Russia's Fever Break

Sometimes events overtake us. When we at the *WQ* first learned about this article last spring, we were eager to bring it to our readers. It seemed to us that James Billington's argument that the Soviet Union was in the midst not of a revolution but of what he calls a "fever break" was vitally important. We were not alone. In late May, Billington, the Librarian of Congress and a leading historian of Russian culture, was invited to present his paper at the residence of the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, before an audience of several hundred select Soviet citizens. Believing Billington's perception of the historic moment would provide encouragement and needed perspective for reformers who had begun to doubt their own cause, a prominent Soviet democrat arranged for its publication in Moscow's *Independent Gazette*. It appeared in June, just as Russians were going to the polls to elect a president for the first time in their history. It hit close enough to home to provoke an unprecedented official protest by the Soviet embassy in Washington, apparently prompted by some of the same forces that launched the putsch. In August, a week before Boris Yeltsin and his allies stared down the leaders of the coup, Billington was back in the Soviet Union repeating his argument. We present his essay here not only as a prophetic historical document but, with minor modifications that reflect recent events, as a continuing guide to possible turns in Russia's future.

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by James H. Billington

We are living in the midst of a great historical drama that we did not expect, do not understand, and cannot even name. It has been called a revolution, but modern revolutions have generally been violent, secular, and led by intellectual elites with political blueprints. The upheavals in Eastern Europe were almost exactly the opposite: nonviolent, filled with religious idealism, and thrown up from below without clear leaders, let alone programs. It has been called reform from above with Mikhail Gorbachev as a Peter the Great; but Gorbachev never

had a clear program, and events rapidly moved far beyond anything he intended, expected, or could control. The attempted August coup against Gorbachev, the counter-reaction of the Russian people, the rise of Yeltsin, and debates over the future of the Soviet Union all perpetuate the turmoil.

A more appropriate term for what is happening might be the Russian word *perelom*, meaning a break in an entire organism, a "fever break" that determines whether a person will live or die. Stalin used the word *perelom* to describe his plunge into the holocaust of totalitarianism, calling the first year of his first five-year plan, 1929, "the year of the great fever break." Sixty years later came another such break, this one ending totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. Then in August 1991 a related *perelom* convulsed the Soviet Union itself.

Defying the old guard from atop a tank, Boris Yeltsin in effect declared communism dead, ending an era that began when Lenin announced its coming from atop an armored vehicle in 1917.

The dialogue has been cacophonous, the set surrealistic, and the cast of characters unlikely and almost anti-political: absurdist playwrights as chiefs of state in Czechoslovakia and Hungary; archival historians leading the factions that broke with communism completely in the Polish and Soviet parliaments; purveyors of the most immaterial of the arts, music, as heads of state in a fading East Germany and a rising Lithuania; a curator of ancient manuscripts as head of state in Armenia.

The West has viewed this all largely as an Eastern melodrama dominated by Gorbachev—first as a St. George liberating the satellites, then seemingly joining the dragons inside the Soviet Union, then clambering back on the democratic white horse lest Boris Yeltsin ride off alone.

We have seen ourselves only as spectators—uncertain as to how much money should be thrown on the stage, vaguely hoping that Westernized minorities can break away, somehow assuming that the Russians will eventually produce a new wave of repression in a culture where the music is melancholy, endings are sad, and democracy is all but unknown.

Such images are not altogether wrong, but they are inadequate for suggesting either the dangers or the creative possibilities in the current tumult. My own alternative analysis is based on seven propositions.

The first is that Americans are not merely spectators but more deeply involved than we realize in what happens inside the Soviet Union. American political and military strength helped force the change within the Soviet Union during the 1980s, and America is now the main model by which reformers in the Soviet Union define and measure themselves as they struggle to open up and restructure their continent-wide, multicultural nation.

Russian culture, never as securely self-contained as, say, the Chinese or French cultures, has always tended to borrow from its principal external adversary. The Russians took their religion and art from Byzantium in the 10th and 11th centuries, their modern governmental institutions from Sweden in the early 18th century, the language of their ruling class from the

French in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and their first industrial models from Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—all either while or just after fighting furiously with each of these Western adversaries. Now, as the Cold War ends, the Soviet Union seems singularly bent on learning from the American "scorpion" it so long faced in the bottle.

The most important reason why Americans cannot be passive spectators at the Soviet spectacle is that the strategic strength of the Soviet Union directed at the United States remains unabated, despite the diminished targeting of Europe. The world, for all its multipolar aspects, remains bipolar in terms of deliverable nuclear destruction.

