

BETWEEN TWO AGES: ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI AND THE 'REAL' REVOLUTION

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Abstract

The Soviet Union entered Poland in 1945 promising to create a revolutionary society that would soon transform the world. The Polish-American academic Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that by the 1960s it was the United States that represented the world's only "real" revolution-having become the first society to enter the age of computer automation. In 1970 Brzezinski published his book *Between Two Ages* suggesting that the United States was pulling ahead of the Soviet Union in terms of high technology. At the same time the revolutionary dreams of industrial communism were coming to an end in Poland in a series of worker revolts along the Baltic Coast.

Key words: *Brzezinski, Soviet Union, Poland, technology, computers*

On May 8, 1945 a seventeen year old Zbigniew Brzezinski sat in his classroom at Montreal's St. Leon's High School. The announcement came over the loudspeaker that the Soviet Red Army had taken Berlin and the war in Europe had come to an end. Brzezinski saw his classmates cheer and carry their celebration out to the streets-some waved British flags and others carried American flags. He was more concerned as several celebrated with the red Soviet hammer and sickle flag.

"There was a sense of being isolated in this uncritical euphoria and this notion that Stalin was the architect of a new world system," he recalled.

Those waving the Soviet Union might believe that Stalin had played a crucial role in the defeat of Nazi Germany-but others saw the Soviet Union represented a glorious new future of the system that level the injustice so industrial capitalism.

Brzezinski felt a sense of solitude that day knowing that his family would not be returning to Poland after the war.

“I felt that Stalin’s totalitarianism was spreading,” he remembered. “And there were few people at the time that realized what this portended not only for my original homeland-but more generally-for the West.” [Interview with Author, 27 09 2003].

World War II had already been the defining moment of his young life. In October of 1938 his father departed Poland to accept a diplomatic posting in Montreal. In the summer of 1939 he was homesick and began to pester his father to return home for the summer holidays-and then there was no more opportunity.

The outbreak of war proved catastrophic for his native Poland. The young Brzezinski followed the war on the radio and discussed the situation with his family. The news got worse each year. And by early 1945 Stalin was pushing his vision of Marxist-Leninist history into the heart of Europe. And by the end of the war Poland had been quietly ceded to the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence.

Stalin’s Polish communists saw the war-ravaged Poland as the template to build a “New Civilization” based on the Soviet model of shock industrialization. The communist authorities hunted down political opponents while standing before maps indicating the modern steel and cement factories that promised to modernize what they considered a backward and feudal state.

In the autumn of 1945 Brzezinski entered McGill University in Montreal. He was intellectually combative and articulate and wrote his papers quickly-outlining the basic points on a yellow pad. At this time he developed an early view of the Soviet Union that would only sharpen in later years.

The Soviet Union did not represent a glorious future. Lenin’s Great October was in fact a conspiratorial coup d’etat by a ruthless one-party state that became the model for other totalitarian states in the 1930s. This one-party police state had only been expanded by Stalin. And by the summer of 1945 this brutal system was being inserted on native Poland.

Brzezinski, like millions of Poles in the West, thought the Western allies should have tried harder to keep Poland out of the Soviet orbit. Yet by the late 1940s he had already begun formulate a policy that would stay with him for the remainder of his academic career.

His thesis at McGill argued that the Soviet Union was not the single entity seen on Western maps. In reality it was the end product of 400 years of Russian imperial expansion. The Soviet Union was thus better understood as a myriad of conquered nationalities seeking greater latitude from Moscow. This, he began to postulate, was no longer a mere academic question. This was the great weakness of the Soviet Union-and potentially its Achilles heel.

In 1950 he embarked on academic career. He had no interest in becoming be a doddering old professor smoking a pipe in a tweed jacket. He wanted to influence American foreign policy in the great struggle that journalists had termed the “Cold War.”

In 1950 he entered the PhD program at Harvard University seeking to implement these ideas. This was among several American programs set up specifically to develop of experts on the Soviet Union.

