

Ronald Reagan and the Russian Revolution

By Leon Aron

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Where Ronald Reagan's role in the fall of the Soviet Union is concerned, most obituaries mention the re-armament of America, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and the resistance to Soviet expansion in the Third World. These policies, the story goes, had dramatically increased the cost of global military and political competition with the United States, forcing the Soviet leadership to change its policies.

True enough, as far as it goes. Which is not nearly far enough, because this précis leaves out the most important dimension of Reagan's contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union: the deep impact he had on the self-perception and self-confidence of the Soviet regime.

In the end, every great revolution is about morality and legitimacy. Impoverishment, military defeat or famine alone is never enough. To take only the most recent examples, neither starvation nor food rationing nor a crushing military defeat stopped North Korea, Cuba or Saddam Hussein's Iraq from persisting in irrational and inhumane policies. The change comes only when elites begin to lose faith in the country's direction and their right to rule, and the people soon join in, first in doubt, then in anger and protest.

And Reagan, quite simply, did more than anyone to delegitimize and demoralize the Soviet Union.

Where the arms race, in general, and SDI (a planned space-based anti-ballistic missile system), in particular, are concerned, far more important than the costs was the realization by the Soviet Union's unelected rulers that their science and industry were *in principle* incapable of matching U.S. technology.

Contrary to what the Soviet propaganda stridently asserted at the time, the problem had little to do with their fear of nuclear annihilation. Instead, for the Soviet Marxists, the impact stemmed from the belief that the economy defined every other aspect of the society and served as the most important barometer of its health and progress. Having long given up on even approaching the standard of living of the U.S., Soviet leaders had considered strategic parity with the U.S. as evidence that theirs still was an economic and political system that provided an alternative and, in the long run, winning vision of society. By exposing the inability of the Soviet economy to compete in advanced weaponry, Reagan made that evidence increasingly flimsy.

Similarly, the boost that Reagan gave the anti-Communist resistance in the Third World, where Soviet-supported dictatorships were beaten to stalemates or defeated in Angola, Mozambique, El Salvador, Nicaragua or, most jarringly, Afghanistan, was not just nibbling at the periphery of the Soviet empire. The latter always was but a consequence, a by-product (albeit a most welcome one) of the regime's vital necessity to produce a proof that, in the absence of "the world socialist revolution," the Soviet Union still rode the crest of the "wave of history" and, once made, "the conquests of socialism" were irreversible. Reagan severely damaged that proof as well.

Yet, as frequently happens in history, the crucial trends are intangible and invisible at the time. Enormous as the damage done by SDI and the anti-communist resistance, Reagan's greatest contribution to the Russian revolution perhaps came from the mere fact that he was in the office when he was, inflicting his personality and beliefs on the Soviet regime when it was most vulnerable. It was as if history got back at those who for almost a century had proclaimed that they knew its "laws," harnessed it by their "science," and feared no surprises from it.

In the early 1980s, the Soviet Union was not just repressive and deeply corrupt, as the ruling *nomenklatura* had delicacies delivered to their posh apartments and dachas, while food increasingly was rationed outside Moscow and mothers stood in line for hours to buy milk for their children, millions of whom grew up without ever seeing a steak, an orange, or a banana. It was a deadlocked and depressed country.

Mikhail Gorbachev's future prime minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, who was by no means a radical, wrote of those years in his memoirs: "The stuffiness in the country has reached the limit: After that, only death. . . . Nothing was done with any care. [We] stole from ourselves, took and gave bribes, lied in the reports, in newspapers, from high podiums, wallowed in our lies, hung medals on one another. And all of this—from top to bottom and from bottom to top. The country was drinking itself into the ground. [People] drank everywhere. Before work. After work. In the *obkoms* [regional party headquarters] and the *raykoms* [district party committees]. At the construction sites and on the shop floor. In offices and apartments. Everywhere."

Suddenly, from the relentlessly jammed but occasionally audible foreign broadcasts and from the shrill propaganda, which generations of Russians learned to decipher for a few words of truth, came a voice. Into the airless, oppressive, sunless world that Russian writer and exile Vladimir Nabokov described as "so shoddy, so crabbed and gray" burst this big, charming, handsome American. Sunny, serene, self-confident.

Reagan did not seem to be the least bit impressed by the Soviet Union's 10,000 nuclear missiles, or its 5-million-strong army, or its annual production of more tanks than the rest of the world. For him, there was no "parity," nuclear or otherwise, between America and the Soviet Union. The former was vastly and permanently superior for one and only reason: Its people were free. As if that were not bad enough, he did not confine these sentiments to private musings. He told the entire world that the "evil empire" was destined for the "trash heap of history."

No one, not even the leading political actors in the Soviet Union at the time, can be certain today of the exact impact that this unprecedented assault on the legitimacy of the Soviet system had on their thoughts and actions. Yet there is little doubt that everything Reagan had said and done in the previous four years was central to the almost palpable sense of foreboding and desperate need for a change when, on the evening of March 10, 1985, General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko died in the exclusive "Kremlin hospital" in the Moscow suburb of Kuntsevo. The future "godfather of glasnost," Alexander Yakovlev, remembered thinking that day: "It was if before the thunderstorm. One could almost hear people say: We cannot live like this any longer. *Tak dal'she zhit' nel'zya.*"

A day later, at a Politburo meeting in the Kremlin, without formally asking for the floor, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko got up to nominate Mikhail Gorbachev to the post of general secretary.

The rest, as they say, is history, which Reagan had so profoundly shaped.

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