We are at the fever break in the body politic of Soviet totalitarianism, but I contend, as my second proposition, that the current scene in the Soviet Union is part not of the Eastern melodrama that I previously described but instead of a broader global drama of a high moral order.

Act I in this drama of the 20th century was that of *total war*: the two world wars which threw the masses violently on stage and ended European world dominance. Act II was that of *totalitarian peace*, the attempt to impose a totalistic order on the world first by Germany and then by the Soviet Union in the Cold War that followed the hot wars. Act III was the *victory of freedom*, which climaxed in the late 1980s when a liberal political and economic order emerged as the preferred norm over both the totalitarianism of Act II and the surviving authoritarianism of the Third World. Act IV is the *search for authority*, a quest that seems to be on the rise in this decade. As newly freed peoples search for unique identities in a world of creeping technological uniformity and for a source of responsibility amid the fluidity of freedom, they are rediscovering their own deeper cultural traditions.

Act V—the classical last act—lies ahead in the New Millennium: that of a genuinely multipolar world in which other currently dormant peoples in the Third World will simultaneously claim both freedom's general entitlements and their own distinctive identities. Only Act V will tell us whether humanity will be able finally to live at peace in a culturally divided, ecologically overtaxed planet—or whether we will simply use new weapons and empowerment to renew old patterns of tribal and national conflict. Only then will we know if the ending will be happy or sad, peaceful pluralism or renewed warfare that could lead to total destruction.

The Soviet Union today is traumatically enduring both the end of Act III and the beginning of Act IV. Its peoples are at once struggling both for common legal rights and for particular national identities.

The central tension in the Soviet Union today is neither a political one between personalities nor an economic one between programs. The key conflict is rather an elemental struggle for legitimacy between two very different, rival forces—primeval, moral forces that compete within, as well as among, people—forces that can be best understood by reading the long novels rather than the short histories of Russia.

From this follows my third proposition. The central struggle in the Soviet break with its totalitarian past has been between physical power and moral authority, between a dictatorial machine trying to control things at the top and a movement towards democracy from below.

In recent months, we have paid so much attention to the failures of the Soviet system that we have overlooked its one conspicuous success: the creation of the largest, most powerful, and long-lived political machine of the modern era. The Leninist machine in the Soviet Union (essentially the three million people in the inner *nomenklatura* of the Communist Party) has proven to be perhaps the most successful political oligarchy of this century. While maintaining its hold on power, it skillfully distributed patronage, atomized dissenters at home, and anesthetized opposition abroad. Considering the colossal economic failure and human cruelty of the Soviet sys-

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tem, the *nomenklatura*'s ability to retain power must be recognized as one of the great, sinister political accomplishments of the 20th century.

Gorbachev is a pure child of this *nomenklatura* elite. Having once presided over the resort area of Stavropol, where the overweight, geriatric leadership came to take the waters at the spa, he was brought back to the capital to supervise the oligarchy's transition to a postwar, post-Stalinist generation of party leadership. Gorbachev in power proved to be one of the most dexterous of all Leninist politicians, playing off against each other the requisite left and right oppositions while continuously consolidating his own control over policy by invoking a vague slogan devoid of objective content (*perestroika*), which he alone could define. After creating new parliamentary institutions, which brought younger and professional people into the political process as a liberal counterweight to the conservative party bureaucracy, Gorbachev immediately built himself a super-presidency beyond the control of either. From this post he continued to persuade the outside world that he was a sensible centrist maneuvering between right and left excesses. But he was extraordinarily unpopular at home and had little ability to move anything with all his levers of power. He had more formal power than any Soviet leader since Stalin, but very little authority.

Authority, however, was being reconstituted by a democratic opposition welling up from below and seeping in from the periphery. In almost every election in which there was a genuine contest in the Russian as well as other republics, democratic forces have prevailed over reactionary ones—dramatically so in the centers of the Russian republic's military, industrial, and political power: Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Sverdlovsk.

The basic struggle, then, in the Soviet Union was between the Leninist political machine (fortified by a resurgent KGB that had power but almost no legitimacy) and a broad, diffuse democratic movement that had legitimacy and authority but almost no power or experience in economic and political governance. The Leninist machine was itself divided; and, as last August showed, it was finally unable to reverse the popular move toward democracy.

My fourth proposition is that the decisive element in resolving the deepening union-wide crisis produced by nationality tensions and economic failures is the search for identity by the dominant Russian nationality itself. The decisive actor in determining the outcome of the conflict between dictatorship and democracy and of the multiple search for identities within the Soviet Union in Act IV of our global drama will be—as in a Greek tragedy or a Russian opera—the chorus: the awakening Russian people, who control most of the natural resources and almost all of the weapons of the Soviet Union.

