A COUNTRY FALLING APART

The collapse of the Russian state

Tuesday 27 October 2009, by LEWIN Moshe (Date first published: November 1998).

The figures for September show that 44.4 million Russians are living below the poverty line. Twice as many as this time last year. Meanwhile the wheat harvest, at 50 to 60 million tonnes, has barely reached second world war levels. It will cover only a small amount of the country's requirements. The trial of Aleksandr Nikitin, the retired submarine commander accused of treason for exposing the danger of nuclear pollution in the Barents Sea, reveals the scale of the environmental disaster. In short, President Yeltsin's state of health symbolises the country's overall dilapidation, to which his regime has largely contributed. The new government led by Yevgeny Primakov aims to get the economy, devastated by "shock therapy", back on its feet. But its main task will be to restore the authority of the state, whose role has been crucial in the century-long process of Russia's modernisation.

The Russians have a word for it - "bespredel". That's how Russian intellectuals describe the situation in their country. The term defies precise translation. It denotes, at one and the same time, hopelessness, rampant cynicism and antisocial behaviour at all levels. It also implies an absence of limits, a situation in which "anything goes".

The essential meaning, one Russian writer suggests, is "I'm all right, Jack." The constant use of this word points to the deep distress felt throughout Russia and the enormous effort and suffering needed to surmount it. Its numerous connotations also remind us that crises have multiple causes and that their theoretical analysis, for the historian, is a much more difficult matter than understanding and describing periods of progress. Yet it is generally agreed that the present situation needs to be seen in historical perspective. Analysing it as a "classic" crisis of Russian history makes the situation, if not less desperate, at least more intelligible.

It is an apparent paradox, though in fact entirely logical, that the preponderant role of the Russian state has made the country particularly vulnerable. This has proved to be the case throughout its history, but particularly in the twentieth century, with the crises of 1903-1907, 1916-1921 and the 1990's. The last of these, which is the culmination of a long period of much less spectacular though fatal decline, exhibits some parallels with the other two, though of course in a different form.

The key to understanding these various types of crisis is the interaction of historically conflicting socio-political strata responding in different ways to strong pressure from dynamic developments inside or outside the country that upset an already shaky internal equilibrium. Rapid economic development, galloping industrialisation, war and the inevitable arms race, a technological revolution that puts severe strain on archaic or ageing social and political structures resistant to change, are not unique to Russia. They are the universal ingredients of the history of the twentieth century. But the course they have taken has differed from country to country according to historical circumstances.

The 1903-1907 crisis in Russia was preceded by a long period of decline similar to the 1970s. As imbalances and tensions accumulated, they were aggravated by a determined onslaught on earlier reforms. Tsar Alexander III had disapproved of his father's private behaviour and liberal inclinations. He reacted to the latter's "frivolous" conduct of affairs by imposing a heavy-handed authoritarianism just when the opposite was needed. This inevitably compounded the difficulties of a regime confronted, particularly during the 1890s, with the brutal incursions of rising capitalism, a dynamic movement that put severe strain on rural society and the autocratic state, the two virtually immobile pillars of Tsarist Russia.

The rural complex had three main components: the peasantry, the landed nobility and the monarchy (which owned an enormous amount of land). This time-honoured power structure was now obsolete and unresponsive to the needs of the mainly urban strata of entrepreneurs, liberal professions and industrial workers which, while not large in numbers, were growing rapidly. All its components were, to differing degrees, in the throes of change that was breaking up the old order. Some were in the process of adjusting to the modern world. Others were stagnating or on the verge of collapse. The structure as a whole was a patchwork of emerging or declining social and political players moving in different or opposite directions.

At the outbreak of war with Japan in 1904, the Tsarist state was already suffering from all the ills that would eventually cripple it entirely in the run-up to the first world war and during the war itself. Incapable of conducting large-scale hostilities, it appointed incompetent generals and civil administrators. The inner circle of the Tsarist court, riddled with intrigue and inherently incapable of choosing or identifying capable leaders, was the main culprit. Just as debilitating was the monarchy's inability, or refusal, to involve members of the new educated social classes or the political parties that were emerging in the wake of Russia's development.

