a waist-up photograph of Russian President Boris Yeltsin. The ominous words "Stalin or ..." floated above his head, pregnant with meaning. Apparently, in the midst of the recent leadership crisis, plebiscite and fiddling with the constitution, these two extremes were Russia's only options for the future.

In uncharacteristic fashion, *The Economist* had failed to remember two unavoidable axioms of Russian politics. First, reform is not made by one man alone. It is a process that must involve large numbers of the population in order to succeed and one that will likely include any number of successive leaders. Second, the political spectrum in Russia does not begin or end with the Yeltsin-Stalin poles. Opposition to Yeltsin was not (and is not) necessarily opposition to reform, nor is it a call for a return to the horrors of the Stalinist years. Unfortunately, western writers too often throw the words "Stalin" and "Stalinism" around without fully understanding the severity of the connotations.

Stephen Cohen and Katrina Vanden Heuvel's *Voices of Glasnost*, a collection of interviews held with fourteen of the most active and influential leaders of reform in the former Soviet Union, reminds us that we cannot afford to view Russian politics in such narrow terms if we hope to fully understand the process of transformation. While the speed of recent changes has outdated certain aspects of the book, as a whole, *Voices* provides an invaluable groundwork for understanding and explains fundamental truths about the reform process in Russia.



Voices grapples to fill a void in western literature. Rather than a western analysis of the events, the book presents the Russian perspective and the Russian viewpoint on the changes that they are not only experiencing but also creating. The respondents range from politicians to academics to journalists to poets and include such people, some now well known in the west, as Aleksandr Yakovlev, Yuri Afanasyev, Tatyana Zaslavskaya, Fyodor Burlatsky, Giorgi Arbatov, Aleksandr Bovin, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko. In his introduction, Cohen states that the questions posed in *Voices* revolve around "three important questions [that] have been obscured by the ... western reaction . . . . What is perestroika, how did it originate, and what has it achieved since 1985?"

One Man Doth Not A Reform Make

The interviewees in *Voices* underline the very long-term development of perestroika. The need for change had been recognized as long ago as the mid-1960s and had been germinating in the minds and work of significant portions of the intelligentsia, of scholars, and of the bureaucracy. While waiting for the proper moment, these men and women worked diligently in preparation by writing up plans for reform, investigating existing conditions and avenues for change, and criticizing government policy.

Tatyana Zaslavskaya, sociologist from the Aganbegyan Institute who in 1983 leaked a reformist document to the West (the Zaslavskaya Memorandum),

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highlights the importance of the communities of reformers in scholarly institutes (of which she was a part) that arose during the 1960s and 1970s. "And if such people had not worked on all our country's problems for all those years, no political leadership could have started perestroika. People had to do the ground work first."

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the most popular poet of the Khrushchev era and standard bearer of the post-Stalin thaw in the 1950s and early 1960s, continues along these lines from the artist's point of view: "The poets of my generation help prepared [sic] these new leaders. Don't think that glasnost or perestroika dropped from the sky or that it was given to us by the Politburo. It was many years in preparation."

Those interviewed stress that Gorbachev should be viewed less as the originator of the reform path but rather as a representative thereof who was given a seminal role to play in the unfolding of events. Rather than the sole instigator of perestroika and glasnost, he was the one chosen—elected to the leadership by the Communist Party itself—to be the spokesman for a policy of reform.

Aleksandr Yakovlev, considered "the architect of glasnost," asserts that while Gorbachev's ability and drive have left an indelible mark on the perestroika movement, his role would not have been possible without the mandate of the party and the widespread belief that changes were essential and inevitable. It was a policy of reform that, given the severe economic stagnation in the Soviet Union of the late 1970s and early 1980s, was agreed upon by at least a plurality of Party leaders. In actual fact, the reforms that flourished under Gorbachev took off from the foundations laid under his predecessor, Yuri Andropov. It is ironic to think that had former KGB head Andropov not died so suddenly, he, and not Gorbachev, would in all likelihood have been *Time*'s man of the year.

The interviews further underscore the fact that the success of reform will not depend upon one man alone. It will depend upon the people who will carry it out and defend it—the sellers on the street, the industrialists, and the people at the barricades in front of the Russian White House during the 1991 attempted seizure of power.

To Reform or To Reform

Many in the West continue to hold to the myth that Gorbachev was the sole motive force behind perestroika and glasnost. They hold to the same myths today about Yeltsin. As the interviewees make clear, the question in Russian minds has never been "to reform or not to reform?" but rather, "at what rate and in what manner shall we reform and who shall control and guide the process?" If Yeltsin were to go, another reformer would likely take his place (just as Yeltsin succeeded Gorbachev), although perhaps with different perspectives on change.

The struggle today is not between Democracycapitalism (now one word, it seems, in westernspeak) and Communism, but between representatives of different speeds and scopes of change. The opposition within the Parliament (the Congress of People's Deputies) is by no means a unified block, nor do they necessarily desire a return to communism. Generally speaking, they are looking for a slower, more controlled and hopefully less hurtful rate of change (which, not incidentally, would help them to maintain many of the perks which Yeltsin is now challenging in his headlong rush to codify a new assortment of presidential privileges for himself).

