A History of the Thirteen in the USSR

by Grégory Dufaud

The "New Thinking," a complete recasting of Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev, paradoxically precipitated the fall of the regime. A generation of reformers who cut their intellectual teeth in the 1950s were the source of the doctrine.

On: Sophie Momzikoff-Markoff, *Les hommes de Gorbatchev. Influences et réseaux (1956-1992)*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne / Histoire contemporaine, 2020. 358 pages, €28.

There is renewed historiographical interest in the Gorbachev period.[1] Sophie Momzikoff-Markoff offers an investigation into one of its most novel aspects: the "New Thinking" – the defining discourse and practice of Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign policy – and tries to understand its content and retrace its origins. Starting from the observation that a number of ideas implemented by Gorbachev began to be formulated in the late 1960s by members of his entourage, she analyses their careers and influence from the outset of their professional lives in the 1950s. Using rich and varied sources, she follows thirteen people, presenting their educations, careers, ideas and networks.[2]

[1] See Guillaume Sauvé, *Subir la victoire. Essor et chute de l'intelligentsia libérale en Russie (1987-1993)*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2020 ; Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020.

[2] Namely, Georgi Arbatov, Oleg Bogomolov, Alexander Bovin, Karen Brutents, Fyodor Burlatsky, Georgi Shakhnazarov, Ivan Frolov, Alexander Yakovlev, Nikolai Inozemtsev, Vadim Medvedev, Yevgeny Primakov, Anatoly Cherniaev and Vadim Zagladin.

She then discusses the tensions between the institutions sharing responsibility for Soviet diplomacy (essentially the International Department of the party and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but not only) and reveals the competition between different factions in the party leadership. This important contribution to the history of the Soviet political elites is thus also a fascinating social history of ideas and international relations during the second Soviet 20th century.

Divided into eight chronological chapters, the book's analysis cuts across the existing historiography, for which the reforms undertaken by Gorbachev in international relations can be explained either by a shift in political representations or by the country's difficult economic situation. It sketches the outlines of a group of individuals who were involved in all the burning issues of the Cold War, one after another, on each occasion promoting a pragmatic approach that favoured a political solution over the use of force. Their ideas were not implemented, however, and it was only with Gorbachev and the New Thinking that these ideas got beyond the narrow circles to which they were previously confined and were translated into practice. If one of the aims of the study was to reveal the diversity of opinion at the highest echelons of power, another was to challenge the idea of a de-ideologization of Gorbachev's entourage. For his advisors – like Gorbachev himself, incidentally – did not reject Marxism-Leninism: they simply proposed a new interpretation of it that was supposed to allow the Soviet Union to retain its status as great power. This is what leads Momzikoff-Markoff to say that the dividing line in the highest circles of power was not between "reformers" and "conservatives," but between the partisans of a "dynamic ideology" and those of a "dogmatic ideology."

The Rise of a New International Elite

In 1953, Stalin's death ushered in a period – which the writer Ilya Ehrenburg called "The Thaw" – of liberalization of political and social life, as well as of opening up to the rest of the world. One of its crucial episodes was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956, at which Nikita Khrushchev denounced some of Stalin's crimes, established "peaceful coexistence" as new foreign policy doctrine, and argued that ideology should be adapted to circumstances. These changes led to the inauguration of academic exchanges, the aim of which, for the Soviet leaders, was to "gain access to the achievements of Western science [and to] strengthen the aura of the Soviet Union" (p. 35). As a result of this political line, scholars acquired the role of

informal foreign policy agents and a place as experts advising political leaders on international issues. In order to have information on the world outside Russia, the party's International Department revived the network of specialized institutes: like, for instance, the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), which is reorganized in 1956. This served to create "intermediary spaces" that reinforce the link between academic knowledge and political power. Scholars tried to use these changes to renegotiate their margin of autonomy: such as philosophers who wanted a less dogmatic philosophy and physicists who militated for the prohibition of the atom bomb.

