

Stephen F. Cohen

1938 – 2020

For most of his life Stephen F. Cohen was out of step with the establishment view of Russia, but it was with the rise of President Putin that this divergence became a chasm. The days of the inebriate Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin were too much for him and too much for Russia: some semblance of order had to be restored. It had been Cohen's job to explain Soviet Russia, Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's Russia, and now Putin's. The latter perhaps could be described in Churchill's remark that Russia was 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma', or did the Western media and governments want Putin's Russia to be seen that way — sinister, inherently corrupt, different from the West, and above all expansionist? It fell to Cohen to bring understanding and, when necessary, to counteract the lies and misinterpretations peddled by the anti-Russian propaganda machine.

Cohen's achievements are many, but the late period of his life, when he took on the establishment of the Number One superpower, stands testimony to his personal bravery. For many years he was undoubtedly a thorn in the side of the US government (particularly the State Department) and the academic establishment. With his courteous and gentle manner, armed with a different appraisal of the Bolshevik Revolution and the following regimes, and admiration for the efforts of Gorbachev, together with the facts and logical arguments, he could discomfit the most forceful 'shock jock'.

Making his way through various academic thickets, he attended Indiana University, Columbia and Princeton, ending his academic career as Professor Emeritus of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. His many books included *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives* (2009), *Sovieticus: American Perceptions and Soviet Realities* (1986), *Rethinking the Soviet Experience* (1985), and *War with Russia* (2019 – see *Spokesman 142*). However, probably the most influential and provoking work was *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (1973). A close aide to Gorbachev stated that the book had a profound influence on Mikhail Sergeevich, and that there was a possibility of another road for the Soviet Union. We know of course that, owing to the residue of Stalinist-style thinking at the highest levels of the USSR, Gorbachev's hopes for a democratic socialist transition of the Soviet state were thwarted, with disastrous consequences

for the ordinary workers and peasants but enrichment of the oligarchs. During the Gorbachev period a friendship between Cohen and Gorbachev blossomed, as did the close relationship between Raisa Maksimovna, Gorbachev's wife, and Katrina vanden Heuvel, Cohen's second wife. Cohen was invited, together with his wife and daughter, to watch the May Day parade from the top of the Lenin Mausoleum.

Cohen must have looked on with dismay the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Commonwealth of Independent States, with the opportunist Yeltsin seizing final control of the other 'White House' with artillery and tank shells. In his book *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communism (2001)* Cohen described the terrible consequences for the mass of the population. Whilst the oligarchs accumulated vast wealth and power, the ordinary Russian lost her savings, her pension, sometimes her job and even her life. In Cohen's view the Yeltsin period had to end, some level of Russian financial probity be restored, the ordinary people's earnings needed to be improved, and order restored amongst the competing oligarchs. Economic confidence had to be rebuilt, and Russia had to regain respect on the international stage.

Vilified by much of the media as a Putin sycophant, Cohen stood his ground. Using his vast knowledge of the Soviet Union and Russian history, politics and people he tirelessly explained both the misreading of Russian statecraft and its desire to be on good terms with America and the West. He stated that the arms race between Russia and the US, and the unilateral abrogation of nuclear treaties by the United States, made the world a much more dangerous place. With NATO now on Russia's doorstep and Russia involved in three proxy wars in Syria, Georgia and Ukraine, Cohen feared that the nuclear menace was so close that it was in fact more dangerous than the Cuban Missile Crisis. Not only was there the threat of Russian-American antagonism, but there was the added danger of the joker in the pack, the terrorist jihadist, itching to get his or her hands on some fissile material to spray around Manhattan, Trafalgar Square or the Eiffel Tower. In his 80s, Cohen was not afraid to make himself unpopular: he was brave, an astute teacher, intelligent and knowledgeable. For example, he had been a member of the group advising President Reagan at the Reykjavik talks with President Gorbachev, which nearly ended in the abolition of nuclear arms. Cohen particularly lamented the current lack of serious discussion between experts with contrary views. Under Presidents Clinton and Obama such dialogues were wound down, and under Trump they were non-existent.

The loss of Stephen F. Cohen is a loss for all who want peace and a

fairer world. In his final book *War with Russia? From Putin and Ukraine to Trump and Russiagate*, the Afterword concludes:

Is any leader visible on the American political landscape who will say to his or her elite and party, as Gorbachev did, ‘If not now, when? If not us, who?’

John Daniels