Undeniably there are those who are disenchanted with the present economic path and some who call for a return to the system under Brezhnev. From one perspective, who can blame them? At least materially, they were better off then than they are now. Only time will tell how soon the benefits of the Yeltsin sponsored program of accelerated change (deriving from the 500 days plan) will begin to filter down to those who need it most. A widowed pensioner I met on a recent trip to Russia had not received a pension cheque—her sole source of income—for over eight months. In order to survive she was selling her bi-weekly vodka ration on the street. When she pines for the old days, it is not because she feels any connection to communism but because it was then the last time that she received her pay.

For others, the victories of reform have been ambiguous. Under the old system, one was not free to travel where and when one wanted, even though many people had the financial means to do so. Now, one is free to go anywhere, at anytime, but travel has become so expensive and the population so impoverished that few can take advantage. At the bottom line, little has changed—only a privileged elite remains able to travel.

That the economy is in chaos is clear. Inflation now runs somewhere around 30% per month. That anything can be done about it is unclear. There are as many plans to correct the problems as there are political leaders.

While they support reform, such Yeltsin challengers as Ruslan Khasbulatov and Aleksandr Rutskoi hold different

A Moscow crowd considers posters outside a Metro stop telling about Presidential impeachment. [Nicholas Breyfogle]

visions of the road to arrive there. In *Voices*, Aleksandr Yakovlev, who remains wedded to components of the past structure, defines perestroika to be "the further development and strengthening of socialism," the task of which is "to reunite the ideals of socialism and people's real interests." Socialism and Leninism (of NEP variety) had been pushed entirely off course by the Stalin years and their bureaucratic forms of

define the short term personal power of the individuals involved but they will demarcate the relations of political power in Russia for many years to come. Understandably, Yeltsin wants power to revolve around and emanate from the presidency while the vocal parliamentarians desire it around the parliament.

This butting of heads, however, presents the western world with an opportunity to teach the former Soviet Union

were equally extreme.

In contrast, perhaps Western politicians can also learn something from the Russian experience. It is admirable that Russian leaders believe so strongly in what they are doing that will tolerate no challenge to their goals. Yeltsin was willing to overturn his democratic reform process in order to defend it in the long run (granted there was a good deal of grappling for personal power involved). With

Graffiti writers show their support for reform. "Yeltsin--Yes!" (left) and "No to Dictatorship!" (right) [Nicholas Breyfogle & BC Pictures]

management, statism, and command administrative system.

The "voices" of the book hold a definition of democracy that is firmly grounded in Russian historical experience and practice. The democracy of which these reformers speak appears as a combination of the somewhat anarchic practices of the peasant commune and the Bolshevik conception of democratic centralism. These include a submission to and "unconditional implementation of the decision of the majority" once the debate is over. This brand of democracy was clearly visible in the recent Yeltsin-Parliament clash.

Growing Pains

After a closer look, the current leadership crisis forms part of what should be expected growing pains in a newly democratic society—who will have what power, what gives the leader legitimacy to rule? In a system that has both Parliament and President, the problem is acute. It took the French politicians well over a hundred years to settle on the existing political power structure and many are still unhappy with the balance of powers between President and Parliament. In Russia, there is no precedent of who should control what. The lines that are drawn in the battle today will not simply

something about the democracy in whose name they "fought" the cold war. At the heart of western democracy is the notion of compromise and of checks and balances between the different governing bodies—legislative, executive, judiciary. However, Russian politicians have yet to come to terms with this aspect. Each time Russian politicians run up against opposition, their immediate reaction is to remove the obstacle rather than to try to work with it. Once a decision is reached, they expect all to follow along behind, whether they agree or not, and are unused to the extensive criticism and blocking that accompany the implementation of policy.

A case in point was Yeltsin's declaration of a state of emergency in mid-March of this year. Little attempt was made at this time to find a middle ground acceptable to all parties. The imposition of rule by presidential decree was clearly unconstitutional according to the existing statures. Just imagine if President Clinton suddenly came on television to institute the equivalent of martial law because Congress happened to have filibustered his economic stimulus package and disagreed with his economic philosophy! By the same token, the efforts on the part of the Russian parliament to impeach the President in response to Yeltsin's actions

western politicians seemingly so ambivalent and caught in the ruts of bureaucratic legislation, this idealism and motivation is both inspiring and instructional.

Renovations

In general the "Voices of Glasnost" are not entirely pleased with the progress of reform. While they believe that important and significant acts and measures have been accomplished they foresee a very long road ahead before any substantial, qualitative differences will be achieved. States Aleksandr Yakovlev: "It is like repairing a house or an apartment. Living becomes better only after the reconstruction is complete." The greatest fear among the reformers is not, as might be expected, conservative/communist backlash so feared in the West, but, rather, apathy and disinterest on the part of the general population (Velikhov declares: "what I really fear is indifference and passivity"). Despite this, there is an optimistic flavour that surfaces during their comments. As Yevtushenko states: "What is it you used to say in America? We shall overcome."