The dominant Russian nationality has the most acutely difficult identity crisis of all the nationalities in the Soviet Union. Whereas the minorities can define their post-totalitarian identity in opposition not just to communism but to Russian imperial occupation, the dominant Russians must confront a double indignity. They are blamed for a system under which they have suffered as much as anyone else. Yet they realize that their communism was to some extent self-imposed rather than imported by an invading army. The inner trauma is considerable for a people that was indoctrinated for half a century into Stalin's highly Russocentric version of communism, a version that portrayed Russians as being the center of human progress and the vanguard of history. The televised tumult among the minority nationalities simply heightens the tension among Russians, who no longer know who they really are or what they are connected to either historically or geographically.

Defining a post-totalitarian identity for the Russian people has been the single most crucial element in reconstituting political legitimacy within the Soviet domain. Each of the two contesting forces in the Soviet Union came up with an answer; and the result was a struggle for the Russian soul between the Leninists and the democratic movement.

The Leninists, unable to base their legitimacy on a failed communist ideology, fell back on a kind of Russian nationalism that glorifies the state and army as the heart of the Russian experience. This degraded na-

tionalism plays one minority nationality off against another and everyone off against Jews in accordance with well-established techniques of imperial crisis management. It also defends alleged rural values against Western corruption and rehabilitates much of the tsarist past, forgiving a kind of nationalism that Russians call "governmentalism" (*gosudar'stvennost'*).

An example of the more sophisticated forms of *nomenklatura*-sponsored nationalism could be found in the output of a new think tank, the Experimental Creative Center, which flourished in the months leading up to the aborted coup. Headed by a former actor and richly subsidized with a budget of 100 million rubles and a host of transfer appointments from government agencies including the KGB, this center extolled the virtues of unitary, authoritarian societies based on agrarian values—Japan, China, Korea, and Cuba—and called for a program of "national salvation" from the alleged chaos of democratic pluralism.

The rival reformist camp had a strikingly different vision of Russian identity, well depicted in the rich and varied independent press. This openly democratic press represented new independent organizations initially activated by the early Gorbachev reforms. Disillusioned by *perestroika*, the leaders of these groups turned next to Yeltsin and then even beyond him to a younger generation of local activists who seek a total break with communism. This broad movement attaches renewed historical importance to autonomous regional traditions and to local organizations of the kind that permitted Russia to survive in two world wars despite bad leadership in both. Russians are beginning to celebrate the forgotten variety and improvisational skills in their past history, just as they are relying increasingly on the so-called second economy to provide basic goods and services needed to survive the breakdown of the state economy.

A new, better-educated Russian generation, assisted by electronic communication, energized by the genuine opening of glasnost, is forging a shared determination to build from below political and economic structures that are more participatory and accountable as part of the definition and entitlement of modern civilized life. They have created not so much parties (the very word has been delegitimized) as fronts, platforms, and unions.

At the same time many of these same people are also beginning to recover a Russian tradition that is defined more in terms of spiritual and cultural accomplishment than in those of military and strategic power. This return to a different cultural identity is evident in the extraordinary popularity of the environmental and historic restoration movements (perhaps the two most popular causes in the new civil society) and in a striking revival of religion, particularly among the educated younger generation in the Russian and Slavic parts of the Soviet Union.

The recovery of religion among the Russians as they move from Act III to Act IV of our global drama (from problems of freedom to those of identity) is a complex phenomenon. It emerged in reaction to moral and aesthetic impoverishment and the sheer boredom of the "stagnation" era under Brezhnev. It began as a classical revolt of sons against fathers—in this case, conformist atheist fathers—and has created, particularly in the generation under Gorbachev, an attitude that has led to more than curiosity if often less than conversion.

Religion spread through a kind of outmigration from the center to the periphery; it evolved spiritually from the formalistic, often politically subservient Orthodox Church to the still growing Baptist Church and on to the even faster growing Pentecostals.

But there was also an attempt by the political establishment to exploit the religious reawakening; the *nomenklatura*, for instance, seemed to use the millennial celebrations of Russian Christianity in 1988 as a relegitimizing device. Gorbachev (whose mother is a devout Orthodox believer) and his wife have both cultivated links with the greatest and most deeply Christian scholar of Old Russian culture, Dmitry Likhachev, a survivor of the original *gulag* at Solovki. Yeltsin chose an avowed Christian general as his running mate in the recent presidential campaign in the Russian republic and announced that his grandchildren had been baptized. Publications of the proliferating religio-philosophical circles and orga-

nizations are second in quantity only to democratic political publications in the almost unbelievable flood of new independent journals and bulletins.

