Review article

Getting it right, getting it wrong: the Soviet collapse revisited

CAROLINE KENNEDY-PIPE

Rethinking the Soviet collapse: Sovietology, the death of communism and the new Russia. Edited by Michael Cox. London: Pinter. 1998. 256pp. Index. £45.00. ISBN 1 85567 321 5. Pb.: £15.00. ISBN 185567 322 3.

Michael Cox establishes the rationale for this book in the introduction. He has set himself the task of editing a work that engages in a serious retrospective analysis of the failure of Soviet studies to anticipate the fall of the USSR. He argues that this is necessary because in order to understand what is going on in Russia today we must understand where our intellectual predecessors (or at least many of them) went wrong. The key question is why was the rapid and relatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union such a shock to the group of academics known as ' Sovietologists'? Cox argues in his opening chapter that the fall of the USSR did not so much challenge their assumptions but bury Soviet studies as a discipline. Few practising Sovietologists actually foresaw the possibility of the Soviet period coming to an end and, in Cox's words, 'the scale of the failure should not be underestimated'. He begins the book by trying to understand why the discipline was unsuccessful in anticipating the implosion of an entity that it had been studying for over forty years. So far, so provocative.

Cox situates this failure not just in the nature of Soviet studies but with the position of the academic in the modern university. Specifically, he argues that there were three reasons which determined the failure of academics working in the Soviet studies field. The first pillar of his argument is that, on the whole, academics are trained to look at the small picture; academic work was therefore narrow and highly specialized. Cox's second point is that there was a dislike of futurology which in turn led to a disdain for prediction and a preference for studying the world as it was rather than as it might be. His third point is a more general one, which is that most social scientists are better at dealing with stable structures than with radical change.

Perhaps, though, as Cox points out, the most important factor determining the nature of Soviet studies was the acceptance that the USSR would continue to be: an assumption on the whole unchallenged and strengthened by the

structures of the Cold War. Publicly, at least, during the period of Cold War, many academics and policy-makers emphasized Soviet power, its proclivity for expansionism, its encouragement of revolution abroad and its bellicosity in dealing with capitalist states. As Cox points out, the obvious signs of weakness, the retreats, the uncertainties and the fact that, on the whole, Soviet influence was limited to the most backward parts of the globe, did not dent this picture. Perhaps most surprisingly of all, the fact that an economic system as inefficient as the Soviet one was an extraordinary burden for any state and did not lead some to conclude that at some point the Soviet Union might go the way of many other empires and have to decolonize.[1]

So Michael Cox opens up a debate about the nature of scholarship, knowledge and, in the case of Soviet studies, failure. His attempts to take a hard look at, or deconstruct as he phrases it, 'Soviet studies' are taken up by Peter Rutland in an essay which was previously published in *The National Interest*. Although the article concedes that there were indeed some specialists who pointed to a demise, although not an imminent one, of the USSR, it argues that there were many more who perceived evolutionary change in the communist system which would enable it to manage economic decline or political dissension. The question, therefore, which lies at the heart of this chapter is, why was it widely believed within the Soviet studies field that the prevailing order was reformable?

Rutland indicates a variety of sources that might have contributed to this view, not the least of which, he argues, were deficiencies in the training of specialists within the American university system—in particular, the process of doctoral research, much of which, Rutland argues, produced 'nonsense on stilts'. Overall, though, he blames a collective failure of imagination for the inability to foresee the end of the USSR.

Rutland's chapter is controversial but interesting in several respects: he stresses, for example, the notion of accident in history. He argues that, in the main, when accident has been discussed in relation to the failure of the Soviet system it has been in the context of Gorbachev and both his courage in launching perestroika and his foolishness in failing to predict the outcomes. Leaving aside for the moment the role of Mikhail Gorbachev, Rutland identifies the two other serious candidates for the role of the critical 'accident' in the demise of the USSR: the Afghan war and the Chernobyl disaster. Rutland is, of course, correct in raising these two events as landmarks on the road to Soviet collapse, but one is tempted to take issue with his view that these were accidents of the historic kind. Certainly, in the case of the Afghan war the decision to intervene can be seen as a logical outcome of the Soviet decision-making process in which the military were actively involved and as a reaction to the beginning of the 'Second Cold War'.[2]

[1] Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Fontana, 1989).

[2] See e.g. Odd Arne Westad, 'Concerning the situation in "A": new Russian evidence on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan', in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, issues 8–9, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Winter 1996/97, pp. 128–33.

It is also too glib to assert, even as an aside, that perhaps the main contribution Ronald Reagan made to the fall of communism was in sending stinger missiles to the *Mujahadin*. Aside from the debate over the impact of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) on the Soviet leadership there is now a question mark over what difference these missiles actually made to the outcome of the Afghan war.

