

The Soviet Lesson for America

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Twenty years ago the mighty Soviet Union collapsed. Its legacy includes many things, from *Sputnik* to training Palestinian terrorists. One phenomenon especially deserves our attention. I strongly believe that by examining the Soviet failure we can learn something of vital importance.

There are many reasons for the demise of the Soviet empire, but one cause is often overlooked. As soon as the ideologues moved from debating circles into their offices, the seeds of destruction were planted. Bureaucracy was formed and started to grow. Stalin clearly understood the potential of the bureaucratic machinery and used it effectively. He was godfather to the Soviet bureaucracy, and his bureaucrats worked efficiently because they were ruthlessly controlled to the point of extermination.

After Stalin's death, bureaucracy flourished. In a few years it acquired enough power to remove Khrushchev, who tried to reform the country by reshuffling and restructuring state and party machinery. Brezhnev never challenged the bureaucracy and allowed it to grow unchecked. The major achievement of the Soviet bureaucracy was total alienation of the individual from the decision-making process, and from any participation in the life of society.

Over the course of a few decades, bureaucratic rule created a new type of individual. Major traits of this *Homo Sovieticus* were the welfare mentality and antisocial behavior, the very traits that are now reasons why Russia is in such bad shape.

The U.S. is not in good shape, either. I am afraid we are losing our way of life. We are becoming more polarized and less involved in the life of our communities. Bureaucrats and lawyers are becoming our masters. Rules and regulations are taking the place of common sense. As an example, children in Massachusetts need a license to sell lemonade from their parents' driveways.

The Soviet people were subjected to abrupt, forced alienation, while we are now in a slow process of voluntary alienation. Citizens' responsibilities were taken from the Soviet people; we are freely relinquishing them. What took 70 years in the USSR might take much longer here, but this is only a quantitative, not a qualitative difference.

All bureaucracies are alike in many ways. Functioning of the bureaucratic machinery is determined mostly by the rules of the

office, which are accounting and control—*Uchet i Control*—as Lenin said. The rule of bureaucracy leads to alienation. The result of alienation is disintegration of society. This can be prevented by diminishing the role of bureaucracy by decreasing its size. Downsizing bureaucracy is the most difficult task. All presidential candidates vow to do this and inevitably fail. Bureaucratic machinery has the innate tendency to grow. As a self-preserving institution, its goal is expansion.

Taxes are the lifeblood of bureaucracy. When are taxes excessive, and how much taxation is sufficient? Excessive taxes are levied when people agree to shift the burden of their personal involvement onto the shoulders of bureaucrats. This attitude is a time bomb. Control over the life of a community, a state, or a country slides away from people and into the hands of the bureaucrats, stifling initiative and creativity.

If we are going to reverse this trend we must cut the bureaucratic apparatus by reducing taxes. Bureaucrats threatened with reduction inevitably attempt to cut or eliminate the most necessary services rather than the most useless functions. Bureaucrats must be obliged to publicly prioritize their full list of functions and to cut from the bottom, not from the top, of the list. This will insure that tax reduction will cause a minimum of public pain.

In short, the Soviet experiment shows that proliferating bureaucracy results in alienating people, and that alienation ruins the nation. But it would be naïve to think that just decreasing the size of bureaucracy will reverse the already widespread alienation in our country. We have drifted far from being involved citizens. Ask young people, who are the future of our country, what constitutes citizens' civic duties, and be prepared for a shock. Many don't even know the meaning of the question!

Civics has been dropped from the curriculum in most schools, and history is presented mostly as a series of facts without socioeconomic underpinnings. If left-leaning cultural forces and the progress of alienation are not reversed, we will find ourselves in the situation best described by the poet Osip Mandelstam: *We live not feeling the country under our feet.*

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