

BOOK REVIEWS

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Carole Sigman. *Clubs politiques et perestroïka en Russie : subversion sans dissidence*. Paris : Karthala, 2009. 476 pp. ISBN 978-2-8111-0240-1.

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François Furet once remarked that never before had a big country with an epochal role undergone a disintegration—and especially an internal disintegration—as rapid and thorough as the collapse of the Soviet Union (Furet 1990). In her case study Carole Sigman offers us a glimpse into a key aspect—the decay of legitimacy among intellectuals—of this process which remains astonishing in its speed and scope.

By looking at a sample of about thirty non-official or “informal” (*neformal’nye*) political clubs in Moscow between 1986 and 1991, she is able to provide a very concrete idea of the nature of the erosion. The groups were seemingly marginal (all the clubs combined are said to have gathered between 3,500 and 5,000 people for “informal” political activities in 1988). But from the perspective of the intellectual-political bankruptcy of the regime they are extremely illuminating, thanks to their close and ambivalent relationship with the reformers in the CPSU.

Sigman has identified activists from organized groups like *Perestroika*, *Club of Social Initiatives* (KSI), *Obshchina*, and *Memorial*, and for the later period from Party clubs within the CPSU that was itself fragmenting, new parties and their organizational committees, and the media. Of the leadership of these groups she identified roughly 160 persons, of whom she managed to gather biographical information in 87 cases and to conduct interviews in 65 (!) cases in the mid-1990s. The interviews appear to constitute a very valuable data set, judging by Sigman’s use of them. She has also been able to use the clubs’ archives and, what is highly important for an analysis of relations with the CPSU reformers, local Party archives from a few key *raions* in Moscow.

The biographical trajectories of those who became involved from 1986 to the beginning of 1988 (the first cohort in Sigman’s terminology) and of those who entered from mid-1988 on (the second cohort) differed to some extent, which is a good indicator of the tempo of the erosion process. Many activists in the first group,

ready to take risks in their activity, came from higher-class families with a critical attitude to the official discourse and had a prestigious academic education in economics or other social sciences or humanities. The hard core consisted of people born between 1948 and 1964, and the older ones among them had lived through the Khrushchev Thaw and the subsequent period marked by the 1960s generation of *shestidesiatniki* and dissidents. Many of them worked in universities or reform-oriented research institutes.

The origins of the clubs were in this milieu. It provided relative liberty vis-à-vis the official political line and a vantage point in relation to it, and people there had politically charged scholarly expertise relevant in facing the enormous difficulties ahead. The scholarly institutions became links between the Party and the (future) clubs. In them the informal groups found allies who at the same time controlled the movement, but the controllers could also be converted into protectors. Ambiguity was essential to the relationship.

The alliance with the reformers in the CPSU was a central element of the identity of the first cohort, but so was a double game or collusion with those reformers. The early joiners were at pains not to compromise themselves in the eyes of other groups hostile to the regime, such as dissidents. Politically the clubs mainly carried different socialist labels. An example of the blurred line between the scholarly and the political discourse were disagreements with the official line about the past, notably the Stalinist period: *Memorial* became an important emblem of the movement. Through their inroads in the Party the clubs undermined it from inside, without directly attacking it.

At the same time the key notions of the period, such as *perestroika* and *glasnost*, increasingly escaped the Party's control. They acquired new meanings and interpretations in the movement, which was assuming greater proportions. There was a widespread feeling that the opposition was turning into a mass movement, but no real idea of what this would look like. How the turn affected the clubs can be seen in the entrance of the second cohort onto the scene from 1988 on. Its social background and age structure were largely similar to those of the first cohort, but its members more often had been trained in technical or other hard sciences, including the military field: their expertise was thus not politically charged. Yet they were, and apparently for this very reason—because of their career orientation—more often members of the CPSU than the intellectuals of the first cohort. Now these people (their total number in Moscow was somewhat over 1,000) directly attacked the system. They joined "Party clubs," which in the summer of 1990 left the CPSU in the form of the Democratic Platform and finally adopted a "liberal" discourse. They were also active in organizing meetings and demonstrations that were continuously going on in 1989 and 1990.

Underlying the new orientation was the introduction of electoral politics—in itself an eloquent indicator of the dismantling of the Party's power. The Soviet legislative elections in March and April 1989 and the Russian legislative elections in March 1990 put the "democrats," as they were now increasingly called, under new constraints. Not only did they organize mass meetings and the like, but the electoral

logic obliged them to work for candidates and deputies who had electoral prospects, even though these did not come from the movement but were public figures with or without a Party background. An example of constraints is the relationship with Boris Yeltsin. He could draw an enormous benefit from the movement and present himself as its leading figure, despite doubts and reticence on the part of many democrats. Sigman describes Yeltsin's role in detail from the "Yeltsin affair" in 1987 to the moments he left the Party in 1990 and was elected President of Russia in 1991.

The trajectory of the movement from 1986 to the beginning of the 1990s includes a paradox, as Sigman points out. The driving force behind radicalization and confrontation consisted of people who were socially well integrated and had remained far from critical thinking or dissidence, whereas those actors who had begun their oppositional activities even before *perestroika* preferred cooperation with power-holders and were moderate in their actions.

The apparent paradox seems to reveal something characteristic about the Soviet downfall. It has one parallel, but only one, with the preconditions of major revolutions as they were once laid out by Barrington Moore (1972). The first precondition is, he says, decay of legitimacy: the whole intellectual and emotional structure that makes the prevailing order seem natural, legitimate, and inevitable begins to crumble in the face of embarrassing questions. Then sharp conflicts of interest develop within the dominant classes, and finally they culminate in the loss of their unified control over the army and police, and in the search for popular support for competing contenders. The first precondition certainly materialized, as demonstrated by the intellectuals of the first cohort in Sigman's study (and of course others), but the two latter ones did not. They did not manifest themselves because the system had practically no power of resistance: it crumbled right away.

One could say that this development—first the decay of legitimacy among intellectuals, but then a quasi-absence of resistance on the part of the regime—appears, in miniature, in the difference between the first and second cohorts. Intellectuals who were ready to take on risks were followed by people who were well integrated into the system, immediately after these realized that it was falling down. The members of the second cohort engaged themselves only after decisions had been made that made the political transformations irreversible, such as the introduction of electoral competition. But even if they seized the opportunity in a way that seems characteristic of the sudden fall of the Soviet Union, they never became central actors. That role was taken on by dignitaries of the apparatus who took control of the democratic opposition—which is a no less typical manifestation of what the rapidity and thoroughness of system change meant for the disintegration of the USSR.

REFERENCES

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