Book Reviews: The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Détente, Problems in Administrative Reform, and The Third Reich, 1933-1939: A Historical Bibliography

Richard Brown
Michael Mumper
Donald M. McKale

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Detente

A decade has now passed since the era of detente; an era in which East-West relations appeared to have overcome the psychological barriers that mired the two opposing camps in a cold war for a quarter of a century. In the West, detente was perceived foremost as diminishing the haunting specter of nuclear war. For Europeans in particular, detente was also perceived as diminishing the threat of another conventional war on the continent. For Americans, detente was a ray of light piercing the overcast of Vietnam. Beyond these psychological effects, detente yielded tangible economic and cultural benefits which brought the business, labor, and intellectual communities of the West to its defense. The era of detente was a truly heady period in East-West relations and, as with all such times, a period when critical voices were readily dismissed.

Detente faded in the latter 1970s due largely to Western disillusionment over the Soviet Union’s expansionist policies during that time. Today, however, as the events associated with those policies begin to recede from our collective conscience, one senses a longing in the West for a return to the halcyon days of trade, summit meetings, cultural exchanges, bilateral treaties, and scientific cooperation. In the recently concluded U.S. presidential campaign, for example, both candidates were generously deferential toward the Soviet Union. In Western Europe too, interest in improving relations between the superpowers is being reinvigorated. As a result, even the smallest sign of a thaw in relations, such as Gorbachev’s visit to Great Britain last December or the Shultz-Gromyko meeting in Geneva a month later, commands enormous media attention in the West. “Improved relations” between East and West is today a political end in itself, not a means as Kissinger’s grand strategy once envisaged it to be.

The current groundswell of opinion favoring improved East-West relations makes Harry Gelman’s The Brezhnev Politburo and The Decline of Detente a timely publication. Gelman’s book is a study of the rise and fall of detente from a Soviet perspective. Other scholars, most notably Richard Pipes, have also analyzed detente from Soviet perspective but have concentrated primarily on its geo-political and ideological dimensions. Gelman, who is a Senior Staff Member at the Rand Corporation, also includes chapters on these topics, but his study of detente is distinguished by its revealing look into the Byzantine world of Soviet politics. Gelman discusses the major power trends inside the Brezhnev Politburo and how they influenced Soviet Attitudes toward detente. He also discusses Brezhnev’s adroitness in exploiting these trends for personal gain. Though no study of internal Soviet politics can be definitive, German’s book is less speculative than most. In this way the author achieves his goal of contributing to Kremlinology in the tradition of Michael Tatu and Robert Conquest.

Gelman’s main thesis is that detente had an entirely different set of assumptions in the Soviet Union than it did in the West. Moscow’s objectives in pursuing detente had little in common with the West’s desire for reducing global conflict. On the contrary, Moscow’s decision to pursue detente was made in the context of a major military buildup and a growing
influence of the military establishment in Soviet decisionmaking—both of which fueled a pre-existing impulse to expand. Detente was explicitly de-linked from military and strategic matters in the Soviet scheme of things.

As evidence, Gelman describes the political factors behind Brezhnev’s consolidation of power after the displacement of Khrushchev. In brief, Brezhnev was able to forge an alliance with the leaders of the military, the security forces, and the ideologues in the party Secretariat by supporting a reversal of Khrushchev’s priorities in these areas (Khrushchev had favored the consumer and agricultural sectors of the economy over the military and capital goods sectors, and a limited political liberalization). His hard-line stance enabled Brezhnev to eclipse the rival faction in the Politburo led Nikolai Podgorny, who believed that Nikita Sergeyevich had the right ideas and was only misguided in his methods. Gelman describes several subsequent political maneuvers by Brezhnev which had the common thread of enhancing the Politburo’s pro-military faction. In 1973, for example, Brezhnev brought the heads of the three “national security” bureaucracies (the foreign ministry, the KGB, and the defense ministry) into the Politburo. He also strengthened the influence of the Defense Council, a body responsible for defense matters, in the Politburo’s decisionmaking.