The graduate students debated the big questions about the Soviet Union: What was the nature of the Russian Revolution? Was Stalin’s Lenin’s natural heir? Had Trotsky betrayed the Revolution? What was the future after Stalin?

But the American public was speaking in more dire terms. The confrontation with the Soviet Union was seen as an ideological contest for national survival. The Soviet

Union claimed to be at the vanguard of a glorious proletarian revolution that would one day encompass the world.

And many concerned experts in the United States feared that this was a very real possibility. Shortly after World War II Stalin announced a “Five Year Plan” designed to rebuild Soviet industrial might. By 1950 many of the war-devastated regions of the Soviet Union had begun to produce at prewar levels. And in the production of what Lenin once called “the commanding heights”—coal, electricity, oil, steel— the Soviet Union was said to be outperforming the West.

This was coupled with a growing concern that the Soviet Union was determined to overtake West in the development of scientists and technicians. “While the democracies of the world including the United States are looking the other way,” the New York Times gravely warned, “the Soviet Union and its satellites are training scientists and engineers at an almost feverish pace.” [New York Times, 7.11.1954: 1]. In 1953 Brzezinski began his teaching career at Harvard University. He was not only a professor but part of a new intellectual arsenal in the Cold War. The term “Kremlinologist” gave a scientific tone to describe this new generation of scholars trained to diagnose the mysterious happenings behind the Iron Curtain.

At the same time Brzezinski was one of the millions enjoying the unexpected opulence of a postwar economic boom. In 1945 communist propaganda claimed the western “proletariat” was seething with revolutionary vigor. But ten years after the war the American system of industrial mass production had created the most productive economic system in the world.

The old American working class was hardly the vanguard of a world communist revolution. Indeed millions of American workers were settling into comfortable suburban housing developments in what sociologists began to call the “post-industrial society.” The economy of “abundance” produced a hundreds of new products that fueled a revolution in consumer spending—ranging from automobiles, television sets, to modern kitchen appliances. The economic forecasters assured that the magic of Keynesian economics, which skillfully combined government spending with private industry, meant that the country had achieved the elixir of permanent and sustainable growth. [Hodgson 1978: 76].

But the most important development was the remarkable advances in the nascent American computer industry. In 1947 the research labs at Bell Telephone Laboratories introduced the first semiconductor device that used silicon to transfer current across a resistor. This marked the genesis of a revolutionary new era of electronic devices that began to change the fundamental nature of the American society.

At the same time the Soviet Union was making almost no progress in this area. This was due primarily to Stalin’s official declaration that computers were part of a grand capitalist plot to exploit the working class. [McClellan 1998: 222].

When Stalin died in 1953 the Soviet Union still claimed to be leading a world communist revolution. But it hardly represented the worker utopia that was said to be the inevitable endpoint of history. Indeed, in February of 1956 the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev stunned the communist world with his dramatic “Secret Speech” that condemned Stalin for ruling with a “cult of personality” and betraying Lenin’s original vision of the Soviet Union.

The speech led to a general relaxation of Stalin’s tyrannical system. In August of 1956 Brzezinski toured the Soviet Union on a research grant. Upon his return he offered

his observations in a guest lecture before the Government 215 class at Harvard University.

Brzezinski stated that the Soviet problems were systemic rather than personal. The Soviet industrial productivity, he noted, was largely achieved by copying Western technology. The Soviet economic system was now hampered by “bureaucratic inefficiency and stagnation” in the political system and the public felt an “overwhelming, oppressive drabness of life.”

The Soviet Union was mired in the dogma of an outdated 19th century ideology. The centralized system discouraged individual initiative and the experimentation with new methods and products.

“The living standard is low. Housing is poor, and very crowded, clothing expensive, and wages low, but many Russians are seemingly unaware of this and have no ideas of the enormous gap between their living standards and those of the West.”

There was a significant new development in the Cold War. One member in the Harvard audience inquired if the Soviet Union was beginning to see communist China as a potential rival.

“I have no information on that,” said Brzezinski. “However I met with a Swedish journalist recently returned from Outer Mongolia, where he had found rather intense competition between the Chinese and the Russians.”