The history of the Duma, from its creation to its "emasculation", shows that the Tsarist state was both unwilling and unable to discard the monarchist ideology of the seventeenth century. It refused to adopt even the most urgent reforms. And the scope of the reforms actually required was well beyond the powers of a sovereign (and a court) who insisted on governing the empire as if it were a vast patrimonial estate, a *votchina* of former times.

The monarchy collapsed without a whimper, and there was nothing ready to take its place. This needs to be stressed. For as we shall see, the pattern was to be repeated. In early 1917 all the political forces in turn tried their hand at the task which the monarchy had proved incapable of performing. The machinery of state stood for a while but soon fell into ruin.

The course of events was similar to the "troubles" of the seventeenth century, when the breakdown of the state apparatus, coupled with social upheaval, was followed by internal conflict and fragmentation, the emergence of national separatist movements and, finally, a terrible civil war. Who was to rebuild the state, and what kind of state would it be? Those were the issues in the bitter clashes of that distant time, and those were the issues in 1917. The forces arraigned were different, but the task was the same.

From then on, the picture becomes more complicated. Although the civil war, the New Economic Policy (NEP) [1] and the Stalinist period cannot be seen as three distinct types of state, they nevertheless marked three separate stages in state construction. One of them, the NEP, will go down in history as a period of *détente*. The other two, dominated by ideological mobilisation, will always be seen as tragic and coercive.

The post-Stalinist period saw a considerable relaxation of coercion and the elimination of arbitrary mass terror as an instrument of state control. As a result, fear ceased to be a factor in most people's

everyday life. This can appropriately be described as “demobilisation”, not only because it was like the experience of returning from war to civilian life, but also because the functioning of the regime itself underwent considerable demilitarisation.

The weakening of dictatorship and terror, and the demilitarisation of the regime, themselves reflected numerous social and cultural changes, encouraged or simply accepted by the system, that were specific to educated urban societies. Thus the towns began to overtake the countryside as the dominant factor in society sometime in the second half of the 1960s, and the country as a whole achieved considerable progress in various areas.

But despite this renewed vigour, and despite the spectacular demonstrations of progress of which the regime was so fond and which were now accompanied by many real improvements, worrying trends were detectable. What is more, they seemed to be deeply entrenched. From the early 1970s onward, bottlenecks were forming in all parts of the system. They marked the start of a new slowdown, known in Russian as “zastoy”, or stagnation [2], which led inevitably to a further period of decline. As the 1970s progressed, the regime lost all its vigour. It no longer had the energy or will to assess the situation, let alone work out measures to remedy it.

Here again, the crisis had multiple causes. But the problem, in a nutshell, was this: a political system created at a specific stage in history, and apparently in the process of moving on smoothly to the next stage, suddenly found itself stuck in midstream. It was caught between two opposing forces, one pulling forward and the other backward. All progress was blocked by a huge bureaucratic apparatus - the greatest the world had ever seen - that had grown up in the process of industrialisation, but in the heart of an economy and a society that were still mainly rural.

The Stalinist dictatorship, and the bureaucratic absolutism which succeeded it, had given rise to unprecedented industrialisation and urbanisation. While Stalinism had to contend with a country that was still essential rural, the bureaucratic regime rapidly achieved urbanisation. But although Russia became a different kind of society, it still bore the stamp of the agrarian period and its state system retained many features of the Stalinist model.

When the formative Soviet state got stuck in midstream, it was crossing a historical bridge from a world with ancient rural roots to an urban industrial, not to say post-industrial, society. Fashioned and acted upon by both of them simultaneously, it reacted to the complexity and inherent tensions of each.

This period lasted no more than thirty-five years, from 1935 to around 1970. The main transformation took place very quickly. Whole communities, amounting to millions of people, migrated willingly or under coercion from villages or small towns to large cities. The bureaucratic apparatus and society as a whole found themselves trapped together on the same stepping stone of history. Society was blocked by the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy was confronted with a society that had effectively mutated.

Just when socio-cultural change and the imperatives of the technological and scientific revolution required the state to adapt to the country’s internal complexity and to the new international environment, the huge bureaucratic apparatus got hooked on power and the considerable benefits it conferred. It exhibited all the symptoms of entrenchment, unable to abandon the comfort of a ship that was already sinking under its own weight.