Quibbling aside, Rutland's chapter does solid service in two respects. He makes some important connections between the conduct of foreign policy and the failure of the Soviet system. He also introduces one of the central themes of this collection which is the issue of how knowledge of the Soviet Union was constructed (or misconstructed) in the West. Rutland's view, that many engaged in group think which caused them to turn a blind eye to the nature of the Soviet system, is not a comfortable one. It is, though, an allegation that fellow contributor Terry McNeill can comfortably avoid. McNeill has carved out a career as a conservative analyst of the Soviet Union. In his chapter he defends the contribution of what he terms 'realists' and argues that their great strength compared to liberal theorists was to recognize the Soviet system as 'abnormal' and, in essence, fundamentally flawed.

Hillel H. Ticktin is scathing in his analysis of Sovietology. He maintains that if scholars in the field did not understand where the Soviet Union was moving to, then perhaps their understanding of the USSR was profoundly flawed. Ticktin believes that, contrary to what may have been suggested, the breakdown did not come suddenly but was the result of a longer-term malaise: stability in the Soviet state had been achieved only through repression which carried a high economic price. The failure to develop an understanding of this nexus was, for Ticktin, a profound misunderstanding of the USSR. Worse, however, Ticktin believes that those who got the Soviet Union wrong are now still getting Russia wrong: how, he wonders, can they believe that capitalism can be constructed on the debris left behind by the Soviet Union? He points to perhaps the most interesting challenge for those engaged in working on post-Soviet Russia. It is not often that scholars get the chance to manage their material, and in Russia academics can now become practitioners. Ticktin, however, has little confidence that those who were engaged in studying the USSR will manage any better in their assessments of Russia.

So far, then, the field of Soviet studies has in this collection had a lambasting, albeit a thoughtful one. Yet the worst, or best, is still to come. If Ticktin would like to see many Sovietologists in sackcloth, his fellow contributor Vladimir Shlapentokh willingly supplies the ashes. He echoes one of the complaints voiced earlier in this volume—that there was a general failure within Sovietology in the United States to perceive that the USSR was very far from a normal society that could or would endure. This omission was, he contends, traceable at least in part to the growth of positivist methodologies in the United States which looked for what could be observed and counted rather than confronting the big issues. The use of positivist methodologies was, he argued, particularly inappropriate for the study of the Soviet Union because it relied upon empirical

data: given the closed nature of the Soviet system it was almost entirely bound to be of dubious value. The simple but critical point is for scholars to beware of their sources. Yet Shlapentokh also has a subtler proposition, which is that scholarship is related to the political climate in which it is carried out: in this respect the views of American Sovietologists in his opinion reflected the political climate in the United States rather than the realities of the USSR.

Shlapentokh is particularly harsh in his assessment of the role of Mikhail Gorbachev and critical of those he terms Gorbachev's 'admirers' in the West. Practically no one in this collection has a positive word to say about Gorbachev's period as leader of the Communist Party and his role in transforming the USSR. (In his chapter, Peter Rutland is damning even of Gorbachev's intellectual qualities.) This is worrying for two reasons. First, Gorbachev's reputation does, in the interests of fairness at least, deserve some defence, and second, given Gorbachev's central role during the 1980s, there are some interesting questions to be asked, and indeed answered, over whether Sovietologists got him wrong.[3]

It is Robert Daniels who begins the counter-attack against the onslaught upon Sovietologists. The defence is executed in a splendid essay. Daniels begins with the basic, but essential, question of what is actually being discussed in this collection: before we consider how and why Sovietology failed we have to know what it was. Sovietology, he argues, was never a discipline in itself, let alone a cult. It was, in terms of its scholarship, a broad church comprising many different academic disciplines. While Daniels concedes that political scientists did in many respects dominate the study of the USSR, we should not overlook those engaged in study of the history, geography, and anthropology of the USSR. Daniels points out that to focus only on political science and the study of the former Soviet state is to lose perspective on the very valuable work carried out in other fields. Much of this work never claimed to have the predictive powers which had become central to the work of respectable social scientists. Indeed, as Daniels explains, one of the enduring problems for those engaged in the study of the USSR and indeed of post-communist Russia, is that the study of these regions has been caught between an area and a disciplinary focus.

Nevertheless, Daniels is not content simply to pay tribute to those non-political scientists who have contributed much to the study of Soviet affairs. He mounts a robust vindication of Sovietology in all its guises and its traditions within the United States. It has, he claims, an honourable past. For example, Daniels highlights the work of the Harvard Refugee Interview Project during the early 1950s and he points to the endeavours of many Sovietologists who, through their scholarly pursuits, helped to diffuse the climate of hysteria over communist expansionism during the early years of the Cold War. Daniels also effects a stout rebuttal of those who argue that the failure of Sovietologists to predict the ending of the USSR renders them redundant in the post-communist age.