This budding Soviet rivalry with China in 1956 was overshadowed by dramatic the anti-Soviet revolts in Poland and Hungary. The Soviet Union, Brzezinski argued, was now expending significant energy merely trying to maintain an over-extended empire. This, he suggested, would provide new opportunities for the United States to wean the Eastern European states out of the Soviet sphere of influence.

The Soviet Union, however, was still capable of impressive technical achievements. In October 1957 Moscow announced the successful launch of the world’s first artificial satellite. The beeping signal from “Sputnik” could be heard around the world from the small radio transmitter that circled the planet every ninety minutes.

The first shot in the “space race” created a sense of foreboding in the United States. “If they surpass us in technology in the years immediately ahead” warned Edward Teller “there is very little doubt who will determine the future of the world.” [Newsweek, 11.11.1957]

President Eisenhower assured the public that the United States was making quiet progress on its own rocket and satellite programs. In 1958 Eisenhower supported the development of the National Aeronautic and Space Agency [NASA] that would become the face of the American space program.

There was also a less publicized agency that emerged in this era of national concern. There was a consensus that a nuclear attack could permanently disrupt the national telecommunications system. This led to the founding of the Advanced Research Projects Agency [ARPA] that in the ensuing decade would lead to dramatic leaps in computer technology-and provide the foundations for the modern internet system.

The Soviet Union, at the same time, was making far less progress on its computer industry. In September of 1959 Nikita Khrushchev toured the United States while proudly boasted of Soviet achievements in space. The Soviet leader was still basking in the recent announcement that the space probe “Luna” had become the first human-made object to make physical contact with the moon.

Despite these achievements in space, the Soviet Union was quietly falling behind in what in the long term would become an even more important industry. This was seen

when IBM executive Thomas Watson gave Khrushchev a tour of the company headquarters in the region known as “Silicon Valley.”

Watson was especially proud of IBM’s most recent “RAMAC” computer that could apparently take any date in history and recite the most significant events of that year in ten languages-including Russian. The Soviet leader, however, seemed more impressed with latest advancements in the American kitchen.

“Father was staggered by the IBM cafeteria much more than by its computers,” recalled Khrushchev’s son, especially the new Formica table tops that could be wiped clean with a damp sponge obviating the need to launder table cloths. “You brush off the crumbs, wipe it with a cloth, and everything’s clean,” he told his son with evident amazement. [Carlson 2009: 196].

The Soviet Union, Brzezinski began to argue, may have been winning the early victories in the space race-but was failing to keep pace in terms of computer technology. Meanwhile the state-controlled centralized economy had created inefficiencies and the defense industry absorbed badly needed resources from the consumer economy.

Brzezinski contended that the validity of any revolution must be evaluated on whether it was historically relevant. It was thus the United States, not the stagnating communist states, that was paving the way toward the only “real revolution” in the world. The United States was leading the world into the unknown era shaped by the impact of technology and computer electronics.

This technical revolution had no dramatic origin story such as French revolutionaries storming of the Bastille in 1789 or the Bolsheviks seizing the Winter Palace in 1917. This was a gradual and accelerating technological revolution that would eventually prove more significant to the world than either of those events.

In 1960 John Kennedy campaigned for the White House promising to “Get This Country Moving Again.” This was symbolized most famously by his dramatic pledge to land a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s.

Brzezinski admitted to a degree of hero worship for the young and charismatic president as representing the modernizing spirit of a new decade.

In 1960 Brzezinski moved from Harvard to Columbia University. That year he wrote *Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* which provided a detailed analysis of the Sino-Soviet split and the growing divisions in the communist world.

He was among the millions of suburban “white collar” commuters leaving their suburban homes to work in New York City. The new air conditioned glass and steel skyscrapers included the dramatic unveiling of the “World Trade Center” set in two twin skyscrapers that symbolized New York replacing London as the capital of world finance.

