

BEYOND PERESTROIKA

A COMMENT ON THE ARTICLES BY PRAZAUSKAS, TISHKOV, AND YAMSKOV*

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The crisis that is currently unfolding in the U.S.S.R. is developing so rapidly that anything one says concerning the plight of nationalities in the Soviet empire risks being out of date by the time it appears in print. This is true even if one limits oneself to theoretical and conceptual questions, but it is particularly the case if one attempts to analyze current events.

The three articles that form the core of this issue fit neatly together. One focuses on general theoretical and comparative issues (Prazauskas), one on the nature of the Soviet nationalities crisis in a broad sense (Tishkov), and one on the causes and patterns of the ethnic conflict in one particular area, that of Nagorno-Karabakh (Yanskov). All three authors have produced interesting and challenging articles that address important questions. One need not agree with all the conclusions of the authors, but the scholarly spirit evidenced by these studies can only be welcomed.

In the historic drama currently unfolding across the enormous expanses of the twentieth century's most remarkable and controversial empire, the authors and their Soviet commentators are not only observers but also actors. Nonetheless, I stress that the following critical remarks are part of the academic debate on this question and are not expressed on behalf of any movement, party or political-interest group. No one has a monopoly on truth, and the difficult search for objective social knowledge can only be advanced on the basis of scholarly investigation and debate.

I focus this commentary on the article by Tishkov because it deals with the current crisis in the Soviet empire in the broadest manner and because I disagree with the main points discussed in it. Yanskov's detailed analysis of the case of Nagorno-Karabakh does not lend itself to the same kind of debate. I find a number of his points persuasive and his typology of ethnic conflicts very interesting, but the article would be strengthened if he were more willing to make predictions and policy suggestions. His conclusions that the normalization of ethnic relations in the Transcaucasus

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is only possible "by strengthening the state unity of the country, along with the disappearance of separatist tendencies in the republics" is either a meaningless stylistic assertion, or, if it is to be taken seriously, constitutes a simple-minded, conservative call for the "restoration of order." On the other hand, I find myself largely in agreement with the theses formulated by Prazauskas. Unlike Yamskov, Prazauskas's prescription for the Soviet multinational state is quite radical. He sees a successful transition as possible only on the basis of an entirely new commonwealth or confederation of independent states.

After setting out a number of legitimate criticisms concerning the ideas advanced by the Communist party, Mikhail Gorbachev, the late Academician Andrey Sakharov, and the independence movements in the republics, Tishkov puts forward a scheme that is essentially very close to that of Gorbachev. Tishkov's main idea is to save the union: "Taking into account the enduring sociopolitical heterogeneity of the world, the dangerous military and strategic confrontations of the great powers and blocs, and also the world-wide trends toward economic and political integration, the goal of preserving the integrity of the Soviet Union on the basis of its federative (or, in part, confederative) structure is entirely justified. ..."

The principal theoretical weakness in Tishkov's article is his analysis of what he considers to be the socioeconomic roots of the crisis. He seems not to have fully comprehended that the question of the viability of the union is not so much one of who has more abstract rights – the union or the "peoples" – but of whether it is possible to reform the Soviet political and economic system without destroying the U.S.S.R.. Is the continued existence of the union compatible with a market economy, and from the political point of view, can the nations of the U.S.S.R. be kept together if the totalitarian Communist party power machine is dismantled?

It is my opinion that the disintegration of the Soviet Union is practically inevitable. The most likely future political arrangement in that part of the world may be a complex system of states, some of which (for example the three Slavic states) may join in confederative arrangements, while others may insist on greater independence, although even these states may be willing to enter into a system of mutual, international, economic, political, and defensive agreements. This appears to be the most likely outcome in the absence of a conservative crackdown before the disintegration process becomes truly irreversible. Unfortunately, while I am writing these lines (in October 1990) one cannot yet rule out the prospect of a conservative crackdown. But even if a conservative coup should occur, it would by no means abolish the process, it would only postpone it; in 5–10 years a new perestroika would have to be undertaken, and the whole process would start again, only in this case it would begin under even worse conditions.

It is also quite likely that, once the U.S.S.R. has dissolved and the new successor states have made their first difficult adjustments to the market economy, a new, much more powerful and economically sound process of integration will commence. This process might also help some parts of the present Soviet Union to associate themselves with a future united Europe.

