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**A Book Review of**  
*Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union*  
**by Scott Shane**  
**(Elephant Paperbacks: Chicago, 1994)**

The fall of the Soviet Union has been attributed to many things; an overextended empire, inherent flaws in socialism, and Reagan's military build-up are but a few of the reasons cited for the defining event of the late twentieth century. Indeed, it appears that the Soviet empire that caused so much fear in the West for generations has been characterized as an obvious failure by contemporary analysts. This perception of glaring Soviet weakness, however, is only obvious in hindsight. Even during the Soviet Union's increasing economic and political struggles after the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the "evil empire" still featured a powerful army capable of resisting nationalist insurgencies or Western intervention. So, how did such a sweeping revolution occur without military resistance? In *Dismantling Utopia* Scott Shane argues that information was the key element. As the people of the Soviet Union learned more, the less they were willing to support the communist system.

Shane begins his journalistic account of the fall of the Soviet Union by describing the culture of information control in Russia. Tourist maps provide a telling example. Seen by most as a benign source of information, the Soviet government would purposefully print incorrect maps in order to hinder a military invasion. In the end, it was only the Russian citizens who became lost due to the poor maps, as the United States used U2 planes and, later, satellites, to accurately depict the country. And that was the tragic irony of information control: although

justified by the KGB as a means to protect its people from foreign aggressors, it was the Russian people who most suffered from the veil of secrecy. The government's attempt to filter reality stretched throughout every aspect of Soviet life. Vladimir Ulyanov was known as Lenin, Josef Dzhugashvili became Stalin, and Gorbachev's iconic birthmark was erased from official portraits. Shane even describes how Soviet citizens were required to edit their encyclopedias due to political whims. Ultimately this attempt at centralized control would undermine the government itself.

A state-owned, centrally planned economy is a defining aspect of communism. Advocates of the system argued that this approach eliminates the disparity of wealth and volatility of the markets found in capitalism. And, to an extent, they were right. The Soviet Union "led the world in the production of many commodities—steel, cement, lumber, oil, tractors, wheat, potatoes, milk."<sup>1</sup> And "on the base of a gross national product far smaller than that of the United States, the Soviet Union had managed to match American achievements in military power and space exploration."<sup>2</sup> However, it was not the lack of ability to produce, but the lack of ability to produce what the public wanted that doomed the Soviet Union to economic failure. According to Shane, that inability to match production to demand was due to a lack of information. Shane describes the long lines for shoes in Russian cities that existed despite the fact that Russia was the world's leader in making shoes. The problem was that the Russian people wanted different shoes than those made by government mandate. Corruption and "shadow economies" were the logical result of the disconnect between government production and consumer demand.

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<sup>1</sup> Shane, *Dismantling Utopia*, 59

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The KGB was the organ of the government responsible for punishing those who undermined the government by selling goods on the black market or distributing prohibited political works. Eventually, however, as the only segment of the population with access to accurate information and therefore fully cognizant of the untenable economic situation, the KGB came to support Gorbachev and his efforts to reform socialism through perestroika. And so it came to be that the thought-police emerged as advocates for increased information flow. Perhaps the beginning of this process was the selection of former KGB head Yuri Andropov as the General Secretary in 1982.

As the boss of a vast information-collecting bureaucracy (Shane describes the KGB as the “CIA, NSA, and FBI rolled into one”<sup>3</sup>), Andropov was in an excellent position to recognize the true depths of Soviet economic struggles. He clearly wanted Gorbachev to succeed him in power, and when the KGB “undermined Grishin’s candidacy and guaranteed Gorbachev’s selection by citing KGB evidence of corruption,”<sup>4</sup> it appeared Andropov’s plan was put into effect after the brief tenure of Chernenko. Shane believes the motivation for the apparently contradictory KGB efforts at liberalization was power. Recognizing that the Soviet Union was in danger of failing, they hoped to maintain their status by maintaining the status of the empire—and the only way to do that was through reforms. Unfortunately for the KGB and Gorbachev, the power of information was too strong to control and it took a life of its own, leading to unintended dissent and demands.

The political elite of the Soviet Union were the primary force for opening the floodgates of information. In a totalitarian government it couldn’t have been any other way. The

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<sup>3</sup> Shane, *Dismantling Utopia*, 105

<sup>4</sup> Shane, *Dismantling Utopia*, 107

major advantage to authorization of debate from “above” was an official sanctioning; the historians and others who took up the cause of revising history could feel relatively safe from persecution. Among these middle class revisionists Shane highlights the efforts of Alexander Milchakov, an experienced television and radio correspondent. Milchakov was instrumental in bringing to light the horrors of the mass executions carried out during Stalin’s “purges.” Later, the official Soviet history of the Baltic nations’ voluntary incorporation with the Soviet Union was undermined by revelation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which divided Eastern Europe between Stalin and Hitler. The effect of the revisionist histories was substantial. By 1991 “polls showed that a majority of Soviet citizens and a substantial majority of urbanites had lost that basic faith in the system.”<sup>5</sup> Confronted with the power of information, total revolution—not patchwork reforms—were inevitable.

Although initiated by Gorbachev in an attempt to give the Soviet Union a “second wind,” public access to information wound up dismantling the ideological edifice of the government. Gorbachev never intended to implement full democracy and was therefore unable to lead the Soviet Union in a new era of information flow. Therefore, instead of emerging as a revolutionary leader, he lost relevance to Yeltsin. It was as if, Shane likes to write, Gorbachev successfully convinced the Russian people that two plus two does not equal six as they had been taught, but then he goes on to argue that, in fact, two plus two equals five.<sup>6</sup> In the end, however, the power of truth was not to be denied. With the help of technology such as television and radio, information brought down the empire.

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<sup>5</sup> Shane, *Dismantling Utopia*, 214

<sup>6</sup> Shane, *Dismantling Utopia*, 221