When the Brezhnev clique scuppered Aleksei Kosygin’s promising reforms in the second half of the 1960s, the whole apparatus of government came to a standstill. A strange logic seemed to be at work. The greater the complexity and mobility of Soviet society, and the faster the pace of change on

the international scene, the more the Soviet regime became stultified and incapable of any movement.

Although the reins of power were supposedly in the hands of a political party, the system itself was becoming increasingly depoliticised. In particular, it had become totally incapable of promoting competent leaders or developing strategies for change. Behind the imposing façade and endless speeches, the regime was impotent. It had seized up and rusted over. There is a price to be paid for failure to grasp an historic opportunity. The Soviet system fell with surprising ease. It didn't even have to be pushed.

The sudden disintegration of the party and one-party state was not followed by the expected emancipation. Instead, a long and devastating decline set in and the state has ceased to play any effective role. Just as at the other critical moments of history already referred to, the very foundations of national existence seem to have collapsed. Once again, the most urgent task on Russia's agenda is to revive or recreate the state itself.

After the collapse of the Soviet system, the first step towards recovery should have been to lay down the basis for a new model. Only then should the pace of transition have been stepped up. Solid support for the private, cooperative and mixed sectors would have encouraged small state-owned factories and export-oriented enterprises of all sizes to seek private partners. That would have created private and mixed systems for the procurement of capital goods to replace the rigid and inadequate state distribution bodies.

Large state enterprises would have had no choice but to engage with the market and themselves look for partners, both at home and abroad. Failing this, those that still had an essential role to play and were strong enough to carry on could have remained entirely in the hands of the state. These measures would also have facilitated the emergence of political organisations and new institutions and stimulated the development of a strong, properly adapted legal framework.

Instead of which, a war to the finish was declared against the state-owned economy. In record time, under cover of a counter-ideology ignorant of the realities of the previous system, the country's riches were sold off at knock-down prices in pursuit of a miracle cure known as the "free market". But the so-called reformers forgot or underestimated one simple fact: Western techniques of market regulation cannot work until a functioning market economy has come into existence.

In the absence of a legal framework and independent judicial apparatus, gangrene spread quickly throughout a state economy in the throes of a privatisation process largely dominated by organised crime. Strongly encouraged by Western advisers and extolled by the West's most influential governments and economic institutions, the policy of "privatisation" amounted to highway robbery of unprecedented proportions. Specialists are still struggling to come to terms with the figures involved.

It is symptomatic that as the economy declined, capital flows in and out of Moscow were vastly greater than those of other financial centres. An operation of such proportions would have been impossible without collusion between large-scale currency smugglers and key sectors of the state apparatus, based on "gentlemen's agreements" that were highly lucrative for both sides. This is proved beyond doubt by the fact that the institutions responsible for this unprecedented plunder were infiltrated by a mafia-like criminal network making systematic use of blackmail and hired killers.

The so-called economic boom largely consisted in the proliferation of banks, which mainly served to transfer enormous sums of money abroad. Naive or biased observers took these developments as a

sign of good health, despite the fact that the country's economy and industrial base were growing weaker by the day and the standard of living was falling sharply. The simultaneous existence of prosperous banks and an economy drifting out of control was a sure sign of impending bankruptcy, but well-meaning Western advisers continued to press the government of the "reformers" to engage in further reforms.

The incredible short-sightedness of this approach is dumbfounding. It was readily interpreted by large numbers of Russians as proof that the aim of Western policy was to turn Russia into a dumping ground. Sadly, that is exactly how things are turning out.

In the absence of properly structured parties and influential leaders with alternative programmes, the Yeltsin regime has established itself as the new centre of the state and pursues its chosen course unimpeded by political or judicial bodies that carry real weight. The privatisation of state assets rapidly gave rise to vast fortunes whose owners now wield considerable power. This in turn led to virtual privatisation of the government itself, with the rich and powerful now in a position to purchase their own ministers and impose a president of their choosing.

At the present time, although the institutions in place more or less resemble the government of a state, they are in fact presiding over a growing political and economic vacuum. Russia is losing its substance. A nation in which the state has historically played a powerful, sometimes all-powerful, role now finds itself practically without any state structure at all. Laws no longer exist or are openly flouted. The judicial system is impotent. The military forces resemble a beggars' army. The police act like gangsters. Some regions have virtually seceded. The governors of the larger regions are bribed by the president and negotiate special privileges for themselves in exchange for their political support. Wages are no longer paid. Nor are taxes, either because of fraud or for lack of money. Ordinary people are increasingly dependent on barter and the food they can grow in their gardens.

