EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Most of the obituaries for the late Professor Richard Pipes, the doyen of America’s Russologists and President Ronald Reagan’s adviser, present an incomplete picture of this complex and unique scholar. Pipes, who died on May 17 at the age of 94, was not just an unrepentant, Polish-born, anti-Soviet hardliner like Zbigniew Brzezinski. He was also, like Henry Kissinger, a refugee from the Holocaust and a unique visionary. His work is relevant for students of both Russia and the Middle East.

Formation and Disintegration of the USSR

Pipes’s scholarship provides a key to understanding Russia’s expansion not only in Christian Europe but also in the Muslim border areas in the direction of the Middle East. As Pipes recalled in his superb Vixi [I Lived], he studied the Muslim nationalities in Central Asia and even their Turkic languages on site and in depth.

Pipes’s updated volume The Formation of the Soviet Union is still relevant in the post-Soviet era, when ethnic groups, including those in the Muslim borderlands, have reclaimed their independence. He provides insight into what became the Achilles’ Heel of the Soviet empire: Muslim groups and their brethren, Uzbeks and Tajiks, in northern Afghanistan.

In the late 1950s, while visiting Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, Pipes watched a May 1 parade of expressionless Kazakhs marching with portraits of Stalin and asked a probing question of his young Russian escort. “What would happen if the Kazakhs were to say to you, as the Algerians did to the French – Thank you very much, and now please leave?” The reply he received, “Pust’ pobrobiut [just let them try]”, was arrogant and wrong. After the 1991 fall of the Soviet empire, the Central Asians separated themselves into independent countries.
**Pipes vs Kennan: Afghanistan and Cuba**

From Alma Ata, Pipes traveled to Kabul in a Soviet plane over the Hindu Kush Mountains. He observed something many others overlooked: a highway constructed by the Russians from Termez in Uzbekistan to Kabul. In his view, that highway “could serve only one purpose, namely to transport Soviet troops into the heart of Afghanistan.” It did just that two decades later, enabling the Kremlin’s 1979 surprise invasion of Afghanistan.

With his background, Pipes was well prepared to debate the venerable George Kennan as to the aims and consequences of the Soviet Union in general and Afghanistan in particular. He considered Kennan to hold “some bizarre political ideas” alongside “very realistic ones”. In 1960, Kennan told Pipes that Russia “had a ‘right’ to Iran, something Moscow did not even demand”. Moreover, Kennan held that the US “ought to invade Cuba and get rid of a Soviet base so near our shores.”

Had John Kennedy heeded Kennan’s advice during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, we could have had nuclear Armageddon. Nikita Khrushchev had deployed both missiles and nuclear warheads in Cuba, and prowling the Caribbean not far from Miami were four Russian nuclear subs with orders to launch at America without contacting the Kremlin if Cuba was invaded.

“Hardliner” Pipes did not propose US military intervention in Cuba. Nor did he do so in Afghanistan as a response to the 1979 Kremlin aggression. He favored less dangerous, more Reaganesque, and more effective indirect intervention in the form of major covert military aid for the Afghan anti-Soviet resistance. Thus he was not the foreign policy hawk he was reputed to be but a strategic dove, while Kennan, who proposed the military invasion of Cuba instead of naval blockade, was a strategic and irresponsible hawk.

**The Making of the Reagan Doctrine**

At his White House desk, Pipes advanced major propositions that became the core of the Reagan Doctrine. Ever the visionary, he argued for transcending Soviet communism not just through Kennan’s policy of containing Soviet aggression but by seeking, in a variety of ways, to change the Soviet Union from within. In his words, “This ran into the teeth of conventional US Cold war policy ... which applied behaviorist psychology by punishing Soviet aggression and rewarding good conduct but carefully avoided interfering with the regime itself.”

**National Security Decision-making**

Pipes also made memorable observations regarding bureaucratic decision-making in both Washington and Moscow. “[D]ecisions are usually made ad hoc, on the basis of intellectual predisposition and the mood of the moment,” he said. “This held true not
only of the Reagan administration but all that I have studied, including the governments of Russia under the tsars and communists.”

Pipes’s observations are relevant when reviewing the Kremlin decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968. It was not the result of the Brezhnev Doctrine, as Harvard Research Fellow Mark Kramer repeatedly and eloquently argued, but of ad hoc Kremlin bureaucratic and coalition politics. Alexander Yakovlev explained in his memoirs (available only in Russian) that he helped to save Alexander Dubcek, who had been arrested by Russian commandos and jailed for a few days in Ukraine, by convincing the General Secretary that Dubcek was not a Soviet enemy. The freeing of Dubcek was hardly consistent with the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Reagan’s Double-Pronged Strategy

In the early 1980s, the visionary Pipes foresaw the future polarization of the Soviet elite into two camps. He wrote a memorandum to Reagan in which he discussed the profound crisis in the Soviet Union caused by over-expansion. He predicted that “the successors of Brezhnev ... are likely in time to split into “conservative” and “reformist factions”.

As he saw it, Reagan’s mammoth military program (similar to Trump’s) and use of economic instruments like lowering the price of oil, as proposed by CIA Director William Casey – and above all America’s support for anti-Soviet fighters in several conflicted regions (not only Afghanistan) – would encourage Soviet reformers to “...press for modest economic and political democratization.” Pipes thus believed it was in the US interest to pursue “a double-pronged strategy of encouraging pro-reform forces in the USSR and raising for the Soviet Union the costs of its imperialism.”

Noted soft-liners did not agree with his unique Kremlinology. “Pipes is wrong on assuming there is a clear-cut division between two camps [in the Soviet Union],” declared the much respected Professor Robert Legvold of Columbia University in 1982. “Any US policy designed to assure that some nonexistent group of moderates will come to power is a chimera.” How wrong he was.

Alexander Yakovlev, Who Saved Russia from Communism

Alexander Yakovlev, Mikhail Gorbachev’s principal adviser, was a Russian Henry Kissinger of sorts, yet he is largely unknown to the American public. Why? Because Yakovlev was kept in the shadows by a jealous Gorbachev. The bitter truth is that some Russologists, admirers of reform communist Gorbachev and eager to work with his foundation, abandoned Yakovlev despite his having evolved into a genuine democrat. They clung to the vacillating Gorbachev when the putschists sought to reclaim the empire.
As usual, Pipes neither joined the academic herd nor became Gorbachev’s apologist. He was not a power-hungry academic turned politician but the quintessential scholar. An independent loner (like his son, Daniel Pipes, in the Middle East arena), he applauded Yakovlev’s transcendence in the belief that his evolution into genuine democrat could be followed by new, courageous leaders who would emerge after President Vladimir Putin’s repressive years. Indeed, the message in Pipes’s last book is not to give up on Russia despite the ongoing Cold War. As it did during the Reagan era, American statecraft must encourage the rise of Yakovlev’s type of radical reformism by raising the cost of Kremlin interventionism.

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