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STRUGGLING FOR A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE  
ON THE CONTEMPORARY SOVIET UNION  

By James E. Will

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This article was requested as an "analysis" of recent events in the continuing Soviet struggle for freedom. I have not been able to bring my thought to that level of clarity. To analyze so complex a social process requires sufficient conceptual control of the major constituent factors that one can understand the pattern of their causal interaction. The Soviet Union is the most diverse of the large societies in our world religiously, ethnically, and linguistically -- even more diverse than the U.S.A. Those in North America who dare to analyze its very complex contemporary dynamics seem to know either much more or less than I do. The best I can do as a more average American who has had a frequent opportunity to visit the Soviet Union as a churchman, and has tried to understand it as a theologian concerned for peace during the last twenty-five years, is to share my struggle to escape an ideological perspective while seeking a Christian perspective.

Among those who know more about the Soviet Union than I is Alan Geyer. Those who want to strengthen their capacity for understanding what is happening in that society should read his Christianity and the Superpowers: Religion and History in U.S. - U.S.S.R. Relations (Abingdon, 1990). In a paper read to the American Society of Christian Ethics in January 1990, Professor Geyer wrote:

The virtue of truthfulness has been very hard to come by in U.S.--Soviet relations. The Cold War has been waged with vicious strategies of disinformation on both sides. For many years, anti-American propaganda in Soviet rhetoric and media has been outrageously crude. But the problem of truthfulness is hardly one-sided. George Kennan has exposed the "primitivism" of American propaganda against the U.S.S.R.: its "endless series of distortions and oversimplifications," its "systematic dehumanization" of military capabilities, its "monotonous misrepresentation" of the
Soviet people, and its "reckless application of the double standard to the judgment of Soviet conduct and our own."  

Mr. Kennan has been one of the few North Americans who has known enough of the Soviet Union to be trusted to make an analysis, both when he urged "containment" of Stalinism in the 1940s and "detente" in the 1980s. But for many others, I fear that adequate truthfulness is still hard to come by in understanding our Soviet neighbors even in this post-cold war epoch.

My ten visits to the Soviet Union from 1968 to 1990 have enabled some insight into the urban culture of some of its major cities: Leningrad, Moscow, Odessa, Tallinn and Tbilisi, but almost nothing of its rural and village life. I know the Methodists in Tallinn, Estonia, best, but there are only a few thousand of them, plus a few more I have heard and read about in Moldavia and Siberia. The Lutherans in the Baltic states and the Evangelical Christian Baptist Union are not unknown. Some Russian and Georgian Orthodox have ecumenically opened their life to me, though I am too Protestant fully to understand them. But I know almost nothing directly of the Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim communities in the Soviet Union, and the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of their government I have tried to understand is now everywhere in disarray and dispute even amongst those who still call themselves communists.

I have recently observed with great gratitude and some astonishment the transformation of the repression and stagnation I first experienced in 1968. The warning of the Methodist Superintendent Kuum when I first preached in Tallinn in 1971, that someone in the congregation would report on what I said to the government, no longer needed to be given by Superintendent Parnamets in 1990, or even 1985. There is no longer the terrible distance between public speech and private conversation that used to be so deeply troublesome. Christians and others may now seek and speak what they understand to be the truth even in the public arena. But I also have been touched by concern, even fear, of some of what I recently saw and heard in 1988 and 1990: especially the ethnocentrism, nationalism, even xenophobia and hatred. How is one to "analyze" so complex a set of dynamics? For most of us, a reticence born of humility seems to be the first dimension of a Christian perspective.

This perspective engenders a degree of skeptical about some of the analyses we receive from our government and through our media. Representative Steny Hoyer, who chairs the U.S. Congress' Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, has an important role in what is better known as the 'Helsinki process'. He appears to be a well-meaning participant in what has proven to be one of the most creative, liberative processes in the last fifteen

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years in Europe and North America. While addressing the parliament of Latvia in mid-February 1991, in what he said was his "first trip to the Baltic states," he nevertheless claimed that "our presence here symbolizes our commitment to your cause." One must wonder, however, how well he understood their cause on his first visit, especially when he went on to identify it with our cause as defined in President Bush's recent rhetoric during the Gulf war about "a new world order." Speaking ten days later at a conference in the University of Virginia, he expressed more definitively his political judgment about recent events in the Soviet Union:

Although most Eastern countries have steered a steady course, recent events in the Baltic States demonstrate how much work remains to be done before the Soviet Union becomes, as President Gorbachev has said it must, a rule of law state. Many of the commitments freely undertaken in Copenhagen (CSCE Conference on the Human Dimension, June 1990) have been tragically violated by the Soviet government.

