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## Red Sunset

DURING MUCH OF THE SECOND HALF of the twentieth century young kids and old goats marched in demonstrations against the existence of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately they advocated isolationist pacifist policies which, we now know, came within an ace of causing such weapons to be used. In the same years the same groups marched first against the "ecological crime" of fast economic growth, and then against the unemployment which was naturally caused when growth was slowed down.

For most of the second half of the twentieth century it seemed more than 50 per cent likely that the world would blow itself up. After the achievement of nuclear fission in 1945, mankind could soon count how many hydrogen bombs or cobalt bombs would be required to destroy the planet.

Our grandfathers at this period were strangely allowing

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themselves to be bossed around by three sorts of excessive government, misleadingly called the “rich democracies,” the “communist powers,” and (somewhat contemptuously) the “Third World.” Each was in a dangerously unstable state. Today psychology is recognized as the science concerned with diverting humans in an unstable state to a more comfortable one, but psychology played little part in the last century’s conduct of foreign policy or any other policy.

In the rich democracies, this was the age of limited-channel television, which was very different from the free-as-air telecommunicating computer terminals (TCs) of our time. Under that limited-channel television, for the first time since the days of Pericles, democratic electors could regularly see and hear in their own living rooms those whom they were asked to vote for. Democracy thereby became a system of picking men with the characteristics of good television actors—that is, prima donnas skilled in dissembling—and then putting them into the kind of antagonistic work environment which would turn a poodle into a paranoiac (listen to the tapes we still have of congressional committees vetting American presidential appointees or of the daily, shouted question times in the British House of Commons). The rulers who emerged through this system were then allowed, amid an atmosphere of power and egomania (but also occasional appallingly unjust personal slander), to spend half their people’s money for them, until somebody heard some tape of what they had been saying casually to their own staffs in private, when there arose a great clamour to put them in prison instead.

And this was the most civilized of the three contemporary systems of over-government. In 1974 it applied to about 40 of the 165 governments of the world. In most of the 125 non-democratic countries the head of government went to bed each night in some way afraid that he might be killed together with his family in a *coup d’état* before breakfast tomorrow morning. This did not lead to a relaxed frame of mind in what was to become the nuclear trigger-minders’ profession.

The first nuclear power among what might be called the *coup*

*d'état*-terrified states was communist Russia. It was thus the first power that looked as if its system of neurotic over-government might destroy the planet. It was also the first to disappear, and it is interesting to see how this came about.

Through most of the second half of the twentieth century around a third of mankind was ruled by communist governments, including the peoples of China and Russia. All of the communist governments had come to power by force. None had been elected by its people, and communism was proving to be a system of over-government that had no prospect of bringing adequate prosperity or liberty to its subjects.

In 1913 tsarist Russia had a higher income per head than imperial Japan. After sixty years of communism in the late 1970s Russians had a lower income, lower life expectancy and a lower range of choice than the Japanese at every level of their society. By 1970 there was no communist country in which a majority of the workers would willingly have voted for the government in power. From then until 1991 communism was therefore dying, as so many other failed religions and failed governing systems had so frequently and so bloodily died before.

Two recent similar failures were everywhere in men's minds. Any fifty-five-year-old Russian in 1949 had been aged twenty-three in 1917, when the privileged families who ran the scattered estates and towns of the Tsars' Russia—a vast country with practically no communications—had been overthrown and often horribly done to death in a few months. By 1949 the scattered towns and collective farms of the Soviet Union were run by a communist party privilegentsia whose understandable, if neurotic, obsession was not to suffer the same fate. Most of these local communist leaders were cautious men, instantly obedient to Moscow's authority. Any who had been incautious or idealistic, intent on building socialism without quite knowing what it meant, had been murdered in Stalin's purges. If in 1949–53 Stalin had ordered the world to be destroyed by nuclear bombs on the grounds that only this could make it safe

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for communism, few local or national leaders of the Soviet communist party would have dared to say him nay.

Horrified observers could look back only a few years to the last European governing system that had collapsed in Wagnerian epic. When Adolf Hitler had been driven back to his bunker in 1945 his propaganda minister Goebbels had cried on the radio, "If our National Socialist Germany is to go down, we will slam the door on history so loud that it will remember us for ten thousand years." Hitler's Nazism mercifully could not fulfil that threat, because it did not possess the nuclear bomb. Soviet communism, which was as plainly due to die either epically or otherwise, did possess it.