Such is the result of the "reforms" that have stripped Russia of its state and its economy. The social consequences are terrible. A large part of the population lives below the poverty line. Old-age pensioners are dying of starvation. Life expectancy, especially for men, is falling dangerously. The educated middle classes are struggling to survive.

The crisis is systemic. It embraces everything from the government and its policy to the moral and cultural substance of society. No adequate remedy can be found or begin to be applied until Russia possesses a government able to act. But that is just a necessary precondition. Much more is needed. No economy can develop or function without a viable state, meaning not only the state apparatus as such but the whole political system. That is the crux of the matter.

A political system capable of practising democracy needs a whole range of social, cultural and political institutions, of which an effective opposition, comprising powerful trade unions, political parties, churches, etc., is an essential element. Only the presence of such institutions can provide the binding force of legitimacy, that is a degree of acceptance and support that renders the system legitimate irrespective of the number of its critics.

Another vital ingredient, closely connected with legitimacy, is political culture - meaning the ability of ordinary citizens to understand the functioning and problems of the administration, to choose and support political leaders, and to monitor their behaviour. This assumes that citizens have a degree of confidence in the system, that voters and their elected representatives basically agree on a code of ethics, and that governors and governed share a set of principles and ideals. Such are the necessary components of any political system. Some of them may have been over-simplified, but all of them are theoretically indispensable. To summarise them in this way gives some measure of the crisis from which Russia is suffering and the extent of its deficiencies.

After protracted negotiations, an agreement has been reached between the Duma and President Yeltsin to appoint the former minister of foreign affairs, Yevgeny Primakov, as prime minister. Mr Primakov is a member of a category of apparatchiks known as “gosudarstvenniki”. Many of these professional state functionaries occupied senior positions in the Soviet era but had no real control over the course of events. They were known for their efficiency and are free from any suspicion of corruption.

The formation in Moscow of a government that is - we have reason hope - honest and at least minimally efficient is a crucial step forward. But as we have seen, the state apparatus is only one part of a much larger political system that no Russian government, especially at the present time, can summon into being from on high. The health of the Russian state is of major concern, but another great historical handicap must also be borne in mind. Whenever state power vacillates in Russia, when it needs to be restored in one form or other, the old demons reappear, hovering over the political arena like vultures. Statist fundamentalists clamour for a return to a state-controlled society, an authoritarian system with a built-in tendency to dictatureship that leads inevitably to all-pervasive, debilitating bureaucratisation. It is, they claim, the only model of society which the Russian people has ever been willing to accept or able to understand.

An apathetic society in which the media are once again controlled by the government and financial interests, the schools are falling into ruin and young people are totally uninterested in politics, is a fertile breeding ground for those whose only programme is a “strong hand” to restore order in Mother Russia. The sort of order that would spell the final collapse of the country and plunge it into the “fourth world”.

As the country falls to pieces around him, Mr Yeltsin has been casting about for a great idea to rally the nation. There were calls to restore the monarchy, but that idea was soon dropped. In any case, it would have been more like exhumation than restoration. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, overwhelmed by the extent of the crisis and the suffering on all sides, looks to the Orthodox faith to turn the Russians into patriots. But at the same time he describes the Orthodox Church as irreparably corrupted by a chronic inability to act.

Communism, too, no longer has a church worthy of the name. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) is its only serious political force, but it takes good care not to advocate a communist programme. The party even considered changing its name, but - with opinion polls showing widespread nostalgia for the Brezhnev era - the change would have cost it too many votes. The CPRF is to the left of Yeltsin, but it is not a left-wing party. It is essentially a nationalist-statist organisation that seeks to rehabilitate many bitterly criticised aspects of the Soviet past but does not advocate a return to a non-market economy, a fully state-run society or even a one-party system. It talks vaguely of “restoring” the Soviet Union, but that is clearly not its first priority.