The American economy was indeed booming in the 1960s. Brzezinski’s academic work began to speculate on what he called America’s “Third Revolution” in science and technology. This revolution began with the technological advancements of World War II. After the war well-funded private and government research centers led to the development of nuclear power, a modern health care industry, three national television networks, a continental telephone system, a dynamic aerospace industry, and most importantly the dramatic and continuous evolution of the modern computer industry.

The massive government spending on the “space race” had the added benefit of providing “spin off” technology that trickled down to the average American consumer.

The business newspapers were full of stories praising corporate research teams that were devising better and faster ways of doing things. Even the cans of aerosol hairsprays that Jackie Kennedy used to control her famous bouffant hair were said to be a “spin off” of the space program. [Hodgson 1978: 6-7].

In 1964 Brzezinski was among the millions of visitors to the New York World’s Fair. The corporate pavilions demonstrated how modern scientific research was related to the official theme of “Man’s Achievements on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe.”

General Motors displayed a future of “underwater cities” with a family submarine replacing the automobile for the daily commute. The representatives at ATT introduced a new era of “Touch Tone” telephones while RCA officials took the world out of black and white in their new “Color Television Communications Center.” The Disney pavilion featured a remarkable life-like robot of Abraham Lincoln that moved with “audio-animatronic” technology originally developed for rocket launchers. [Margolis 1999: 107].

In October of 1964 Khrushchev was ousted from his duties for reasons of “age and deteriorating health” and his “harebrained schemes.” This stunning event came at a time when academic fashions in the West assured that the Soviet Union was modernizing to the point where it would eventually “converge” and integrate with a larger European civilization.

Brzezinski thus disagreed with some of the more flattering profiles of the new collective Soviet leadership as “communists in a gray flannel suits” seeking to modernize their society. The Soviet Union, he said, was now ruled by a group of conservative bureaucratic “clerks” that would likely fall further behind the West in terms of science and technology. “As a group,” he wrote, “it is uncertain, cautious, ambiguous, mired in party dogma, and moribund.” [Brzezinski 1964: 22].

Brzezinski’s 1965 book *Alternative to Partition* argued that the Cold War had reached an impasse in Europe. The United States should thus use its superior socio-technological advantages to take the offensive and bridge the gap across the Iron Curtain.

This topic dovetailed with his next research project—an unusual book that he would eventually call “Between Two Ages.” He began to outline the more relevant questions of this new age of science and technology.

Was this an era that might be as difficult as the previous transition from the agricultural to the industrial society in the 19th century? Can computers and advanced science be used for humane purposes? Can advance science help reduce the growing divisions between the rich and poor nations? Could technology eventually lead to excessive social control—and will this society begin to lose its traditional religious and social values?

He concluded this transition to the “technetronic age” might be socially disruptive—but the modern society could not simply turn its back on these new developments in science and technology. As the first step, Brzezinski advocated the creation of “a community of developed nations” of Japan, Western Europe, and the United States to help ease the transition. This would include the financial and modern managerial skills to help relieve global problems such as increased urban poverty, air pollution, and the continued depletion of natural resources. [Vaughan 2009: 117].

Brzezinski saw the Soviet Union, on the other hand, as was entering an era of prolonged stagnation due to its inability to grasp the importance of the computer age.

These views could be seen in Brzezinski's 1967 article bluntly titled "Communism is Dead." He analyzed the Soviet Union using Marxist stages of economic growth to demonstrate that the Soviet Union was an inevitably doomed system-for historically determinist reasons. Leninism had become an "obsolete dogma" unable to cope with the "novel psychological and scientific dilemmas of the post-industrial, technetronic age." [Brzezinski 1967a: 13].

Yet by 1967 a new generation of young Americans seemed to be moving the other way. The revolutionary members of the "New Left" denounced the injustices of modern capitalism and the rise of dehumanizing modern technology. Indeed many young student rebels took to the streets claiming that revolutionary communism was the wave of the future.

Brzezinski countered that these student radicals were actually a "counter-revolution" that had more in common with the Luddites of 19th century England-or even the right-wing fascist movements of the 1930s that often sought a return to more simplistic values of the agrarian past. [Brzezinski 1967b: 18-21].

