

Paul Sheeran

Cultural Politics in International Relations
(Aldershot : Askgate, 2001, 224pp.)

The content of this book – the impact of ideas on the disintegration of the Soviet Union – is more specific than the title would indicate. Sheeran's basic concern is that the realist school of international relations and students of the Soviet system did not see the signs of things to come. *"This failure of the discipline of international relations to predict the disintegration of the former Soviet Union exposes its epistemological, ontological and methodological limitations and flaws."* The followers of E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau underestimated the currents of the Soviet counter-culture which began in the early 1960s and which 30 some years later had become the common framework of Soviet critics of the socio-economic failures of the system. Western international relations scholars had listened with only a distracted ear to Bob Dylan's singing that "The times they are a changing".

It is true that some Western social critics did spot the trends. H. Marcuse had coined the image "miniskirts against the apparatchiks, rock'n'roll against Soviet realism". However, Marcuse was never taken seriously as a writer on international relations.

Even today, there are those who argue that the Soviet Union collapsed for straightforward economic, political and strategic reasons that had little to do with intellectual dissent and culture. Sheeran thesis is that *"The institutional collapse of communism was not achieved through a set of calculated decisions taken at the highest level. The pressure that had accumulated in response to putrefying banality of the unceasing decrees, proclamations, detailed regulations, notifications, plastered in the consciousness of the ordinary people as well as on the walls of every town and village, which could not be fulfilled. The evidence of failure was everywhere. The weight of negativity shattered the illusion and the hold exercised by the authorities. In a brief tumultuous moment, Soviet history was swept aside, its institutions vanished into thin air."*

This brief, tumultuous moment was prepared by a popular counter-culture, for in the absence of a recognized political opposition, the counter-culture was fundamental in maintaining and developing an alternative view. *"The reactivation of the counter-culture in the 1960s, a force relatively impervious to systematic social control, recorded and communicated the inconsistencies, the flows and the contrariety, embedded in the Soviet system through various methods of criticism: art, music and literature being the popular outlets."*

In the light of a Soviet regime ruled by coercion, it should not be unexpected that social forces, however atomized and heterogeneous, should seek to expose and ridicule it. *"The intelligentsia had become familiar with the rhetoric of the authorities and ridiculed it using a variety of forms, many of which were copied and distributed through illegal methods to a population keenly interested in material that circulated through unofficial channels."*

Folk-style singers such as Bolat Okudzjava and Vladimir Vysotsky with a mixture of pathos and humor pointed out the failings of the society and the hollow nature of many government statements. As Okudzjava said, speaking of himself: *"Soviet songs were*

supposed to be uplifting, and along came this guy with a strange name and a strange moustache, playing the guitar badly and singing sad songs, anti-war songs, songs that didn't inspire people to greater things – ah, they (the authorities) didn't like that.”

In fact, it was the Soviet security authorities who did take seriously dissent in the arts. They knew, as Sheeran writes, that “*subtle actions of dissent, trivial in isolation, powerful in unanimity, appear to accumulate exponentially.*” Even during the later period of Perestroika, Gorbachev in his address to the 27th Congress of the Party said “*A society's moral health and the intellectual climate in which people live are in no small measure determined by the state of literature and art.*”

During the Brezhnev era and later, it was not possible to return to the Stalinist practice of imprisonment for all artists and intellectuals suspected of dissent. The Soviet Union had developed too many contacts with the West, and the fate of intellectuals such as Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn became world concerns. Thus the “moral health” of the society changed.

Sheeran may overstate his case on the role of cultural politics in international relations, but he has presented a clear picture of the role of ideas in the late Soviet system. By doing so, he has helped others in international relations analysis to be aware of the subtle trends in popular culture.

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