In achieving the reversal in priorities, Brezhnev established the groundwork for his opening to the West. His objectives were to seek technology and consumer goods from the West to help compensate for the reduction in investment in these sectors, according to Gelman. Arms control, Brezhnev’s carrot to the West, was not to include anything that the military had already planned for.

The picture that emerges from Gelman’s analysis of the rise of detente is that of a powerful pro-military influence in the Brezhnev Politburo’s decision-making process. Domestic development and detente were subordinate to military and military-related prerogatives. In this regard, Gelman analogizes detente to an island in a stream of continuous Soviet efforts from the 1960s to the 1980s to displace the U.S. in the world. “Like an island, detente neither halted nor changed the surrounding process.” Kissinger’s grand strategy to entangle the Soviets in a web of interrelationships that would temper their aggressive impulses, it turns out, overestimated Moscow’s pliability.

In his discussion of the decline of detente, Gelman again points to the militarist and ideological forces operating inside the Politburo. By 1975, the Soviet Union’s growing “predisposition to act” combined with American impotence and several fortuitous international conflicts to produce a marked increase in Soviet adventurism. Only then did it become evident to the main body of Western opinion that the spirit of detente had a different face in Moscow than in the West.

As for the Soviets, Gelman’s description of their attitude toward the decline of detente provides an instructive insight into their thinking. The Soviets, Gelman states, interpreted their expansionist behavior not as a betrayal of detente, but as an entirely appropriate response consistent with the changing global correlation of forces. The Soviets believed further that it was the American public reaction to their behavior that was inappropriate; “a reflection of the unfortunate influence of misguided or intransigent forces in the American elite who were unable to accept with grace the historic inevitability of either the U.S. defeats of the 1970s or the Soviet ad-
vances." When combined with a militarist/expansionist disposition, such moral relativism creates an ominous presence; one that many of the West seem prepared to again disregard in the pursuit of "improved relations."

Gelman states that by the early 1980s Brezhnev was on the political defensive because attention to defense matters began to "level-off". Gelman offers no explanation here, but one can speculate that this may have been a manifestation of the general sloth that characterized Soviet bureaucracy in Brezhnev's later years. Whatever the cause, the Politburo's pro-military faction sought to exert its influence in the succession struggle following Brezhnev's death. They were apparently successful as Brezhnev's chosen successor, Konstantin Chernenko, was bypassed in favor of Yuri Andropov, who enjoyed the support of then Defense Minister Ustinov, according to Gelman. Andropov, like Brezhnev before him, rode the crest of the prevailing political trend in the Politburo to the apex of Soviet power. Though Gelman's book ends with the advent of Andropov, his research leads one to conclude that Chernenko must have subsequently relieved the pro-military faction of its earlier doubts about him.

Insights such as these, although oblique by comparison to more open societies, make The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Detente an important contribution to our understanding of Soviet thinking and behavior, especially in the present period of renewed pressure for accommodation with the Soviet Union. Gelman's book underscores the point that sober appraisals of what is realistically achievable with the current generation of Soviet leaders are needed if the opinion favoring "improved relations" with the Soviet Union is to be put in its proper perspective. For though Brezhnev, Suslov, Andropov, and Ustinov have passed on, the pattern of militarism and ideological discipline in the Soviet Union endures. It is therefore unreasonable to expect that the basic foreign policy corollaries of this pattern will change. On the contrary, as Gelman argues, "it is plausible to suppose that the leadership now hopes, through the slow return of the pendulum of American opinion, eventually to obtain a bilateral improvement without any modification in behavior in the world at large."

Gelman does not offer any hope for a way out of this plight. Some reassuring note in this regard would have been welcomed, even if only the obvious changeover in generations of Soviet leadership. But this is an aesthetic point that does not detract from the book's effectiveness. Overall, the book is rich in detail and its points are well argued. The book is written in a very readable style and has a very humane length. Its appeal lies in its presenting a realist's view of the Soviet Union without the emotional anti-communism or clarion call to arms which, however justifiable, are offending to many readers. Gelman's is a critical voice that in the present political climate needs to be heard.