I do not agree with Tishkov's assertion that "the dangerous military and strategic confrontations of the great powers and blocs" justify the preservation of the Soviet Union in its present form. The military threat would be greatly reduced if in the place of an imperialist military superpower (which the U.S.S.R. essentially was and still remains) a number of smaller states were created. Russia will remain a strong nuclear state, capable of defending itself against possible threats from the East, South, and West under any likely future scenario. It would be beneficial for the construction of a "common European home" as well as for world stability in general if the Soviet Union were to be dismantled. Above all, it would be good for the peoples of the U.S.S.R. if they could rid themselves of the enormous burden of military expenditures that they currently bear.

The disturbances that have marked the post-1985 period in the U.S.S.R. have demonstrated vividly that the unity and stability of the U.S.S.R. in its present form can only be guaranteed on the basis of centralized rule. It is conceivable that a conservative dictatorship could be superimposed on a market economy, but only an authoritarian state is capable of controlling such a vast country with such a terrible economic crisis and more than 130 nationalities. It appears that only an extremely centralized command (communist?) regime can guarantee the unity of the Soviet Union. If the U.S.S.R. is to endure for any length of time, then it will most likely be in the form of a totalitarian state. This means that international security will depend to a considerable extent on the personalities of the future rulers of the U.S.S.R., and there is no guarantee that those who come after Gorbachev will not repeat the adventurist policies of a Brezhnev or Khrushchev.

International security does not require the existence of a Soviet superpower, but a Soviet superpower in the process of disintegration may present a threat to international stability in the *short run*. The question confronting policy makers, both in the East and the West, therefore, is: how to ensure the peaceful dismantling of the Soviet Union, how to prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of irresponsible political forces, and how to guarantee that safety regulations are maintained at nuclear power stations in the midst of revolutionary changes. Western aid may prove pivotal in this regard. Russia should be the only nuclear power to emerge from the ruins of the Soviet empire and special international mechanisms should be created to help it ensure control over its nuclear arms and facilities.

Tishkov provides a vivid description of the environmental and economic deterioration that has occurred during the seventy years of Soviet communist rule. He legitimately terms this record "ecocide" and maintains that ecocide has been accompanied by elements of ethnocide. According to Tishkov more than 80 percent of the women of child-bearing age in the Karakalpak ASSR suffer from anemia, and approximately 2.2 million people in Belorussia and 1 million in Ukraine live in areas that have been contaminated as a result of the Chernobyl catastrophe. He also notes that the "sectoral specialization and division of labor natural for such a large country were transformed into a phantom of senseless and chaotic connections and interdependencies, monstrous disproportions, inequitable

exchange and the secondary redistribution of goods through 'bagmen' on passenger trains." Tishkov also stresses that "righting the Soviet economy and setting it on a reliable course will obviously take years, and some economists predict that it may even take decades."

Although Tishkov accurately describes the sad Soviet record of economic and ecological mismanagement, he does not detail the linkages between this record and the roots of the current national liberation and separatist movements in the U.S.S.R..

The failure of the central Soviet government in the economic sphere has been obvious throughout the entire post-1917 period. One cannot count as a success the creation of an enormous military-related, heavy-industrial complex, a "feat" that has accomplished on the basis of the near exhaustion of the almost unlimited natural resources of the U.S.S.R., the devastation of its environment, the ruin of its agricultural sector, and the forced labor of millions of GULAG prisoners.

Unfortunately, this record of economic failure has continued throughout the 1985-1990 period, and the Gorbachev leadership's almost unbelievable inability to make even moderate progress in the economic sphere has been an important factor undermining popular trust in the central Soviet government. Despite the availability of the Chinese model, the Soviet government has been unable or unwilling to make use of such measures as special economic zones or the limited privatization of agriculture even though the introduction of such reforms would have served the interest of the ruling partocracy itself. Instead, Gorbachev engaged in such naive and ultimately futile experiments as the anti-alcohol campaign, the "acceleration" of technological progress on the basis of traditional, command-economic methods, and the introduction of an "enterprise law" that mandated the election of upper-level management by workers' collectives. As the economic crisis has intensified, the central Soviet leadership has retreated from one position to another under popular pressure, and has finally publicly admitted the relatively trivial truth that a Western-style market economy is more efficient than a Soviet-style command economy. One noteworthy feature of this retreat is the fact that every concession in economic policy was made only when it was no longer politically possible not to do so. Thus, all of the so-called economic reforms of the perestroika period were adopted only when it was too late for them to have any positive economic or political results. These attempts at reform can best be described as "too little, too late."

This cycle of economic crisis, attempted reform, and economic failure helps explain the vitality of the current nationalist/separatist movements in the U.S.S.R. In light of this experience, it is only rational that the majority of the population in the republics believes that the central government is essentially incapable of contributing to economic progress, and that the all-union government structure cannot be reformed, only destroyed.