American politicians are seldom reticent about their judgments of the Soviet Union's violence and violations. It may no longer be an 'evil empire', but it remains at least a naughty empire. We could spend the rest of this article analyzing the elements of Representative Hoyer's judgment, though we shall not. But we must at least note that President Gorbachev, along with President Bush and the heads of state/government of all 34 states inn the CSCE, signed the Charter of Paris for a New Europe on November 21, 1990. It commits the Soviet and all other signatory governments to democratic government "based on the will of the people," founded on "respect for the human person and the rule of law." It contains the very important provision that "the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected and that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop that identity without any discrimination and in full equality before the law." It is exactly this that Representative Hoyer finds the Soviet government "tragically violated."

There can be no doubt that such rights were tragically violated for much of the Soviet Union's history. The Baltic states were brutally incorporated into the Soviet Union during World War II and tragically oppressed for four decades after war. There also can be no reticence in condemning the violent occupation on January 20, 1990, of the Latvian Ministry of the Interior by troops under the command of the Moscow Ministry of the Interior, and for grieving for the four persons killed and others injured in that attack. Archbishop Karlis Gailitis of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia may well be correct in his expressed judgment that the attack was instigated by the Communist Party because it cannot accept that the independence movements in the Baltic states have become the leading political forces in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, though it is not clear whether it was the local or the Moscow communist authorities who commanded the attack of the 'black berets'.

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After this is affirmed, however, the doubts begin. For the point at issue is precisely the locus of the "rule of law." Can the Soviet Union become a federation of relatively autonomous states through an orderly and legal process of negotiation? Or is it in the interest of their people to have it dismembered into many absolutely autonomous, sovereign states?

In answering this question, we must be careful to distinguish their interest from our national interest, for its dismembering would surely leave the United States all the more securely as the only superpower left in the world. Though one may hesitate at the analogy, could it be that a hundred years from now Mikhail Gorbachev might be as honored as Abraham Lincoln now is for his determination to "save the union"? Those who wonder at the analogy will do well to remember that it is only now that some conservatives in our southern states finally find it possible to join "Lincoln's Republican Party." And are there no clear analogies, for all of the differences, between the Soviets' more recent history of oppression and our national history of the oppression of African-Americans and native Americans, to say nothing of other ethnic minorities? I, at least, wonder. Those of us who need not run for national political office, may well be more reticent about our ideological judgments.

While in Estonia in August 1990 it was entirely clear to me that every Estonian (as well as every Georgian a week later) with whom we spoke wanted independence for their state. This certainly is also the attitude of Superintendent Olav Parnamets of the Estonian Methodist Church. They are now free to speak, organize and vote for it, though it remains to be seen how the central Soviet parliament and executive in Moscow will determine the "rule of law" for making such decisions in the entire Union. Yet I risked rebuke by asking Estonian friends whether it really is feasible for only one million Estonians with a limited economic base to support a fully sovereign state. It seems strange to me when I think of it as similar to one-third of the population of my city of Chicago declaring themselves "sovereign." Their national anger over past oppression must be felt and honored. Their nationalism may be recognized and understood. But they must be as farsighted and wise as possible in these dynamic times. We may best help them with questions that stimulate thought, rather than premature judgments that reflect our ideological interests as we support their "nationalism."

Perhaps the best thing we could do to help assure that disputes like those which threaten the rule of law in the Baltic states are not settled by violence is to support the "Dispute Settlement Mechanism" outlined in the report of the CSCE Valetta Conference. The participatory states, including the Soviet Union, met in Valetta, Malta, January 15-February 8, 1991, just at the time of the violence in Latvia. Over twenty participating states condemned the Baltic violence in their opening statements to this third CSCE meeting on the peaceful settlement of disputes, but the meeting did not break down in cold war polemics or polarization. They rather reached consensus in beginning to develop a process for peacefully
settling such disputes. At this writing, the Council of Ministers scheduled to meet in Berlin in June 1991 has not yet met, but Christian leaders would do well to urge U.S. Secretary of State Baker to support rapid implementation of the Valetta Report and to pledge that the United States would also begin to submit itself to the dispute settling processes developing in international law. Until and unless we urge our government to do so, we have little moral authority to admonish the Soviet government.

There is a genuine fear, and perhaps the real possibility, of civil war in the Soviet Union. Christians should hear and ponder the word of the Soviet author Victor Konetsky reported in the Literary Gazette International of May 1990:

Not long ago, in Hamburg, a German captain approached me and said, "Gorbachev-good man!" They believe in our bright future. Unlike me. So far it doesn't raise any other feeling in my soul except fear. I'll repeat: I'm really afraid of civil war, afraid of bloodshed...For me it's a serious trauma each time I have to take a trip outside my apartment. After which I'm unable to go on writing. Out in the streets of my beloved Leningrad, I find myself in an ocean of hatred.

An 'ocean of hatred' is a very dangerous environment for human beings, and impossible for any society to long endure. It is a fact of my experience that President Gorbachev is more admired abroad than at home. His glasnost and perestroika have released a dynamic that he no longer seems able to lead, and this increasingly poses dangers he cannot control. It is simply a fact that the beginning of democracy in the Soviet Union has led to nationalistic chauvinism, greater economic independence has led to shortages of cheaper consumer goods and rising prices, and the development of entrepreneurial "cooperatives" has also allowed the growth of black marketing. So frustration, anger, and hatred grow apace.

