

Soviet Myth Lures Russia Into Danger

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On the day I heard about the passing of former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, I was in Sigtuna, a tiny town where Sweden had its beginnings 1,000 years ago. At an intersection I happened upon an old telephone booth that had been converted into a book exchange kiosk, and right in the middle of the kiosk there lay a Swedish copy of the book “Perestroika” by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

How deep and how ironic, I thought, that a work by Gorbachev — whom the West not unreasonably considers the man who ended the Cold War but who is hated at home for permitting the collapse of the Soviet Union — is waiting at a crossroads.

Gorbachev was one of the first to comment on Shevardnadze’s passing. That is only natural because, prior to becoming the president of Georgia, Shevardnadze was a loyal member of Gorbachev’s team and the last foreign minister of the Soviet Union. In his comments, Gorbachev pointed out that the subject of the Soviet Union has quietly passed from the purview of political scientists into the realm of archeology.

However, many people today still like to pretend that the world’s first workers’ and peasants’

state is still with us.

I was 14 when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. As a student at one of Moscow's best schools and with personal experience standing in line for milk, sugar and detergent, I understood events as the natural and inevitable end of that system and, to some extent, as our liberation.

Many of those who now dream of restoring Russia to its former Soviet greatness used to look at these things in exactly the same way. Likewise, in Germany in November 1918, few people lamented the fall of the Hohenzollern monarchy. However, it was the predominate view by 1930 that the fall of the monarchy and the country's World War I defeat were the result of a treacherous "stab in the back."

But if perestroika was a stab in the back, what exactly was so great about the Soviet Union? The problem is that even in the mid-1990s, some Russian first-graders already considered the Soviet Union to have been nothing more than an inscription on a cosmonaut's helmet. Now, after the passage of 20 years, it has become an almost mythological entity, like some long-lost Atlantis.

It seems that victory over Nazi Germany is the only thing still uniting the descendents of the Soviet Union. And according to propagandists, that victory is the only thing that can justify all the unmitigated atrocities the Soviet state committed for decades against its own people — people whose families and homes were destroyed by the revolution, civil war, collectivization, forced deportations and the Great Terror.

But today's average Russian school student knows almost nothing about the Soviet Union, despite the nostalgic rhetoric of this country's president — who, at 62, is already older than Gorbachev was when he was forced out of power. And although most still recall that the Soviet Union defeated Germany in a terrible war, very few families speak about that war anymore. Most of its veterans and its ordinary civilian eyewitnesses have already passed away.

Ignorance about Soviet history sadly leads to strange and confusing behavior. For example, people who plaster their cars with slogans commemorating World War II also believe that Moscow should harshly punish their closest former Soviet allies in Ukraine for their arrogant desire to integrate with Europe. For those two thoughts to exist simultaneously in one mind means that a person must lack an elementary understanding of the Soviet Union's political geography.

The heroic feats of 70 years ago still carry a certain weight, but soon the question will have to be asked: If you want to return to the Soviet past so much, why do you use all your strength to battle a former member republic like Ukraine?

In fact, it is probably not so much a case of repulsing Ukraine as it is failing to attract it. Even in the final phase of its existence, the Soviet Union remained an ambitious and global social project that other states tended to either oppose or support. And even in the critical final years — when shortages of sugar, alcohol, cigarettes and other consumer goods brought people from the regions flocking to Moscow in the hopes of obtaining a few kilos of coveted sausage if and when it magically appeared on store shelves — the Soviet Union continued to advocate certain values and invest resources in promoting them.

The people who seized the reins of power following the Soviet collapse immediately decided that values were an expensive luxury. None of the state's new managers have tried to hide the fact that they are more interested in achieving energy sales than preserving any residual post-Soviet friendships. Their stance toward the Soviet Union, at least, should be straightforward.

But as Russia's leaders soberly and pragmatically conduct business by switching to market prices for gas sales to Ukraine, they simultaneously and tirelessly proclaim how fondly they remember the Soviet Union and how much they despise those who brought about its ruin. It is not uncommon that the people who now wax nostalgic for the Soviet Union are the very ones who, 23 years ago, personally helped dismantle it and benefited from its downfall. President Vladimir Putin, for instance, would never have come to power if the Soviet Union had continued to exist.

The Soviet functionaries who dismantled the Soviet Union are in fact some of the few people who understood their political system clearly.

But even they are not such simple figures. About one week before Shevardnadze's passing, I happened to meet a Georgian in Moscow who compared three former Georgian presidents: Shevardnadze, Mikhail Saakashvili and Giorgi Margvelashvili. He reserved his greatest criticism for Shervardnadze, saying, "Under his rule, the people were deathly afraid of the police, who could do absolutely anything they wanted."

To some extent, this is an apt description of the repressive political systems that most of the former Soviet leaders built — including those with reputations as democrats and peacemakers.

And even those who want to escape all these complications, perhaps by emigrating to Europe, are out of luck. Active attempts by members of the Russian leadership to revive elements of the Soviet system make the West look at emigres as dissidents in the Soviet mold, rather than the ordinary people they are.

And so whether we think of it in a positive or negative light, the Soviet Union continues to exist.

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