

WHERE DOES GLASNOST LEAD?

By: Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D.*¹

What is happening in the Soviet Union proves once again that tanks, troops, and mass arrests can prevail in the short run, but that they are no match when pitted against basic human tendencies. Man's nature has defeated the Bolshevik Revolution. Free men and women are not easy to rule, as we in the democracies can observe directly. Waste, mismanagement and corruption, strikes, strife, and crime on the streets are our daily bread. But when Man is shackled, threatened, and suppressed he eventually becomes impossible to govern. He does only the bare minimum to avoid getting into trouble, and sabotages the regime with his passivity.

This is what has happened in the Soviet Union and the reason for Gorbachev's reforms. Pundits and commentators will continue to discuss the aftermath of the recent Communist Party Conference in the Kremlin, but we can really disregard all these vicissitudes. They represent the inner struggle for or against Perestroika and Glasnost, yet in the long run the Soviet Union has no choice but to change itself, or to collapse from within.

Not love of capitalism or democracy has caused the break both with the Stalinist legacy and the Leninist past: The

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Soviet economy is in a shambles. Housing and consumer goods are in such short supply that getting them is a major preoccupation of the population. "The sight of a Yugoslav lamp fixture or a Rumanian sofa bed brings fireworks to our eyes," says Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the best-known poet of the U.S.S.R.. Seventy years after the revolution the Soviets still have to import not only wheat, butter, meat, vegetables, and fruit, but also technology, computers and other electronics to the tune of \$9 billion in 1983 alone. And the drop in oil prices has created a critical problem in their hard-currency account.

The Russian character as described so vividly by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy has been shaped by 300 years under the Tatars followed by 300 years under the Romanov Tsars, in abject poverty with harsh winters: generous in spirit but slow to move, fatalistic and strongly tinged with servile patience, priterpelost. Stalin's long rule and the horrors of the KGB have deepened these strongly ingrained traits. Soviet citizens possess an extra dose of hopelessness and futility, and they know well how to numb these depressive traits with vodka. Gorbachev soon recognized the scourge of alcoholism as an expression of the silent and passive resistance that would jeopardize his efforts to raise productivity and morale.

The revolution of 1917 has freed the serfs of feudalism, it gave land to the peasants and hope to the poor -- but now it cannot motivate a growing middle class to become productive, inventive, or eager to use its initiative. These are always

choked by demands for obedience. The profit motive had to be restored, although still seen as a sinful backsliding into the evils of capitalism, and a wide disparity of incomes is being tolerated. Apathy was the alternative. It was impossible to revive the failing economy without judicial reform, citizen participation, economic competition, and rewards for achievement. But these come accompanied by open political debate, a competition of ideas, secret ballots, and the preservation of individual human rights. Economic restructuring required a basic shift in political ideology.

As explained more fully in my book, Thinking in the Shadow of Feelings, newborns and infants always expect "more" and they wish to be restored to a state where they do not even have to express their wants, but where everything is automatically taken care of. Traces of these expectations linger in adults. Even though the civilizing process was designed to eliminate such primitive wants, it usually succeeds only in changing their modes of expression, and often not even in that. They commonly go underground and from there they continue to influence or even to determine many adult "choices." The force of our yearnings is elemental, and it usually ignores the general good and the overall needs of others.

It is not difficult therefore to predict what is likely to happen with Perestroika and Glasnost in a society where all such yearnings were suppressed for centuries, and in which even many of the basic needs remained unsatisfied. An explosion of

unavoidable situations of conflict we will have to face a much more powerful adversary.

We in the West can neither enhance nor delay the inevitable Soviet transformation. All we can do is prepare for the new circumstances, and watch. We have a unique ringside seat from which to observe a battle of heroic proportions between Man's free spirit and the forces of repression that have vainly tried to chain it.