[3] For a positive assessment of Mikhail Gorbachev see Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Stephen White in his chapter also questions the notion of failure. As he points out, although few actually argued that communist rule would irretrievably collapse in the late 1980s, the consensus within the profession was that for a variety of reasons, corruption, ethnic tension and dictatorship, Soviet socialism was in deep and systemic crisis. White's most interesting contribution, though, is to question exactly what changed in Russia during the upheavals of 1991. The transition, when it came, was certainly a curious one. Throughout the rest of eastern Europe, mass politics ousted communist regimes, whereas the transition in the Soviet case centred around the *defence* of a predominantly communist parliament. As White notes, there was little popular involvement in the events of 1991 in Russia. Because of the particular nature of this revolution, White suspects that to understand the complex events of 1991 that have led to 'post Communism', we have also to appreciate that there are profound connections with the Soviet past.

It is precisely because of the need to understand what has changed, or not changed, in Russia that Ronald Hill argues that those trained in old style Sovietology are still essential to the scholarly and practical problems of studying Russia. Hill poses the question of how anyone who does not know what happened before the events of 1991 can be transported into the former USSR and expect to construct successful market democracies. As Hill argues, these newcomers can learn a lot from a profession which has been forced since 1991 to face up to its own apparent weaknesses. Hill proposes that in order to judge fully, or to have a better chance of understanding post-communist Russia, a new academic alliance is necessary between area studies scholars and social scientists. One group can provide the necessary data and regional expertise, the other, the methodological rigour to interpret that information. Out of the wreckage of communism can come fruitful collaboration for scholars if not an easy future for Russia.

Indeed, as David Lane and Stephen Cohen go on to argue in separate but equally excellent chapters, given the nature of Russia's past, we should be wary of believing that a smooth 'transition' to a liberal capitalist regime is on the cards. (It should be noted that Richard Sakwa expresses doubts in his chapter that transition is even an appropriate phrase for what occurred in Russia.) Cohen, in particular, is especially critical of those American policy-makers who since 1991 have adopted policies he considers to be disastrous; they have failed to understand that market democracy is particularly ill-suited to Russian soil. More culpably, Cohen believes that American policy is failing to perceive that Russia must work within 'its own traditions and possibilities', not those of the United States.

The notion that Russia must find its own path is emphasized by Carl Jacobsen in his chapter on a 'Revolution betrayed'. Taking us back to the revolution of 1917, Jacobsen analyses the adaptations made in communism to bring it into line with Stalinist practise. Specifically, he argues that if we examine the conduct of Soviet foreign policy, we can see how ruthlessly the notion of

revolution aboard was subordinated to the practicalities of national defence. This analysis of foreign policy allows for some pertinent analogies to be drawn between 1917 and 1991. The territorial losses at Brest-Litovsk in 1918 are compared to the redrawing of Russia's borders in 1991, while the imposition of War communism in 1922 and the harsh grain policies have some similarities to 1992. The main point, though, is that revolutionary zeal abroad was always subordinated to domestic priorities. Overall, the point Jacobsen wishes to emphasize is that the ideal of communism was perverted to such an extent that what failed in 1991 was not communism at all. In fact, he claims that communism in its purest form will remain with us because it embodies some noble ideals. There has long been debate about the extent to which the revolution was hijacked by Stalinism.[4] Jacobsen's specific point is one worth noting: if democracy is to evolve in Russia it must have a firm domestic base. His broader point is that in order to understand the future, sometimes we have to return to a study of the past.

This is an appropriate note on which to end this book. A generation of scholars (and policy-makers) were given pause for thought when the USSR collapsed. It is necessary for there to be a certain degree of breast-beating about the failure to predict this event, although, as Michael Cox notes, this was not a failure peculiar to Sovietology. International relations theorists were notable for a similar myopia over the end of the Cold War.[5] Nevertheless, for a profession which prided itself on knowing the USSR (or certain parts of it), it is worth pausing to consider if, and how, bolder and bigger questions could and should have been asked and whether in fact there was a failure of imagination by those studying the USSR. If so, then perhaps, as many in this collection have argued, the structures and training with which Sovietologists worked were not conducive to asking the big questions. Perhaps, at times, the academic was too distracted by the world of policy-making or the political climate. Yet, even if some of these allegations are accepted, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. What this admirably even-handed collection suggests is that even if there had been a failure to predict the end, there was also a long tradition of success in interpreting the USSR. As the second half of this collection demonstrates, expertise and experience in Soviet studies are the qualities desperately needed to understand the new (or old) Russia.

Very good collections of essays have several characteristics. Among them is the ability to enlighten. Ideally, they should also provoke debate among scholars and practitioners of the subject and provide material which promotes a degree of academic self-reflection. This book has all these qualities. Michael Cox has brought together an assortment of experts who dissect the successes and failures of Sovietology. They do not all agree on either the past or the future of Russia,

[4] See e.g. Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet experience: political history since 1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[5] John Lewis Gaddis, 'International relations theory and the end of the Cold War', *International Security,* 17: 3, Winter 1992/93, pp. 5–58.

but this is part of the enjoyment of this lively volume. No one who was in any way engaged in Soviet studies during the past few decades will avoid being provoked or stimulated (or both) by this book. This is, therefore, a very good collection indeed and one to be welcomed, but more importantly, to be read by all those interested in Russia and in the study of post-communist societies.