In May of 1968 student radicals at Columbia University occupied the office of the dean chanting Marxist slogans and waving red revolutionary flags. After a week of disruption the New York City police evicted the student rebels after wading through a barrier of faculty members sympathetic to the cause.

Brzezinski was not one of these faculty members. He was far more critical of the campus takeover which he attributed to spoiled children from the suburbs masquerading as actual revolutionaries. In a controversial article he advocated for stronger administrative discipline while dismissing the campus seizure as "the death rattle of the historical irrelevants." [Brzezinski 1968: 23].

And this "irrelevancy" was not limited to protesting students. The American society, he suggested, was slowly being divided between technocratic experts who ran the new machines-and the often socially privileged student protesters who were intentionally turning their backs on science and technology. He included his own academic profession in those that were becoming increasingly obsolete.

"If we gathered a group from Route 128 near Boston-engineers, scientists, programmers, social planners-and they went out on strike, there would be an immediate political effect," said Brzezinski in 1968. "However if my colleagues and I all dropped dead today, there'll be big obituaries tomorrow, but no social effect." [New York Times, 4.12.1968, 93].

That same year of 1968 a political reform movement emerged behind the Iron Curtain. In January of 1968 Alexander Dubcek began a cautious program of liberalization. He emphasized that Czechoslovakia would remain a communist state -but would attempt to implement a "socialism with a human face" that would permit more political and cultural expression-and perhaps even closer contacts with the modernizing economies in the West.

The Soviet Union, after a period of hesitation, eventually sent troops into Czechoslovakia to put a violent end to the reform movement.

The Soviet Union, Brzezinski asserted in the days after the military crackdown, was now entering a period of prolonged stagnation-and if it failed to keep pace with the Western economies it was increasingly likely to implode along nationalist lines. [Vaughan 2003: 91].

"The present Soviet leadership was acting more like a fascist than a Communist government," he wrote in the days after the invasion. "It is to be remembered that

fascism was a radical, socialist, nationalist, and imperialistic movement.” This military intervention, Brzezinski said, was the clearest evidence that the Soviet Union was not leading a dynamic and modernizing communist revolution.

The Soviet Union was in reality a reactionary and atavistic empire-failing to keep pace with the Western technological advances. “Before long,” Brzezinski wrote, “the contagion of freedom which is temporarily being snuffed out in Prague will spread to Kiev and Moscow.” [Washington Post, 25.08.1968: 1]

President Richard Nixon came to the White House in 1969 seeking a more cooperative “détente” relationship with the Soviet Union. Brzezinski believed this was a misguided strategy noting that the Soviet Union was seeking closer ties with the West as a way to reduce the widening technological gap with the West.

Marshall McLuhan had famously coined the term “global village” to describe the more interconnected planet. Brzezinski saw the chaotic conditions of New York City as a more accurate metaphor for he called “global metropolitanization”. In New York City there wealthy areas remained relatively safe while there was more crime and violence in the poorer sections. “In the world-city it is the same thing,” he said. “No one is really in charge: thus you have a state of semi-anarchy.”

In April of 1970 the world communist parties commemorated Lenin’s centennial birthday. In Moscow Leonid Brezhnev gave a three hour speech extolling the virtues of the infallible leader of the Great October Revolution. Brzezinski countered that Lenin’s real legacy was an ossified bureaucratic state.

He noted that fifty years after the “Great October” the Soviet Union still could not produce an economically viable automobile. But the real evidence was the Soviet Union was failing to adjust to the new era of technology. “It is even more ominous,” he wrote in 1970, “from the standpoint of their technological competition with the West that today the United States has something like 60,000 computers in use in its economy while the Soviet Union has probably no more than 3,000.” [U.S. News & World Report, 20.04.1970: 72].

The Soviet Union, however, would remain a serious geopolitical rival that would create more instability in what promised to be an increasingly chaotic world increasingly divided into rich and poor regions. These disparities in lifestyles were now transmitted instantaneously via a global satellite communications network pioneered by American technology. The Soviet Union, falling behind the West in terms of technology, was also likely to become more assertive around the world. [Vaughan 2009: 107-130].

