Intelligence and Secrecy: 
Sovietology Redux

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Intelligence is not just the story of individual spies and defectors, it is the sum total of our knowledge about political, economic, and military trends in the outside world. It comes from a myriad of sources, some secret, others not. The question that has preoccupied me is how such knowledge can be improved, how more can be found out about the pitfalls and intelligence failures?

Why do some observers and analysts arrive fairly consistently at more correct assessments than others? It was clear to me from the outset that “theory” was not able to provide decisive clues. This refers to attempts, quite influential at one time, to make a science out of political analysis and prediction. Although these attempts were more prominent in the academic world, they also left their traces in the intelligence community. Intelligence analysts were (and are) after all, graduates of political science departments who arrive at their place of employment equipped with a certain training and theoretical concepts and tools. Intelligence agencies were certainly open to fresh inspiration; leading academics were invited to give lectures and sometimes to undertake special projects.

Intelligence and Communism’s Collapse

The most important event of the 1980s was undoubtedly the collapse of the Soviet empire. Could it have been foreseen by the experts? If it came as a near total surprise—what were the reasons? The record of the experts will be analyzed for a long time to come, but it offers even now an excellent case study of the success and failure of political assessment. It would be unfair to claim that no one saw the coming of the upheaval. A famous essay published by the young Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik in 1969 was entitled “Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?” and other books to the same effect were published by French littérateurs.

Amalrik originally wanted to take 1980 as the date of the Soviet downfall, this being a round number, but was persuaded by a friend to change it to the Orwellian 1984. His essay was based, not on scholarly research, but only on observation and reflection. “From an academic point of view, it may appear to be only empty chatter,” he said. “But for the Western students of the Soviet Union, at any rate, this discussion should have the same interest that a fish would have for an ichthyologist if it suddenly began to talk.” Amalrik was mistaken in some of his assumptions, notably a military confrontation with China, and the fatal event occurred seven years later than the date he indicated. But he did get the main issue right: “If, however, one views the present ‘liberalization’ as the growing decrepitude of the regime rather than its regeneration, then the logical result will be its death, which will be followed by anarchy.” Amalrik’s essay was welcomed in the West as a piece of brilliant writing, as another link in the chain of Russian apocalyptic literature.
Virtually no one took it at the time as a piece of political prediction though its “observations and reflections” proved subsequently astonishingly accurate.

Nor was much attention paid to the extremely negative reports by Russian emigrés on the economic situation. As Evsen Domar, a distinguished American expert, put it: “All countries have usually been immersed in their own seas of troubles and yet managed to muddle through. Will the Soviet Union be an exception?” Negative trends in Soviet politics, society, and economy were noted of course. References to the “coming spring” in Moscow disappeared, the term “decline” appeared with mounting frequency. One astute observer, John Bushnell, described the “new Soviet man” as having turned pessimist. The author of this essay had an unique vantage point of observation during four years in Moscow as exchange student and translator. The economist Marshall Goldman, writing in 1982, called his book *The USSR in Crisis: The Failure of an Economic System*. But there were many others, diplomats, journalists, and above all academic experts returning from prolonged stays in the Soviet Union who did not subscribe to such conclusions.

What had caused the spread of pessimism? Was it limited to the Soviet middle class, or was it shared by working class and peasantry? To what extent was the leadership aware of the trend? Was the cause mainly economic—say the 1972 crop failure, acute consumer goods shortages, or general disappointment with economic performance and standard of living? Or was it a mixture of economic and political causes, the feeling of political drift and stagnation, the realization that the aged leadership had neither new ideas nor fresh initiatives to offer? The war in Afghanistan was not going well, there was a lack of progress in the third world. Those who detected the new wave of pessimism also noted that the discontent was, for the time being, not political in nature, and that, in any case, public opinion was not the most important factor in Soviet politics. But the popular mood of discontent was certainly one factor in the general equation and the longer it lasted, the more important it was likely to become. Likewise, it was only a question of time before unpolitical discontent would turn political.

The consensus among most Western experts on the Soviet economy was that Soviet growth up to the late 1960s had been impressive (more than 5 percent annually) and that up to the mid-1970s, GNP had increased faster in the Soviet Union than in the United States—reaching about 55 to 60 percent of the U.S. level in 1975. After that date, returns on inputs to agriculture diminished, rates of investment declined, so did productivity. But as the experts seemed to agree in *The Soviet Economy in the Year 2000* (edited by Abram Bergson):

[S]lower growth had characterized all economics recently and the USSR had no monopoly on serious economic problems. Current low percentage growth rates moreover, are generating absolute increments that match earlier increments and that yield impressive additions to national power. At a time when many countries, West and East, are troubled by inflation, unemployment, high energy costs, trade imbalances or government deficits, the economic problems of the USSR (however unique their underlying causes) cannot seem so unfamiliar or so incurable.

This was written in 1981. In 1987 the consensus had become more somber; Soviet performance, it was now said, had been poor since 1975 and was getting worse. The lag in technology was threatening its superpower status. Industrial output was frequently of low quality. But the estimates were still based on the assumption that Soviet GNP was about half that of the United States, and the defense burden about 15 percent of the GNP. And much emphasis was still placed on the strength of the Soviet economy.

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According to a study published as late as 1988 by the well known economist Ed Hewett, who specializes in the Soviet economy, Soviet citizens enjoyed “massive economic security.” Writes he in *Reforming the Soviet Economy*: “An egalitarian wage system, combined with subsidized prices for most necessities, fills out the USSR’s institutionalized cushion of economic security which is unmatched in capitalist countries.”

Seen from this perspective, there was no good reason to expect major political discontent among people who were enjoying such unprecedented benefits. It would be more than foolish to revolt against a system that had brought them “such a high degree of personal economic security.” A more balanced picture was needed: “To believe that the Soviet economy is incapable of an adequate response to President Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense initiative is self-delusion.”