The heart of the religious revival is, however, the recovery of the Orthodox tradition within the dominant Russian nationality. The Orthodoxy of the new generation draws inspiration from the so-called new martyrs of the Soviet era, who have yet to be theologically recognized by the still-timid official hierarchy. The most recent martyr was the greatest preacher of the new generation, Father Alexander Men, who was murdered with an axe last autumn just before he was about to become the first theological lecturer at a major state-run pedagogical center in Moscow since the revolution. Though often liturgically conservative, the young church tends also to be far more socially inclusive and intellectually alive, drawing strength from a prophetic emphasis on social justice provided by a strong Jewish element typified by Men and by the legendary long-term political prisoner, Mikhail Kazachkov, founder of the remarkable St. Petersburg society for Open Christianity. There is also a strong and cerebral philo-Catholic element, since many of the Russian Orthodox priests come from the western Ukraine.

But the real action—the intellectual revival, the interaction with the democratic movement and with the working masses—is occurring in the deep interior of Russia: the growth in a few years of the urban diocese of Nizhni-Novgorod from two to ten churches (plus a mosque and a synagogue) and of Sverdlovsk from one to five.

The Leninist political machine has continued to try diverting this recovery of religious tradition into reactionary, nationalistic channels—and to try splitting the democratic opposition by playing off against each other the religious and secular, the Slavophile and Westernizing elements within the Russian democratic movement.

The future of the Soviet Union will essentially be determined by which of the two identities—the imperial or the democratic—the predominant Russian population eventually chooses.

My fifth and darkest proposition is that the key diversion in the end game of the Leninist machine against the rising power of the movement may well be not the predictable provocations of reactionary minority enclaves against restive larger minorities (such as inciting Ossetians against Georgians or Baltic Russian minorities against native Baltic rule). The major coming provocation may well arise from the dying ideology of class warfare, a final spasm of the Leninist stratagem which Stalin perfected during his descent into terror: the incitement of workers against intellectuals.

For a time, this demogogic tactic was successfully used by reactionaries who reviled Gorbachev as a talker rather than a doer. Yeltsin has played with it in his stump attacks on privilege. And the rhetoric of the rising working class denounces the soft, postwar generation of better-educated party bureaucrats as the undeserving beneficiaries of their work and the contemptible source of their woes. Either frustration or provocation could produce a paroxysm of class warfare that pits the frustrated masses against the reformist intellectuals. One would almost have to predict that there will be some forms of major social violence in the Soviet Union during the next year.

Yet beyond—or even instead of—such bloodshed, a more happy, peaceful evolution may occur if my last two propositions are correct.

The first of these (sixth overall) is that the Soviet drama is not fundamentally distinct from the earlier one in Eastern Europe—and indeed may be more influenced by it than is generally realized. To oversimplify a bit, I would say that Gorbachev's reactionary turn of this last year partly resulted from fear induced by what happened in Romania and Bulgaria, where deposed communist leaders were either killed or brought to trial. The Leninist political machine feared a much greater retribution in the Soviet Union. Such fear seems to me the only explanation for why Gorbachev did not follow the Chinese pattern of largely decollectivizing agriculture in order to put food on the table and to secure initial popular support during a difficult period of reform.

If the Romanian experience inspired fear in the machine at the top, the Polish experience provides hope for the movement from below. The Polish reformers, by

building a link between workers and intellectuals in the Solidarity movement and by going cold turkey into a market economy, have provided the democratic movement with a model for overthrowing a Leninist machine and creating the conditions for fundamental change. Gorbachev thus now seems to the movement rather like a Soviet Jaruzelski, claiming to retain order and prevent worse violence from happening, but in fact serving as a tragic, transitional figure who merely delays the victory of the democratic movement from below.

If the Romanian example stirred the fear of the machine, and the Polish example inspired hope in the movement, the Hungarian and Czech examples may provide more realistic models. In Hungary, economic change preceded and facilitated eventual political change. The Soviets will almost certainly have to undertake radical economic reform. Some are currently intrigued with the South Korean model—particularly in Kazakhstan, where the chief economic planner is a Korean.

But could there also possibly be a Czech outcome, a sudden transformation from below brought on by a populace long thought to be cynically somnolent but which eventually, unexpectedly rose up to disarm the Leninist machine with an essentially moral force?