In the summer of 1970 Viking Press published Brzezinski’s book *Between Two Ages*. The United States, he would observe, was making the difficult transition between the industrial age and the “technetronic age” shaped socially and economically by the impact of high technology.

The United States had experienced chaos and disorder in the 1960s partially because it was the first society to make the transition which challenged traditional values and institutions. He warned that these same dangers applied to the more “electronically intermeshed” world where the poorer regions had access to new information and were thus “susceptible to mass mobilization.” [Brzezinski 1970: 36].

The world was about to become even more interconnected, he warned, noting that American computer specialists were at the time working on a “world-wide information grid” that he predicted would be available in 1975. “For the first time in history,” he wrote, “the cumulative knowledge of mankind will be made accessible on a global

scale-and it will be almost instantaneously available in response to demand.” [Brzezinski: 1970: 31].

These emerging global problems went beyond the powers of the traditional nation-state system. In the final chapter he urged the world’s “developed nations” to combine their resources to combat these increasingly global problems.

At the same time he rejected the New Left radical movement as an obsolescent force that sought to escape these new developments in science and technology. “The New Left will become more the violent left,” said Brzezinski, “because of its frustration.” [New York Times: 12.08.1970: 20].

That scenario would also apply to his native Poland. By 1970 Polish citizens were becoming more aware they were lagging behind the West in terms of technology. At the time Poles were watching episodes of “Bonanza” and other popular American television programs. Indeed the medical drama “Dr. Kildare” was said to be so popular that Communist Party meetings were moved from the night it aired so party members could watch. [Time, 12.01.1968].

But this same party leadership seemed increasingly out of touch with the growing frustrations of the public. In December of 1970 a sharp increase in food prices-just before Christmas- led to a series of violent worker demonstrations along the Baltic coast.

The international press reported groups of angry workers marching through the streets chanting “We want food, we want food!” Other groups chanted revolutionary slogans before marching on the regional Communist party headquarters and setting it to flame.

In the end police units fired on hundreds of what the government called “counter-revolutionary” workers. The Soviet and Polish governments were especially concerned that the uprising was led not by intellectuals but the relatively well-paid ship-builders on the Baltic coast. [Newsweek: 28. 12. 1970: 24].

This was a long way from the utopia promised by the communists at the end of World War II. The early promise of communist industrial production had stagnated due to excessive centralization in heavy industry and a bureaucratic government wedded to a 19th century ideology still attempting to meet irrelevant and antiquated industrial quotas. A decade later the Polish workers would take their complaints further, signaling the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire. Vaughan: 1999: 3-29.

Brzezinski saw the Soviet Union has facing a difficult choice moving into the 1970s. They could implement painful economic reforms-or take the safer path of seeking trade and technology from the West. Either way he saw the Soviet future as increasingly bleak.

In 1970 he predicted what the future might hold-noting at some point in the next decade the bureaucratic political elite must embark on political reforms if the Soviet Union was to survive. But he did not feel it would be until early 1980s when the “first fully post-Stalin new political leadership” would begin to enter the political arena.

“An aspiring leader aged 45 in 1980 will have been only 18 at the time of Stalin’s death, and 21 when de-Stalinization actually began in the Soviet Union.”

But this generation would probably find its access to power blocked by a older generation of political leaders there would likely be a leader who would attempt to reform the system.

“The introduction of political pluralism will require at some point a deliberate decision to open the Soviet Union to competitive ideas, to let each Soviet citizen read what he

wants, to reduce the level of the party's ideological control, to decentralize decision-making and thus to share power with society; in effect, a major transformation of the system as a whole." [Brzezinski 1970c: 16]

Brzezinski was indeed prescient in his prediction, but even the reforming instincts of Mikhail Gorbachev could not save the Soviet Union. By the late 1980s the Soviet Union began to collapse along national lines—due in large part because the bureaucratic elite had long seized to be revolutionary—and ultimately failed to keep pace with the “real revolution” of science and technology.

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