



The Group of 78 Bookshelf

Short reviews of books recommended by our members relevant to the themes of the Group of 78 mandate.

Metta Spencer, "The Russian Quest for Peace and Democracy"

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2010

Recommended by Metta Spencer, August 20, 2011

Theme: Russian policies—especially relating to peace and democracy, as influenced by foreign peace workers during the Gorbachev years.

I began attending peace meetings in Russia in 1982 and continued going there frequently, interviewing hundreds of people about foreign policy, human rights, and demilitarization. I found four categories of public opinion: "Sheep" (ordinary citizens who obeyed without complaint), "Dinosaurs" (committed CPSU members); "Barking Dogs" (dissidents who had no power but wanted to instigate resistance from below); and "Termites" (CPSU members who wanted peace and democracy but conformed overtly while awaiting a leader who could institute changes from the top). Gorbachev was their man. The Termites and Barking Dogs should have been allies but actually loathed each other because of their disagreement about the source of potential change. When Gorbachev began his reforms, permitting glasnost, the original dissidents left the country but were replaced by new "radical democrats," who still opposed Gorbachev. The divisions between the two kinds of reformists actually doomed Gorbachev, who attempted to steer a centrist course, progressing without enraging either poles, the Barking Dogs or the Dinosaurs. The main source of his "New Political Thinking" came from peace researchers and scientists abroad, who met in such elite organizations as Pugwash, IPPNW, and scientific conferences.

Economic and nationalistic crises arose, making a centrist position more difficult, and there was a time when the Dinosaurs threatened to depose him, so he placated them, thereby alienating even the Termites, who abandoned him and joined the new Radical Democrats, led by Yeltsin. There was a coup from the right, then from the left, when Yeltsin broke up the country but proved incapable of running the remnant province, Russia.

The Yeltsin years were chaotic and incompetent. He gave the country away to oligarchs and to Putin, who restored order and lucked into a period of high world oil prices, so the populace has been satisfied. It was hard for adults to be free anyway. Having had all their decisions made by the state for 70 years, they were not able to manage their own

affairs suddenly, and do not mind having a reasonably orderly despot run the country while they learn the ways of democracy. But they are learning through civil society organizations. We can help them by arranging more transnational contacts—not in elite organizations this time but on a large, grassroots basis, by setting up hundreds of sustained videoconference dialogues. That is technologically feasible now; it's almost free, but it just takes organizing.

**THE RUSSIAN
QUEST FOR
PEACE AND
DEMOCRACY**



COMMENT: I can't properly endorse the book because it is my own work. But you can see the original transcripts of 200 interviews on the book's web site, along with photos, a glossary, and even digitized audio tapes.

<http://RussianPeaceAndDemocracy.com>

<http://www.lexingtonbooks.com/>