Consider how nonviolent, controlled, and yet expressly political were the mass demonstrations in Moscow and the strikes in the provinces during the first half of 1991. Consider how the way had already been prepared for a Soviet Havel who could bring new moral authority from outside the corrupting system by an apostolic succession of anti-political prophets of change. Russia's premier laser and nuclear physicists, Rem Khokhlov and Andrei Sakharov, who first stirred up the stagnant waters, have died. But they were succeeded by Russia's greatest weight lifter, greatest chess player, greatest linguist, and a galaxy of other activists in their early thirties.

Of course, what was needed to create new political leadership was a willingness to compromise—a quality not abundantly manifest in Russian history but seemingly demonstrated in the Gorbachev-Yeltsin rapprochement. If, however, the crisis involves basic legitimacy rather than mere programs and institutions, there probably also has to be a catharsis. The totalitarian fever must break so the patient can stop dying and start sweating, stop lying down and start getting up.

This leads to my seventh and last proposition: that the final *perelom*, the big break that will enable creative people finally to focus their chaotically dispersed talents, may have more the quality of a nonviolent, spiritual movement than of the violent civil war everyone seems to expect.

There is almost no good Russian literature these days; all of its accumulated moral passion and spiritual questing seem poured into the reform movement from below. And it may be that the only definitive break with the unparalleled institutionalization of violence and atheism in the Soviet system will be precisely a movement of nonviolent spirituality.

If there is, as I am suggesting, a shared need in the Soviet Union to relegitimize the social contract rather than just rearrange social relationships, the choice then will seem to be between two different types of catharsis—one compatible with a nationalistic identity, the other with a democratic.

A nationalistic catharsis has already been market tested by organizations such as the Pamyat Society. It promises a cleansing of Russia from foreign impurities, seeks scapegoats, and would lead to purges. An opposite form of catharsis is as compatible with democratization as the scapegoat-purge pattern is with authoritarianism. This benign alternative might be called the repentance-redemption pattern, which looks within and above for a positive identity rather than without and below for a common enemy. Paradoxically, it may be that only in finding a basic spiritual identity *within* can one feel free to adopt wholesale political and economic forms from *without*. Perhaps only with a secure inner identity can one change outer behavior patterns.

A remarkable feature of the East European decompression from totalitarianism has been the absence, for the most part, of retroactive vindictiveness. Havel's analysis that all (even those like himself who resisted and went to prison) were implicated in the totalitarian nightmare has prepared the way for a sense of common blame and shared relief rather than selective scape-

goating as the means of putting the past to rest. In the Soviet Union, where both the guilt and the suffering have been greater and more long-lived, repentance has provided a rediscovered theological dimension for freeing people to consider an altogether different future. *Repentance* is the title and theme of the most important single artistic work of the Gorbachev era: Tengiz Abuladze's great movie. It is also the title of several new independent journals, the theme of the most innovative new museum of Soviet history (the Museum of the Young Communist League in Sverdlovsk), and a concept central to the unofficial part of the celebrations of the millennium of Russian Christianity in 1988.

In the attempt to come fully to grips with the *gulag* experience, Russians have been thrown back on biblical analogies and on the reassertion of the Judeo-Christian theme of the redemptive value of suffering. Out of the shared suffering that resulted from the atomization of society and degradation of morality under totalitarianism has grown a sense of common opportunity in the reassertion of small human communities gathered around shared spiritual ideals.

Even after the failed coup, the possibility remains that prolonged chaos or social violence could produce a reactionary takeover. Thus the break in the Soviet Union could still be violent: broken bones or even the paroxysm before death, rather than a fever break leading back to life. So we must keep up our guard even as we raise our sights. But my sights suggest a Russian people in movement both forward to democracy and back to religion. This dual movement unites Russia with other peoples; it is what has already happened in Poland. Is it not, in essence, what the United States produced in a very different way many years ago, when democracy arose out of our own religious base, which underpinned it ethically and preceded it historically? The new interest among Russians in both American liberal democracy and their own conservative spiritual heritage could prove to be two sides of the same coin rather than conflicting sides of an irreconcilable Slavophile-Westernizer polarity as we have usually been inclined to think.

This movement towards democracy is probably the best long-term guarantee of peace in the potentially dangerous multipolar world that lies ahead in our global drama. For out of the large and generally depressing literature on how wars actually start in the modern world, there is one encouraging fact: democracies in history do not fight one another.

If we can better understand and build more human links with the extraordinary process of ferment that is going on in the Soviet Union (its cultural as well as its economic and political strivings), we may be able to help influence a new agenda reflecting the wisdom of Reinhold Niebuhr's words: Man's capacity for good makes democracy possible; his capacity for evil makes it indispensable.