

Lecture Notes: Sarah Paine on Why Russia Lost the Cold War, interviewed by Dwarkesh Patel

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1 Context

I was lucky to attend the last of six in-person lectures and interviews by Professor Sarah Paine and Dwarkesh Patel in San Francisco. Previous lectures included Why Japan Lost WWII and How Mao Conquered China; tonight, Professor Paine delivered objectively one of the best lectures I've ever seen on any topic, this one being Why Russia Lost the Cold War, followed by an hour of discussion with Dwarkesh Patel.

I scribbled some quick pen and paper notes in the dark (no phones allowed) but wanted to crystallize my learnings and takeaways while still fresh. I am guaranteeing neither accuracy nor completeness here; please watch the entire recording when it's published.

2 The Lecture

- Meta-point: Professor Paine is a very effective public speaker. Creative use of text and shorthand on slides. Model of how to balance verbal and written communication. Also disarmingly funny.
- Separated the progression of Russia in the Cold War into a core starting thesis (Reagan won it all) and counter-arguments (external, internal, and combined umbrella perspectives).
 - **Externally-squeezed economic and defense breakdown:**
 - * Soviet Union was locked in an arms race with the U.S. (especially Navy) and China
 - * Notably, diverted 30-40-50 funds (respectively) from social, educational, and cultural initiatives into defense efforts
 - **Unchecked internal unrest - failure was inevitable:**
 - * Communism as it was practiced led to misaligned economic incentives, inaccurate demand and productivity reporting, corruption and fragmentation from within

- * Multiple, simultaneous economic crises and revolts ("Eastern European Domino Theory", seen also in Communist Asia)
- * Crisis in Poland influenced by the Catholic Church; in Germany, split of East and West
- * To read: Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (French Revolution) and *Democracy in America*
- **Combined:**
 - * Confluence of internal and external factors (compare Gorbachev's approach to Deng Xiaoping's; both considered Communist with different outcomes)
 - * Soviet Union as a "Donut Empire" that flipped the traditional model of the center being better-developed and wealthier than its serfdoms
 - * Helmut Kohl orchestrating tourism out of East Germany by putting significant cash to lift travel regulations
 - * Kohl and George H.W. Bush driving 1990 German reunification; note Gorbachev received the 1990 Nobel Prize.

3 The Interview

Prof. Paine discussed living in and studying the Soviet Union in the 80s, describing how the elite lived and what they might have realized traveling abroad:

- VCRs were hard to get, and everybody wanted VCRs so they could watch Western movies; Prof. Paine described going to great lengths to pay hard currency to get a VCR for a host family. Also noted Tiananmen coverage was only delivered to the Soviet Union because Gorbachev was in China; that students protested because they knew it would be televised
- Prof. Paine described being laughed at in Russian supermarkets for struggling to find sour cream; it was ladled out into glass jars because commercial plastic packaging had not yet arrived (*N.B.* funny that I'd consider this Michelin-level presentation).
- The smell of rotting meat in the markets was overwhelming. Apples were rotten, from Hungary. Potatoes were so soft they needed to be carved. Prof. Paine learned how to make a very good borscht because Russia produced good beets.
- The years leading up to the end of the Cold War, sentiment was actually optimistic. Locals thought democratic capitalism would be the solution to problems, but did not realize how much work (labor, hours) would be required to bring up the economic state.

4 Takeaways

Each of the points I list out above just barely alludes to decades of history. Thousands of pages of research and writing could be dedicated to each. My initial takeaways from this lecture:

- Watch the other five in the series (currently: How Imperial Japan Defeated Tsarist Russia & Qing China)
- Read Prof. Paine's books, starting with *The Wars for Asia*
- Read Tocqueville on the French Revolution and *Democracy in America*

Moreover:

- Prof. Paine mentions that we as the next generation will live to see what happens in North Korea, a modern case study unfolding.
- Prof. Paine and Dwarkesh both reinforce the perspective that learning widely and deeply, staying as informed as possible, is a step we can all take to be more responsible citizens of the world.
- There is increasing need for well-informed and tech-forward policy. As Prof. Paine describes, history is as much shaped by leaders as it is by the people.

Thanks for reading. Thanks to friends for telling me about this lecture (I will credit them once I get their permission), and deepest thanks to Prof. Paine and Dwarkesh Patel.

Please contact me @valstechblog with any feedback and/or thoughts.