In the ailing Stalin's last years, nobody knew who would succeed him. If anybody had known, Stalin would have known, and he would have bumped him off tomorrow. When Stalin had his last heart attack in March 1953 his housekeeper called in the main members of his government, but none of them dared to summon a doctor. If Stalin had recovered but in a dilapidated state, he would have blamed the doctor and the politician or house servant who called him in. So Stalin lay through the night on his living room floor, until his family next day sent him to the hospital, already clearly dying.

"With the passing of Marshal Stalin," said the London newspaper *The Economist* that week, "the world is a healthier but not a safer place." This proved to be wrong reporting. The world became a slightly safer place from the instant of Stalin's death. Up until then war could have come through madness in the Kremlin. Thereafter it could spring only from miscalculation in the Kremlin, but muddled Western policies and communism's own unstable dynamic meant that the opportunities for miscalculation were about to increase.

The principal destabilizer was the lack of a free-market mechanism in the communist system, which ensured that Soviet economic policy in a technologically advancing world would go more and more awry. At the same time the growth of education in Russia meant that the Russian people could see ever

more plainly that they were not getting richer or freer at anything like the pace they could. Only the parts of national policy which did not depend on the existence of any free-market mechanism even in other countries—such as foreign policy, defense policy, police organization, internal relations within the bureaucracy—proved as adept as equivalent policies in the West.

The change in relations within the bureaucracy started on the morning after Stalin's death. The men at the top of the government had lived until then under daily fear that Stalin might decide to execute them, so they met in sensible conclave and promised each other that from now on no Russian politician was going to order the secret police to kill any other politician any more. One of those who made this promise was lying through his teeth. Unsurprisingly, he was the man in charge of the secret police. So the others banded together and shot this Beria, but from then on the no-fratricide promise among top men was generally kept. Internal machinations continued as before, but all those thereafter toppled (in 1954–64, Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin, then Khrushchev) were retired to positions of moderate comfort instead of to the firing squad.

When Stalin died at the age of seventy-three and Khrushchev was removed at the age of seventy, most Politburo members were ten to fifteen years younger. At Khrushchev's deposition in 1964, the organizing deposer, Brezhnev, was fifty-seven, and he learned from the easiness of his own deed. As the leading young Turk of 1964, Brezhnev's principal determination from then on was that there should be no young Turks on his Politburo lest they organize to depose him. By the beginning of the 1980s twelve of the fourteen voting members of the Politburo were over sixty-five, and at least three were known to be gaga.

This was annoying for the younger apparatchiks kept waiting in line, but there was nothing much they could do. While the leader of a democracy was in those days usually picked by his people as the less bad of two party-caucus-selected candidates whom most of the people did not want, the leader of Russia

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was picked for the Russian people out of candidates of whom most knew less than nothing by a secret cabal to which efficient young people were not allowed to belong.

When Brezhnev died in 1982 the cabal plus the Red Army chose in his place the sixty-eight-year-old Yuri Andropov, the former head of the secret police. He was an old, ill, gray man. Some Western journalists said hopefully that he might move to implement Hungarian-style economic reforms in the Soviet Union; Hungary had become a freer country when a partly market-oriented economy had been introduced there. But Andropov's idea of economic reform proved to be to put black marketeers in prison.

When he died, in February 1984, he was succeeded by a man three years older than himself. It soon became clear that Konstantin Chernenko's appointment had merely delayed the real battle for succession in the Soviet Union—and not for very long. Chernenko spent most of his short chairmanship in his sickbed. His nominated heir, Mihail Gorbachev, was in the mild mould of Malenkov (brief successor to Stalin) and Hua (brief successor to Mao)—a caretaker very willing to bow out in favour of any more forceful character who seized control of the party, and who was willing to pension, instead of kill, him off. The sacking in 1984 of Marshal Ogarkov and the death of Marshal Ustinov meant that a struggle for power in the Red Army was proceeding at the same time. In 1988 rumors began to circulate in the West that Colonel-General Yuli Lermontov, the chief political commissar for the Red Army, was making a bid either for the leadership or to be a new Soviet leader's left-hand man. And the policy reportedly advocated by Lermontov sounded very frightening indeed.