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Review

Failed crusade?

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IN this book, Stephen Cohen presents a devastating critique of American policy towards Russia since the fall of USSR. It is divided into three parts: the first offers his view of the Russian situation. The second is a compilation of already published articles on Russia from 1992 to 1999 with a postscript added to each in order to bring them up to date. The author is at pains to show that throughout this period there were people who saw and criticized the errors of U.S. policy. The final part proposes a new approach that, in the author's view, would make good the fundamentally generous sentiments that lay behind the United States' Russia policy.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/18yelts.jpg>]

Cohen apparently does believe that the American elite is motivated by the loftiest intentions toward Russia, but that its arrogance and ideological blindness, based on the generous but misplaced desire to transform Russia into a facsimile of the United States, have led to catastrophe. Russia is undergoing de-industrialization and the worst socio-economic crisis ever experienced by an industrialized country.

The US elite is convinced it knows better than the Russian people itself what and how to do for Russia. US scholars, 'specialists' and 'economic advisers' are blinded by an ideology that is a holdover from the cold war and by their hatred of the former Soviet economic system. As for journalists, they are basically conformists who follow closely the official analyses.

The book seems addressed first of all to American leaders. The author desperately wants to enlighten them, to make them understand that the current reform strategy is the worst failure of the American foreign policy since the Vietnam War. It poses very real dangers to international stability, since Russia is a nuclear power that has become unstable and is one step from chaos. But most damaging, in Cohen's eyes, is the moral harm to 'America': 'Yeltsin may have lost Russia, but we are losing our soul there.'

In the final part of the book, Cohen presents an analysis to justify a redefinition of the priorities as well as objectives of America. To begin with, it is essential that American leaders, the President first of all, acknowledge US responsibility in what has happened to Russia and recognize that the initial approach ended in total bankruptcy.

Then, a constructive approach must give priority to seeking stability in Russia and reducing its nuclear arsenal. To achieve this, the US must give Russia massive financial support to allow it to pay wages and pensions and to promote productive investment to overcome the economic depression. This financial assistance must be linked to an end of the war in Chechnya. Furthermore, most of Russia's debt must be forgiven and NATO's expansion stopped.

In a more general way, the Americans must stop believing they can transform this country on their own terms. This task must legitimately be restored to the Russian people. And finally, the new approach to Russia should be part of a global redefinition of American foreign policy: from unilateralism to multilateralism, placing the UN at the heart of the international system. Cohen ends on an optimistic note. He feels it is not too late to make these major changes.

Among the American intellectuals, Cohen is one of the few who have so openly criticized their government's policies in Russia. Unfortunately, Cohen's criticism leads the reader down the wrong path by its own blindness concerning the US government's motivations in Russia.

He supposes - without any supporting proof or argument - that American leaders are motivated by lofty goals: to make Russia as free and prosperous as the US. He belongs to a social-democratic intellectual current that believes, apparently sincerely, in America's professed mission to promote the development of the rest of the world. He never poses the question of interests. Yet, at the end of World War Two, George Kennan, Soviet specialist, former US ambassador to the USSR, and later a 'dove' himself, was absolutely clear: '[...] We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population. [...] Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; [...] We should stop putting ourselves in the position of our brothers' keeper [...].' (Kennan himself, it seems, was not immune to illusion about American 'idealism'.)

In reality, US policy in Russia has been consistently motivated by two basic economic and geopolitical priorities. The economic chaos that Cohen decries, in fact, makes possible NATO's expansion into former Soviet territories and America's absolute hegemony in the world. A Russia that is so weak economically cannot pose any threat to US domination. And Russia's submission has been a perennial American goal since the end of World War II. According to a 1948 planning document: 'We should set up automatic safeguards to assure that even a regime which is non-communist and nominally friendly to us (1) does not have strong military power; (2) is economically dependent to a considerable extent on the outside world.'

The so-called 'Wolfowitz Doctrine', developed when the USSR was collapsing, calls openly for Russia's subordination to the West, particularly United States. 'Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival [...]

From a more purely economic point of view, shock therapy facilitates the flow of profits and super-profits to the Western financial elite, and, by its destructive effects, prevents Russia from becoming an important competitor in high-value added industries. The country's economic decline to Third World levels forces Russia to specialize in resource extraction and export to the West, especially of oil and gas. The large foreign debt locks it into shock therapy, i.e. neo-liberal economic policy or 'structural adjustment', the policy imposed though the IMF and World Bank on Third World for over 25 years.

The terrible crisis that the Russian population is living through is not, of course, an end in itself of US policy. This is not a conspiracy aimed at destroying the Russian population. The suffering of the Russian people is a consequence that, on one level, might even be regretted by the US elite. But in the end, it is acceptable 'collateral damage' and certainly not important enough to cause it to rethink shock therapy. Yes, there are contradicting interests too and dangers even for the US, since, as Cohen notes, Russia is still a nuclear power. Moreover, the investment climate for Western capital is quite inhospitable (though Putin is working hard to fix that, mainly at the expense of Russian workers).

For all his own good intentions, which in this case are beyond doubt, Cohens criticism has the pernicious effect of directing our attention away from the criminal interests that are really behind shock therapy and from what it would take to change them - certainly more than an appeal to the US ruling class and intellectuals. Unfortunately, Cohen's blindness is far from unique. The great majority of scholars share it whenever they analyse their own government's foreign policy. As Einstein said, 'The world is a dangerous place. Not because of the people who are evil; but because of the people who don't do anything about it.' While one must admire Cohens passion and humanistic commitment to Russia, his appeal to the US elite and his refusal to denounce the interests that this elite is consciously pursuing in Russia and the world are, in practice, tantamount to doing nothing.