The Thaw thus consecrated the advent of what Momzikoff-Markoff calls the "international intelligentsia of the party." Born between 1920 and 1940, its members attended the most prestigious Soviet academic institutions: in particular, Moscow State University (MGU) and the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO), which was created in 1944.[3] They had done advanced studies, most of them holding doctorates in the mid-1950s, and they had a good knowledge of foreign countries, which they acquired, notably, during academic exchange programs. They began their professional careers in political journalism, thanks to which they developed personal ties with the leadership of the party, before continuing them in the structures of its International Department. Thus, some of them worked in the Prague-based journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism* (*Problemy mira i sotsializma*), which was an "instrument that tried to legitimize, both intellectually and ideologically, the USSR's change in orientation in the domain of international relations" (p. 70). Others joined the academic institutes affiliated with both the Academy of Sciences and the International Department. The task of the *institutchniki* was to produce analyses for the country's leaders.

In 1964, the ousting of Khrushchev and the arrival of a new leadership team around Leonid Brezhnev and Alexis Kosygin resulted in the adoption of an ideological hardline and in a renewal of the Party apparatus. But the change did not always lead to the promotion of the most dogmatic individuals. Thus, the members of the international elite continued their careers in the party apparatus, being appointed consultants in international relations. Created in 1955, this post was used by Yuri Andropov before various departments of the party also had recourse to it: including the International Department, in which the consultants forged the official foreign

[3] On the MGIMO, see Pierre-Louis Six, "The Party Nobility: Cold War and the Shaping of an Identity at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (1943-1991)," Doctoral Dissertation, European University Institute, Florence, 2017.

policy discourse. Like the *institutchniki*, they defended a flexible ideological approach that adapts to circumstances. Another faction of the international elite continued its rise in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), where it participated in the talks with Western countries on nuclear non-proliferation that led to the signing of the 1968 treaty. The new international elite thus held important positions in both the International Department and the MID, thanks to which it was in contact with the country's leadership.

Limited Influence

Following the Prague Spring (1968), the competition in which different groups in the circles of power continued to engage over ideological orientation was settled in favour of the advocates of a hardline, which, according to the latter, was supposed to prevent any political upheaval. Alternative ideas were frowned upon and their authors were sanctioned. Alexander Yakovlev, one of the persons in charge of agitprop, was thus sent to Canada, where he was appointed ambassador in 1973. In 1974, the journal *Problems of Philosophy (Voprosy filosofii*) was accused of "objectivism" and its editorial board was purged. If the leadership "normalized" the country and promoted a neo-Stalinist discourse on the domestic front, it, nonetheless, showed a certain openness in international relations, with the deepening of détente that culminated in the signing of the Helsinki Final Act (1975). The international elite tried at the time to influence the course of Soviet diplomacy, in order to impose a new discourse and instil original ideas, but without success. Nonetheless, it played an important role in the Kremlin's parallel diplomacy. For, even though they were viewed with suspicion by the KGB, the reformist views of a Vadim Zagladin or Anatoly Chernayev of the International Department had a certain utility in reassuring foreign political circles about Soviet intentions and promoting détente.

Nevertheless, the crises faced by the Soviet Union starting in the late 1970s (Eurocommunism, the Solidarity movement in Poland and the Afghan intervention) marked the limits of the founding principles of its foreign policy: the use of force, restricted sovereignty of the socialist bloc countries (the Brezhnev doctrine), and foreign aid for the fraternal countries of the Third World. The country's leadership relied on parallel diplomacy to put forward peaceful initiatives and to restart stalled efforts at détente. But the two great powers' suspicion of one another was such that their relations did not stop deteriorating. The mistrust reached its pinnacle in 1983.

