



## Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions (Russian Research Center Studies)

By Steven L. Solnick

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**Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions (Russian Research Center Studies)** By Steven L. Solnick

What led to the breakdown of the Soviet Union? Steven Solnick argues, contrary to most current literature, that the Soviet system did not fall victim to stalemate at the top or to a revolution from below, but rather to opportunism from within. In three case studies--on the Communist Youth League, the system of job assignments for university graduates, and military conscription--Solnick makes use of rich archival sources and interviews to tell the story from a new perspective, and to employ and test Western theories of the firm in the Soviet environment. He finds that even before Gorbachev, mechanisms for controlling bureaucrats in Soviet organizations were weak, allowing these individuals great latitude in their actions. Once reforms began, they translated this latitude into open insubordination by seizing the very organizational assets they were supposed to be managing. Thus, the Soviet system, Solnick argues, suffered the organizational equivalent of a colossal bank run. When the servants of the state stopped obeying orders from above, the state's fate was sealed.

By incorporating economic theories of institutions into a political theory of Soviet breakdown and collapse, *Stealing the State* offers a powerful and dynamic account of the most important international political event of the later twentieth century.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

Amid lamentations over 'reforms' stymied by Communist troglodytes, the repudiation of socialism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed to come out of the blue. An institutional loss of confidence turned into a self-fulfilling spiral. 'Soviet institutions,' explains Steven L. Solnick, 'were victimized by the organizational equivalent of a colossal bank run.' Soviet officials sensed the impending doom, and they 'rushed to claim...assets before the bureaucratic doors shut for good.' Of course, 'unlike [in] a bank run, the defecting officials were not depositors claiming their rightful assets, but employees of the state appropriating state assets.' And they grabbed everything that was 'fungible.' (From the wreckage Solnick himself plucked a valuable book.) (Stephen Kotkin *New Republic*)

A rigorous account of how the Soviet system fell apart. Using three different Soviet youth organizations as examples--the Komsomol, military conscription, and the job assignment program--Solnick illustrates how Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms rechanneled the self-seeking behavior of bureaucrats in directions that destroyed rather than revived soviet institutions. He bases his compact and accessible explanation on recent general institutional theory. Seen from this angle, structures collapsed not because ideology failed, politicians quarreled, or interested groups rose to challenge sterile authority. Instead, the system imploded because bureaucrats at all levels made off with state assets at the first opportunity, hollowing out the state or 'stealing' it...[The book's] underlying argument will fascinate most. (*Foreign Affairs*)

Solnick addresses one of the most important questions about the breakdown of the Soviet Union: Why did seemingly stable Soviet institutions disintegrate so rapidly during Gorbachev's reforms? In constructing his answer, Solnick uses a neo-institutional conceptual framework, which focuses the analysis on authority structures of institutions and incentives for individual bureaucratic actors. This is an original, richly documented and engagingly written study that reconceptualizes our understanding of major elements of the Soviet collapse. (Linda Cook, Brown University)

Solnick makes a strong case for taking seriously the role that the collapse of institutions internally played in the overall collapse of the Soviet Union. *Stealing the State* is a major contribution to our understanding of one of the great events of the twentieth century. (William Zimmerman, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan)

### **From the Back Cover**

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### **About the Author**

Steven L. Solnick is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Columbia University.

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