As long as the economic situation continues to deteriorate it will continue to nourish pro-independence movements in the republics, and it must be admitted, as Tishkov himself rightly indicates, that there is no hope of an improved economic situation in the near future.

Tishkov identifies the inadequate development of civil society as the main source underlying the contemporary growth of nationalist feelings in the U.S.S.R.. He claims that the "previous political order" was unable to create "even rudimentary civil institutions in the form of effective local government, and to build working political and social structures through which citizens and groups, including ethnic groups, could stand up for and realize their common and disparate interests and rights." As a result, once the power of the Communist party apparatus weakened, for millions of Soviet citizens "ethnic loyalty became the sole and the most readily comprehensible basis for collective action and the expression of protest in conditions of social despair and profound political disillusionment."

There is certainly an element of truth in both of these statements. But I suggest that these are also much stronger, economic reasons at work producing nationalist emotions. The essential features of the command economy were artificially low, subsidized prices, shortages of goods, and queues. The command economy formed the objective basis for the development of protectionist feelings, because consumers from other regions, towns, or cities were viewed as enemies who threatened to empty the stores of the limited goods available to satisfy the needs of local residents. Rationing and special identification cards were introduced in various areas to defend local supplies. Throughout history societies have experienced an upsurge of hatred against "alien" socio-ethnic groups (e.g., rich Jewish merchants, poor immigrant workers) in such circumstances but the command economy seems to be unique in that it appears to have cultivated an almost universal hatred against aliens in general. If one is looking for a historical materialist explanation, then it appears that "real socialist" productive relations constitute a powerful mechanism for the creation of nationalism.

Tishkov refers to the fact that the RSFSR produces most of the Soviet Union's oil and gas and states that "a significant part of these riches goes to the other republics, ... at discount prices." He also asserts that the Soviet state has had to pay for the union "by diminished investment in the social and cultural benefits of the dominant (Russian) ethnic group." It is a pity that Tishkov does not elaborate further on this argument because it touches a very delicate nerve in the current debate – i.e., which nation suffered most from inclusion in the Soviet Union. It also comes very close to asserting that the Russians have suffered and sacrificed more than anyone else. Obviously, such assertions only fuel the nationalist sentiments of the non-Russian nationalities who feel that they have been more deeply wronged – first in that they were compelled to enter the union, and secondly in that they were deported, punished, and decimated by a state and party of which the majority of the leaders were Russian.

I did not bring up this particular point in the Tishkov's article in order to engage in a dispute concerning "which nation has suffered more," but to emphasize the point that this indicates that the union has not been in the best interest of the Russians themselves, and that there are indeed historical and economic causes underlying the growth of the secessionist movement in Russia as well.

One factor that has been highly detrimental to the unity of the U.S.S.R. is the objective conflict of interest that has developed between regions that earn more and those that earn less Western hard currency. A peculiar feature of the command economy is that it sharply reduces the competitiveness of most sectors of the economy on world markets. Only certain raw materials (e.g., oil, gas, coal, gold) have remained competitive and can be more or less easily sold for hard currency. This disparity has served as a basis for the formation of secessionist and semi-secessionist ideologies in that republics and autonomous units with greater natural resources and greater "hard currency" earning potential are objectively more interested in greater independence within the union or even secession from the union.

Tishkov stresses again and again that the principle of one nation, one state cannot be realized within the Soviet federation. Certainly the process by which the peoples of one or another Soviet republic or autonomous unit will gain independence will not be an easy one. The most cursory glance at the recent history of Europe shows how individual and diverse were the paths to independence followed by such states as Norway, Iceland, Finland, Poland, Albania, the Baltic states (independent from 1919–1939), Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and Ireland. Their divergent historical experiences demonstrate how much depends on the concrete historical circumstances and the international balance of power at that particular point in time. There can no more be "pure" ethnic states than there can be universal rules that designate who will qualify to be a citizen in the newly created states. It is also true that solutions do not exist that will be viewed as universally just from everyone's point of view.

I would argue that most of the reforms suggested in Tishkov's program – the renunciation of the practice of designating peoples' nationality in their passports; the abolition of "any laws or legal documents that are based on the nationality of citizens"; the expansion of rights "in the area of ethno-cultural autonomy"; the transformation of the Tatar, Bashkir, Dagestan, and certain other ASSRs into union republics; the reduction in the number of levels in the hierarchy of national-state units; and the creation of reservations for the less populous peoples of the North and Siberia – can have only marginal significance in the context of the present systemic crisis of the Soviet empire. These proposed changes might prove beneficial for a revision of the governmental structure of the RSFSR, but they are clearly insufficient to save the unity of the U.S.S.R.