The Empire Struck Back

Constantin Pleshakov, a Soviet scholar, argues that we are seeing the death throes of one of the world's most unsuccessful empires.

The Soviet Union today is in a time of trouble. A huge and powerful country, stable in its stagnation for many years (perhaps since 1930 when it became clear that the policy of collectivisation would not result in a successful peasant uprising) is now weak and politically shaky despite its nuclear warheads, missiles and submarines, factories and plants, the army and the KGB. The old Soviet Union is now in its mortal agony and it will die. Will many people weep? Not in the Soviet Union itself—in the country which used to be the prison of peoples and the jail of souls. But what frightens people is the transition period from the old Soviet Union to the new country (or countries for that matter) which will be built in its place.

What are the main features of the contemporary crisis in the Soviet Union which make it one of the greatest social earthquakes in human history? There are two: the agony of socialism and the agony of empire. When these two tremendous processes come together it results in an unimaginable outburst of energy (in most cases destructive) which most comparable countries have been spared.

The dismantling of socialism is now common to all of the countries of the former 'socialist camp' (except Albania, Cuba and North Korea, but even there the outburst of people's anger is inevitable in the foreseeable future). But for countries like Hungary and Poland it is not as painful as for the Soviet Union—a country which used to regard itself as a cradle of world revolution and, as late as in 1979, tried to introduce socialism to one more country—Afghanistan. But even the pains of dismantling socialism would not in themselves have led to the global crisis—however difficult they might have been. The greater problem is that the dismantling of socialism in the USSR coincides with the dismantling of an empire—and this fact is a sufficient reason for having a pessimistic prognosis. The Poles or the Germans can be optimistic, they are adjusting their society to the macrosystem of the outside world. The Soviets simply do not know what their society is; they understand that there is an Armenian society, an Estonian society, a Moscow society, but—as in any other empire—there is no such thing as a 'common society'. The West flattered the Soviet Union by calling its people 'the Soviets'. (Nobody—even Stalin—in the Soviet Union has ever dared to call its people 'the Soviets'; everybody used the unnatural term 'the Soviet people'.) The Soviets have no identity and the peoples of the country are in search of it now. Is it not dangerous to search for national identities in a country stacked high with weapons of mass destruction?

Because of its nature the Soviet Union cannot even have a national crisis—it can only face an international crisis in which different peoples are involved.

The Soviet Union might have survived the decline of marxism, but it will hardly survive the decline of empire. In one sense, the Soviet Union was mainly an empire and...
not a ‘socialist state’. ‘Socialism’ as a concept belongs to the realm of ideology; that of empire is more broad and basic. Empires can be marxist, or Islamic, or Confucian; marxism and Confucianism were borrowed by peculiar types of state to become empires; for empires first of all need some kind of idea to build their core.

It is more or less clear what a ‘socialist’ state is. But it is much more difficult to understand what empire is. One day some scholar living in a peaceful democratic country will go to the roots of empire as such, and general laws of imperial development will become clear. But now I would like to suggest only a few ideas about the nature of an empire. I am in an advantageous position because I belong to those who know an empire from the inside—to the body of citizens of the Soviet Union—perhaps the last empire in the world. Of course, one could argue that China, too, is an empire, but China is much more homogeneous—and if it is an empire, it is a sort of quasiempire which will not see such devastating decline as its Soviet neighbour.

What is an empire? Is it just a country possessing colonies? In that sense was Holland an empire? Definitely not. Even France after Napoleon could not be regarded as an empire. Perhaps what is crucial is the idea of empire. Suddenly, from ‘nowhere’ emerges the idea of consolidating different nations under the banner of one, and imposing the culture of this nation upon the others (it could be marxism, Islam or Roman law). Soviet historian Lev Gumilev explains such fluctuations by outbursts of energy, the origins of which are unknown. He calls that energy passionarity.

Paul Kennedy, in his *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers,* is inclined to the economic explanation of the development of empires. This is, of course, a little simplistic: many empires in their prime were not economically efficient. The British empire was arguably efficient, as was the Chinese; the Russian/Soviet empire was not, and Hitler’s empire was an economic nonsense.

While the laws of empire development are still obscure, it is clear that any empire, in time, is doomed to decline.

The decline might be a civilised one, bringing order and law to the former colonies and peace and prosperity to the core of empire—that was the case of Britain (with the significant exception of Northern Ireland). The case of Rome was completely different and led to endless wars, chaos and anarchy. In a sense, when we speak about these two archetypes, the Soviet Union seems to be closer to Rome than to Britain. The tragedy of the Russian empire was that its colonies were not overseas and were not regarded as colonies; they were added to the core of empire—Central Russia—and nobody knew where the colonies ended and where the core began.

There are a number of different scenarios for the next 30 or 40 years in the USSR’s history. The most pessimistic would see a bout of nuclear civil war followed by a long ‘Dark Ages’; the more optimistic would see a relatively stable divorce of the nationalities, followed by a long period of moderate but independent development under a liberal democratic system. But even in this scenario there would be military clashes in the Caucusus and elsewhere.

The only possibility that I would exclude is a completely peaceful transition to a new Soviet Union. The coincidence of these two factors—the dismantling of socialism and the dismantling of the empire, makes it totally unrealistic. The Dark Age of Russia began in 1917; somewhere in 1988 Armageddon began. Now we are living through it. There is no medicine for imperial cancer. The empire has to die. But will the offspring of the empire be sensible enough to bury it with dignity and not turn the funeral into a massacre?

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