

**Discussion of Stephen F. Cohen's "Was the Soviet System Reformable?"**

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Stephen F. Cohen presents a critical analysis of the prevailing view that Mikhail Gorbachev's six-year attempt to transform the Soviet Union along democratic and market lines proved that the system was, as most specialists had always believed, unreformable. Ideological, conceptual, and historical assumptions underlying the nonreformability thesis are reexamined and found wanting, as are the ways in which generalizations about "the system" and "reform" are usually formulated. Cohen then asks how each of the system's basic components—the official ideology, the Communist Party and its dictatorship, the nationwide network of soviets, the monopolistic state economy, and the union of republics—actually responded to Gorbachev's policies. Citing developments from 1985 to 1991, Cohen argues that all of those components, and thus the system itself, turned out to be remarkably reformable. If so, he concludes, most explanations of the end of the Soviet Union, which rely in one way or another on the unreformability thesis, are also open to serious question.

Five distinguished scholars respond to Cohen's article.

Archie Brown emphasizes the need to make a clear distinction between the transformation of the Soviet system and the end of the Soviet state and also holds that "reform" of the system does not do justice to the extent of the change in the polity. In contradistinction to Cohen, he argues that to regard the pre-perestroika system as "communist" rather than "socialist" brings out more clearly the extent of the transformation, whereby a communist system had been abandoned by 1989–90 even though the Soviet Union did not come to an end until December 1991. Brown also draws on recent evidence showing the large element of contingency involved in the dramatic changes of 1985–1991, including the opposition to Gorbachev's acquisition of power which, had it been successful, would have led to very different policies being pursued in the second half of the 1980s.

Mark Kramer agrees with Cohen's general argument and welcomes Cohen's rebuttal of the "retrospective determinism" that is so common in the literature on the subject, but he raises questions about the way Cohen defines and assesses the "Soviet system." Kramer argues that it is important to distinguish between the Soviet system and the Soviet state and that the demise of the former did not have to be accompanied by the end of the latter. He also expresses concern that Cohen's article implies, if only inadvertently, that the Soviet system could not have survived unless it had been drastically reformed.

Karen Dawisha suggests that Cohen's argument is based on a minimalist definition of the requirements for the survival of the "Soviet Union" and that it ignores what she asserts is its most fundamental feature, the es-

sential internalized and structural violence that was at the heart of the Soviet system. She therefore disagrees with Cohen, arguing that at the end of the day, Gorbachev's brilliance and capabilities were restricted by the fact that he was the leader of a country almost totally lacking in political, economic, or social capital.

Stephen Hanson points out that there is little to no agreement among contemporary scholars concerning either the predictability of the Soviet collapse or its underlying causes; between the untenable determinism Cohen rightly attacks and Cohen's own extreme "possibilism" are many quite sensible intermediate positions. Once this is recognized, the real question becomes at what point, exactly, were Gorbachev's reforms of the Soviet system likely to lead to change of the system itself? But to answer that question requires both a more precise, contextual definition of "reform" and a more holistic understanding of the Soviet "system" than Cohen provides here.

Georgi Derluguian writes that Cohen's exposition of the alternatives facing Gorbachev as reformer misses key elements that would give his analysis a firm disciplinary foundation: the social mechanisms involved in formulating and spreading competing discourses, the structural coalescence of potentially contentious groups and their actual mobilizing, the institutionalization of political gains, elite and oppositional brokerage, geopolitical configuration, and shifts in economic flows. He calls for a more rigorous analysis that would incorporate these elements, and he illustrates his method by sketching a number of key nodal points in the history of the USSR that would allow scholars to examine counterfactual, alternative pasts.

### **Regulating Old Believer Marriage: Ritual, Legality, and Conversion in Nicholas I's Russia**

IRINA PAERT

In this article, Irina Paert reexamines the relationship between Old Believers and officialdom. She focuses on the impact the criminalization of Old Believer marriages had on dissenting communities in Nicholas I's Russia (1825–55). Although Paert emphasizes the difference between Old Believer and official approaches to marriage, she also draws attention to endemic conflicts and contradictions within the local and central governments regarding the implementation of policies, and she identifies a variety of grass-root responses to these problems. In addition to ecclesiological disagreements between different branches of Old Belief, conflicts existed within specific congregations, which were divided along class and gender lines. Paert thus raises new questions about the boundaries separating the official culture from that of religious dissent, and Orthodox from Old Believer communities, and she questions the persistent representation of the Old Believer community as a "counter-society."

## How the Soviet Man Was (Un)Made

LILYA KAGANOVSKY

Drawing on contemporary critical theory as well as postmodern post-Soviet literature and film, Lilya Kaganovsky discusses the ways Stalinist socialist realist fiction, and in particular, Nikolai Ostrovskii's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, articulates the "dominant fiction" of Stalinism: that is, the relationship between heroism, male subjectivity, power, and bodily integrity. Positing two models of exemplary masculinity (the healthy and virile Stalinist subject on the one hand, and the wounded, mutilated, blind, and paralyzed, but nonetheless, celebrated male subject on the other) this essay seeks to understand what purpose bodily mutilation serves in Stalinist texts. By examining Pavka Korchagin's insatiable desire to keep returning to the "ranks" of the party despite the toll each return takes on his body, Kaganovsky points to the mechanisms of power and pleasure at work in socialist realist texts that, in turn, reflect the cultural fantasy of Stalinism—the (un)making of the New Soviet Man.

## The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat

ANN KOMAROMI

In this article Ann Komaromi examines Soviet samizdat based on recently available materials and fresh critical approaches. Komaromi juxtaposes traditional mythologizing narratives about samizdat and the exposure of such mythology within samizdat and post-samizdat culture. Drawing on recent publications and archival investigations, Komaromi surveys the history of samizdat, its use, reception and resonance. The material form of the samizdat text proves key to understanding samizdat as the lifeblood of a community of Soviet dissenters. That material form, viewed critically through a lens shaped by poststructural concepts, provokes the sense of play between ideal signified and compromised signifier as samizdat's subversive essence. This samizdat text supports both anti-authoritarian playfulness and serious reflection on the threats to the author and the project of culture. Soviet and post-Soviet writers find in the samizdat text an ambivalent marker of their specifically Soviet identity beyond geographical and temporal boundaries of the Soviet empire.