Even good changes have negative by-products. Some of the finest buildings, of course, used to house regional Communist Party headquarters. Now local democracy has turned them over to many other organizations, like the editorial offices of regional newspapers, factory management offices, municipal councils, etc. But none of them has sufficient funds or power to maintain the buildings. Thus the few fine buildings available are rapidly deteriorating into disrepair for lack of adequate maintenance.

What is to be done? Almost the only answer heard in the U.S. media is rapid and complete transition to free market enterprise. I am afraid it is too ideological an answer. To be sure, the movement toward greater productivity through freeing up private initiative appears necessary. Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Republic, has become the public champion of this proposal and the chief rival of President Gorbachev for political power. But would the immediate freeing up of land for private purchase and ownership lead to real benefit for the Soviet people, or under the present conditions of economic instability would it lead to skyrocketing prices in land speculation? We do not really know, but I think we do know that the free market requires an economic infrastructure and a social ethos that
cannot be acquired overnight. And without them, the free market tends toward economic anarchy and social Darwinism that benefits only the most powerful and unscrupulous.

There has been a growing admiration for Mr. Yeltsin in this country that I am not sure is fully deserved. He is presented as the champion of freedom and democracy. But he was first admired in Moscow, while he was the First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, as a hands-on administrator who got things done. When he visited the telephone office in a new residential district, for instance, bribes no longer had to be paid to get telephones in new residential buildings. It is good for some purposes to be a strong administrator. But this is a long way from being a democratic politician. Many Russians in the present malaise might welcome a "strong man" who would set things right. My suspicion that this is too much the basis for Mr. Yeltsin's growing popularity was recently strengthened by an interview published in the New York Times of March 30, 1991, with Vladimir Isakov, an elected representative in the parliament of the Russian Republic over which Mr. Yeltsin presides. Mr. Isakov was elected from President Yeltsin's home city of Sverdlovsk as his strong supporter. But he has grown increasingly critical, because he claims, "Mr. Yeltsin circumvents constitutionally elected officials, like himself, and relies improperly on a small coterie of aides with no parliamentary standing." We must at least be careful not to try to help choose Soviet political and economic leadership from too great a distance largely on the basis of our ideology. I, for one, simply do not yet know whether the political styles and economic plans of President Yeltsin or President Gorbachev hold the most promise for the well-being of the Soviet people.

It is clear that there are great wounds remembers with great pain that require healing. Many of them have a religious dimension. Christopher Leighton, executive director of the Institute for Christian-Jewish Studies in Baltimore, Maryland, discovered this while dealing with the issue of anti-semitism in the Soviet Union in June 1990. He reported the response of Archbishop Alexander, rector of the Russian Orthodox Theological Academy in Zagorsk/Moscow, when the issue of Jewish freedom was raised:

Do you think that we have not also suffered? Twenty-seven million lost in the Great Patriotic War. As many as forty million murdered in Stalin's purges. Why single out the Jews for special treatment, as though their suffering counts for more? There are other ethnic groups that continue to endure horrendous oppression. The danger is that we will cling to our separate ways and fail to overcome our differences. We must journey beyond our particularities, transcend divisive national affiliations, and find unity in our spiritual journey to God. ²

An even more divisive and overtly conflictual issue is the present struggle between the newly freed Byzantine-Rite Catholic (Uniate) and Orthodox churches in the Ukraine. It is


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clear that the oppressive political force used after World War II to "unite" the Uniate churches in the Orthodox Church should be, and is being, reversed. It seems equally clear that the whole concept of the Ukrainian Catholic church as "Uniate" was wrong from its beginning centuries ago, when it treated the Orthodox Church as though it were not a sister church of grace and salvation. Providentially, there has been an active Dialog-Commission of Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches for the last decade. In their sixth session, meeting in Freising, Germany, in June 1990, they urged their communicants to stop "all use of force--indirect or direct, physical or moral," and urged that "...dialogue is the most adequate means for reaching unity, and is at the same time also the best method for solving all problems."³

This commitment to dialogue fits the "analysis" that Archpriest Vitali Borovoi of the Russian Orthodox Church contributed to the seventh discussion between representatives of his church and the Federation of Evangelical Churches of the former German Democratic Republic in October 1990 on "Renewal of Christianity and Society." He called for nothing less than a conversion from any theological or political "maximalism" that derives from any form of abstract utopianism, which he analyzed in the Byzantine history of his own church and the Marxist ideology of the recent Soviet governments, and then concluded.
"A necessary condition of any renewal is the decisive, authentic and irreversible rejection of every utopian maximalism in our future programs and goals."⁴

I think this is also a good word for us with which to conclude. For as Christians we share his concern for the renewal of his very complex Soviet society. Let us beware and forego any "analysis" dependent on the maximalizing of our own ideology, and remain open to continuing dialogue with what for many North Americans are our newly found Soviet neighbors.