Fear of an imminent war gave rise to a desire for de-escalation. But whereas, on the view of Andropov and the Politburo, only a strong and autarkic Soviet Union was capable of negotiating with the United States and its allies, the representatives of the international elite defended a strategy based on dialogue and economic and scientific cooperation. According to them, only an ideological *aggiornamento* could instil a new dynamism into the Communist Party and its diplomacy. Now, several of them were close to Gorbachev, who was elected General Secretary of the Party in March 1985.

An Innovative Foreign Policy

On coming to power, Gorbachev reasserted the party's control over foreign policy, by replacing the immovable Andrei Gromyko (who had been in office for 28 years) with Eduard Shevardnadze at the head of the MID, and over the army, by appointing a commission led by Lev Zaikov. In addition, Gorbachev's entourage developed a communication strategy presenting him as a young, alert and open leader, whose style is unlike that of his predecessors. The first secretary launched several diplomatic initiatives: disarm in order to give priority to improving the living conditions of the population; find a political response to the Strategic Defense Initiative (or space shield) dear to Ronald Reagan; withdraw the SS20 missiles from Europe; and disengage militarily from Afghanistan. The New Thinking, which was based on many of the ideas that the international elite had long defended, was announced in 1986. Taking into account changes that had occurred on the global level, this innovative "ideological framework" laid down that the Soviet Union should be integrated into the international system in order to participate in resolving global problems. From now on, peaceful coexistence and collective security took precedence over class struggle. Two events contributed to setting the course of Soviet foreign policy at the time: the Chernobyl disaster, which confirmed the importance of a multilateral approach to a number of issues, and the Reykjavik summit on disarmament, which, despite its failure, suggested that an agreement was possible.

Eager to move from words to deeds, in 1987 Gorbachev formulated the principle of "reasonable sufficiency," which henceforth, as the basis of Soviet military doctrine, not only called for finding a political solution to military aggression, but also for reducing arsenals. This was how the negotiations on nuclear disarmament got restarted, following a strategy inspired by Yakovlev. After a few months and several twists and turns, the INF treaty was signed in December. On the recommendation of

his advisors, Gorbachev reoriented Soviet diplomacy towards Western Europe. If the goal was to make the latter into an economic partner, there was also a strategic aspect, since this was supposed to help move Western Europe away from the United States and to bring about its disarmament. In February, Gorbachev thus announced the "Common European House" project, which replaced confrontation by cooperation in relations with Western Europe. For him, even if the international system was no longer supposed to be a space of confrontation, the Soviet Union was, nonetheless, supposed again to become the power it had been. As finding peaceful solutions now became the priority, Gorbachev refused to use force in Nagorno-Karabakh (where clashes broke out between Armenians and Azeris) and tried to find a diplomatic solution to the Afghan question.

Conceived as a way of reviving the Soviet project, the New Thinking paradoxically served to precipitate the fall of the regime. If it is possible to explain the failure of the Gorbachevian project by its idealism, Momzikoff-Markoff insists instead on two elements. The first involves the hesitations of Gorbachev, who was overwhelmed by the effects of his own policy, whereas the question of what is to become of the two Germanies undermined his relations with his most intransigent advisors: eager to do everything possible to stop there from being a united Germany in NATO, the latter accused him of being too conciliatory towards the United States and Europe. The second point concerns the use of force in the Baltic states, where Soviet troops were sent in January 1991 to retake control of the three republics that had declared their independence a few months earlier. Now, Gorbachev had rejected the use of force in the Socialist Bloc countries and in the Gulf War.

Momzikoff-Markoff thus paints an elaborate portrait of this international elite whose members were long confined to a subordinate role before becoming the advisors of Gorbachev, with whom they altered the course of the Cold War. The opposition drawn between "dynamic ideology" and "dogmatic ideology" perhaps effaces a bit the diversity of opinions that she has shown and undoubtedly partly overlaps with the contrast between "reformers" and "conservatives." Nonetheless, it represents a stimulating interpretation that allows us to grasp the dynamics of Soviet diplomacy in the late socialist era.

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