

EURO 301 Lecture

Late Soviet Socialism:
Iconic and Not-So-
Iconic Images



Dismantling Soviet Communism: Who did it, How, and Why It Matters

Setting: The End of Soviet Communism and the USSR in the Context of the “1989” Revolutions and the Debates About Their Causes



Questions:

- Questions: 1) Why did the Soviet Union, and Soviet Communism, meet their demise?
- 2) What happened? How should we conceptualize the process: collapse, restoration, or revolution?
- 3) Whatever happened, why didn't legions of academic specialists see it coming? Why didn't they understand that Gorbachev's attempts to reform the Soviet system, and to produce a truly humane socialism in the USSR, were inadvertently dismantling the very system he wanted to revitalize?

And a “Meta” Question

- 4) What lessons are to be learned from the end of Soviet Communism, the end of the Soviet Union, and our failure to see it coming, even as the “end” was happening?

II. What Caused the End of Soviet Communism and the end of the USSR?

- A. Circumstance?
- B. American military build-up and the superiority of capitalism?
- C. Ideology and the Logic of the System: Was the End (1991) Inscribed in the Beginning (1917)
- D. Gorbachev's Reforms Themselves?
- E. Gorbachev's Reforms, Plus Other Factors?



III. Other Factors: Bringing In Ordinary People and Their Everyday Experiences of “Late Socialism”

- The “Political Logic” of Material Culture and Everyday Life
- How do we incorporate this without writing the history of late Soviet socialism, and the end of Soviet communism, from a “triumphalist” perspective?





АРОШЛИК
СМАХЕРСКАЯ №36

ХЛЕБО-БУЛОЧНЫЕ ИЗДЕЛИЯ





Visiting the World of Special Privileges: the Elite Makes Coffee

- In Late Soviet Socialism, only the privileged could buy a coffee grinder like this



III. What happened? Collapse, restoration, or revolution

A. The Case for “Collapse” (Widely Used), and Its Flaws

B. The Case for “Restoration” and Its Flaws

C. The Case for “Revolution”

But what kind: political? Social?

What is a Political Revolution?

- Very brief definition: Sudden emergence of new political elites in control of key resources.

What is a Social Revolution?

- Social revolutions are defined not just by a change in political elites, but by an "abrupt and simultaneous" (Michael McFaul) transformation of the economy and social relations.

IV. Why didn't Western Sovietologists Understand that Reform was becoming Revolution?

A. Flaws of the “totalitarian” school.

B. Flaws of the “modernization” school

V. Lessons from the “1991 Revolution” and Our Failure to Understand It

A. Cultural arrogance

A. Empires and their Fortunes