Richard Brown
Empire State College

On the surface, Problems in Administrative Reform is not an appealing proposition. It is composed of fifteen essays on widely divergent topics in public administration presented at a conference held more than six years ago. Moreover, the price of the volume is nearly $30. A careful examination reveals a few noteworthy highlights amidst a host of unanswered and unaddressed questions.

The scope of the book is wide indeed. Meiwald and Steinman assemble works that conceptualize administrative reform variously as an input, a process, and an output. They examine reform at all levels of government; four of the studies focus on the national level, eight on the state and local level and three look at reform in general. The topics addressed range from zero based budgeting to court reform and from technological change to the reorganization of H.E.W. The essays are primarily case studies, with a sprinkling of quantitative analysis.

Of the studies covering federal reform, the essay by Carl Grafton stands out. He presents a sophisticated model to explain the creation and reorganization of federal agencies. Drawing data from 85 agencies created de novo at the federal level and a sample of 48 federal reorganizations, Grafton argues that it is unprecedented, large-scale discontinuity which forces governments to reconceptualize their role that is the driving force behind most agency creation and reorganization.

By far the most interesting of the studies of state reform is that by Kenneth Kraemer and William Dutton. In their essay “The Interests Served by Technological Reform: The Case of Computing”, they ask “how the functions of technological reform may be political as well as technical” (p. 102). After a rigorous analysis of data from forty-two U.S. cities, the authors conclude that technological reform tends to support the status quo against the forces of change and the interests of professional managers over elected officials.

In the end, this is not a coherent package. The various essays seem to have nothing to connect them beyond their broad association with administration. The reader is left to conclude that sometimes reform makes a difference, sometimes it does not, and often it is difficult to tell. No attempt is made to synthesize these works or distill some overall conclusions. Indeed, the editors do not even provide a concluding essay. The result is that while each study makes an individual contribution to our understanding of administrative reform, when looked at together they tell us very little.

Michael Mumper
Winthrop College
This volume, the tenth in the series of ABC-Clio research guides, is invaluable to political scientists and historians studying Nazi Germany. Because of the catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust, and because of the capture of masses of Nazi records at the end of the war, scholars have examined every aspect of the Nazi regime. They have produced hundreds of books and articles. This book, which covers the years preceding World War II, during which Adolf Hitler consolidated his power and prepared his country for war, contains 932 abstracts of journal articles. The latter appear mainly in American, British, European, and Soviet journals.

The abstracts are separated into seven chapters. The first chapter, "Nazi Germany in Historical Context," covers a wide range of topics, including historiographical and interpretive essays on Hitler and his regime. Chapter two, "Domestic Policies and Politics," examines government activities and the establishment and growth of the German armaments industry and military forces. Chapter three, "Nazi Foreign Policy," includes abstracts of articles on Nazi diplomacy and alliances, and especially on German relations to Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The response of other nations to Nazi aggression in the 1930s is also covered. The fourth chapter, "German Culture and Society," contains writings about Nazi art, the popular media, literature, theater, and the life of the average German citizen. Chapter five, "The Crushing of German Jewry," presents extensive documentation on Nazi anti-Semitism and the early stages of German persecution of the Jews. The final chapters are titled "Christianity in Crisis" and "The Left under Siege."

The editors of this fine volume have taken much care to provide useful abstracts. Most are a paragraph in length, they furnish the necessary bibliographical data, discuss the subject and thesis of the article, and even mention the sources on which the article is based. The work also has excellent subject and author indexes. My principal criticism of the book is that it covers only journal literature published between 1973 and 1982. The work is sufficiently moderate in length (239 pages) that it could have been expanded to include articles that appeared since the mid-1960s, when the bulk of captured Nazi documents became available to scholars and the explosion of scholarship on Nazi Germany started. The inclusion of such material would have made a fine reference and bibliographic work even better.

Donald M. McKale
Clemson University