

## **Failed Crusade by Stephen Cohen Norton, 2000**

**Failed Crusade** is a poorly reasoned and badly written book about issues of immense importance. These important issues concern the failure of the United States to constructively influence the Russia's transition from communism. As Cohen correctly points out, this failure has many dimensions. At a governmental level, the United States has inappropriately interfered in Russian domestic politics through its uncritical acceptance of virtually every action undertaken during Boris Yeltsin's presidency. At an academic level, the shock therapy policies endorsed by economists, many of whom have had advisory capacities in Russia, have failed. Russia is a country where 70% of all children live in poverty, life expectancies are plummeting, and a substantial part of the population has been reduced to growing its own food. Whatever economic growth has been generated in certain sectors and regions post-1991 has overall been so unequally distributed as to have virtually no social significance. And certainly Cohen is correct that much of this intellectual failure is due to the failure of western academics to properly account for the unique historical conditions in Russia when offering advice. These differences are so vast so different that the insouciant advice that Russia should unreflectively import Western economic institutions wholesale was, past of present positions.

As important and valid as his basic claims are, Cohen does his cause no credit by producing such an insubstantial book through which to articulate them. Rather than engage in a serious discussion of alternative economic policies, Cohen is far more concerned in showing that various magazine columns he wrote in the early 1990's have been vindicated by subsequent events. This strategy means that in the end, the 250 pages of **Failed Crusade** are a repetition of about 10 or so pages of newspaper column-level substance, so much so that the same polemical phrases keep showing up in different sections of the book.

Cohen's anger over US policies during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods is so extreme that it periodically makes him sound like an apologist. According to Cohen, Russia's alleged identification with its Slavic brethren in Serbia as well as its evident right to regard Eastern Europe as its sphere of influence are apparently sufficient to render NATO's intervention in Kosovo wrong. It is completely unpersuasive (and in my view wholly incorrect) to dismiss the human rights component of the Kosovo intervention as having involved the US in "reverse ethnic cleansing." To take another example, in condemning Yeltsin's forcible October 1993 dissolution of the Russian Parliament, Cohen treats this action as nothing more complicated than the violent removal of a legitimately constituted legislature by a would-be czar. This is simply a gross oversimplification of the situation at the time. Precisely because Russia did not undergo the constitution-building process which Cohen quite correctly identifies as a crucial problem of the post-Soviet transition, the institutions such as the Russian Parliament possessed at best an ambiguous degree of legitimacy. No attention is paid to the degree of freedom of the elections (held under Gorbachev and at best partially free under a generous interpretation) which produced the parliament, although he is quite happy to dismiss any of Yeltsin's electoral successes because of equal or lesser defects in the election process.

More generally, Cohen vilifies Yeltsin at every opportunity, giving him no credit for any of the remarkable and desirable transformations of the Soviet Union and Russia in the last 15 years.

Further, Cohen cannot admit any possibility that his own assessments are incorrect. In a remarkably petty discussion, he even condemns favorable reviews of a recent sympathetic Yeltsin biography as driven more by the desire of the reviewers to rationalize their own incorrect assessments than because they might have legitimate disagreements with Cohen's perspective. Part of Cohen's hostility to Yeltsin appears to stem from his desire to resurrect Mikhail Gorbachev's historical reputation as a reformer. But this task (to the extent it really needs to be done) is far more effectively achieved via serious histories of the period; an outstanding example such a history is Archie Brown's **The Gorbachev Factor**.

Cohen's skills as an historian (which are considerable, as any reader of his classic **Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution** will recognize) frequently fail him here. When he repeatedly refers to Yeltsin's illegal dissolution of the Soviet Union, he shows none of the subtlety necessary to write serious recent history. To take this specific case, Cohen's denunciation of Yeltsin's actions presuppose that the Soviet government was the legitimate authority for the Soviet Union. But in what sense was this true? The Baltic states clearly were not "legitimately" parts of the Union at any time since their forcible incorporation at the beginning of World War II, let alone in 1991 when civil movements in these countries had progressed to the point that the only alternative to independence was a military crackdown. And after the August coup, how could a government whose identity was fundamentally intertwined with the hegemony of the Communist party (any amendments to the Soviet constitution irrelevant to this fact) claim legitimacy? Evaluation of Yeltsin's actions requires much more than the facile remark that they were inconsistent with the existing laws of the Soviet Union. (And of course, Cohen's argument would imply that all changes of political regime are a priori illegitimate, as it is difficult to think of cases where the law provides a mechanism for this!) Now, Cohen is correct that it is entirely possible that many citizens of the Soviet Union (and perhaps more important, many citizens of now independent republics) would have chosen to remain in the Union were they making the choice via referendum. My point is that the Soviet Union was disintegrating both economically, ideologically and politically throughout the late 1980's and early 1990's, so assessments of Yeltsin's actions require much more justification than is illustrated here.

Despite its large shortcomings, **Failed Crusade** does identify many of the fundamental problems with transition economics and transition political science, namely the extent to which these fields have become ahistorical endeavors. Capitalism and democracy are more than sets of formal rules of conduct; they are constituted by a people's culture. Ignoring this fact has led, via ill-conceived social and economic policies, to many of the massive problems facing Russia. What is needed is not an answer to "Who is to blame?" for the bad policy advice offered by the West, but rather the development of a coherent carefully reasoned alternative. Cohen is surely correct that the failure of the United States, after spending trillions in order to wage the Cold War, to provide the relatively small amount of aid needed by Russia, is a colossal ethical and political error. And he is surely correct that much of the American evaluation of the Russian transition, official and academic, reflects an inability to see fundamental differences between Russia and the US. Unfortunately, **Failed Crusade**, by substituting indignation for specifics, fails to persuasively answer the eternal Russian question "What is to be done?"

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October 8, 2000