There is no lack of great ideas bandied about in Russia, but a unifying national concept cannot be dreamed up by specialists in propaganda or public relations. National identity, patriotism, national characteristics and culture are organic products of historical development, emerging from the interplay of conflicting trends inside and outside the country. The new national anthem was selected by a committee set up by the president, following a nation-wide competition. The fact that the winning entry has no words is spectacular proof that the emperor has no clothes and that his thieves’ kitchen of a regime is incapable of rallying and leading the country.

But perhaps we are being too pessimistic. Are there no grass-roots forces - in local communities or provincial administrations, enterprises, schools, or among the intelligentsia - that might eventually form the basis of a new system? At this stage, the most urgent need is for action by capable administrators. Such people already exist, and there are potentially more of them. But they will not

come forward unless the pump is primed by incentives, a measure of hope, clear rational programmes for the immediate future and new leadership.

It would be foolhardy to attempt to predict how a new upsurge might originate. But it should not be ruled out. A credible improvement in the performance of the central government, a promising provincial experiment that could serve as a model, a stiffening of the sinews by reliable, honest politicians that would encourage people to get involved in the political process, might be enough to start the ball rolling. None of this is impossible. A crisis of such proportions leads inevitably to demoralisation, but it can also stimulate a positive reaction.

This is amply demonstrated by the groundswell of social and political activism during *perestroika*. The enthusiasm and willingness to learn which the initial electoral experiments of the period aroused in large sectors of society dispose of the notion that the Russian people is inherently incapable of making democracy work. But these positive developments were buried under the rubble of the forced transition to the "market". For the time being, there is widespread apathy and little cause for optimism. The fact that politics has no attraction for young people is in itself a pretty alarming symptom. Hostility to democracy, which put paid to the emerging political activism, is primarily a reaction to a crisis brought about by policies that claim to epitomise it. But widespread participation in politics is absolutely necessary if Russia is finally to lay its old demons to rest.

That they have reared their heads is eloquent proof of the burden of history. The main problem is the disparity between the tasks to be done and the means deployed to accomplish them. An obvious example is the contrast between the size of the national territory and the weakness of administrative control. With centrifugal forces threatening to pull the country apart, the response was to step up the centralisation of state power. Hypertrophy at the centre inevitably resulted in a pernicious increase in the role of government.

When the state gets out of control it fails to perform its vital role as a regulator. Instead, it becomes a burden or a parasite. Once the trend to an overblown bureaucracy sets in, all sorts of barriers to development arise, and underdevelopment becomes a real prospect. The whole situation reinforces a propensity, inherent in action by the national government and the state, to foster large-scale development measurable by quantity at the expense of the small-scale, qualitative improvements that bear the seeds of innovation.

To an historian, it appears as if we are watching the latest remake of an old Russian classic. The forms are new each time, of course. But the country is still struggling under the same burden. Tsarism collapsed from exhaustion. The same thing happened to the provisional government and to the party of Lenin, too weak to resist attack from within by the exponents of all-pervasive state control. Finally, although in very different circumstances, the post-stalinist regime succumbed to the same fate. It had spectacular successes, of course - in the space sector, the sciences, and in providing an educational system accessible to all. But in the end it was unable to shed its traditional burden.

Once again an energetic Russian state intent on modernising the country has turned into a parasitic excrescence. The overblown, dilapidated centre has finally admitted defeat and collapsed under its own weight, like the Tsarist regime of old. Despite many predictions to the contrary, it was not the periphery that finished off the centre, but the collapse of the centre that signalled to the nomenklatura in the national republics that they could now proclaim their independence.

After so much effort and colossal expenditure, Russia seems once again to have missed the boat. As the collapse continues, all eyes are on the new government. Will it be able to reverse the trend?

P.S.

* From Le Monde diplomatique, English Edition, November 1998: http://mondediplo.com/1998/11/02lewin

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Footnotes

[1] In 1921, at the end of the civil war, Lenin abandoned “war communism” and advocated a partial return to a market economy. The aim of the “new economic policy”, as it was called, was to rebuild Russia’s industrial infrastructure and improve the standard of living of the peasants, industrial workers and middle classes. It relied massively on the expertise of administrators and technicians trained under the ancien régime. By 1927 the Soviet Union had achieved the level of production of pre-war Russia.

[2] It was in the Gorbachev era that the Brezhnev period came to be referred to as a “period of stagnation”.