Disintegration of the Soviet Union as Seen in Japanese Political Cartoons

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese political cartoons have, since their initial popularity in the late nineteenth century, played a significant role in shaping debate on domestic politics and foreign relations. The development of modern political cartoons coincided with the rise of the Japanese empire and wars with China (1894–95) and later with Russia (1904–5). On the one hand, the cartoons were powerful forces of propaganda, helping to boost Japanese national sentiment; on the other hand, the satirical and often humorous illustrations served as one of the few avenues open for political critique. Cartoons also were instrumental in creating images, often in the form of enduring stereotypes of foreign countries, which in turn helped to define Japanese national identity. Yulia Mikhailova, for example, has written on the role of political cartoons at the time of the Russo-Japanese War.1

Throughout the twentieth century, political cartoons not only reflected popular opinion, but served to form it, influencing the way readers viewed events. Although some critics claim that the spread of television and the internet has minimized the role of political cartoons or that contemporary life is too complex to be conveyed in simple black and white illustrations, others, to the contrary, maintain that it is the very scarcity of graphic resources that allows a cartoonist to condense various events into an impressive symbol that remains in the memory of people.2 The example of the furore caused by several anti-Islamic cartoons in 2006 gives strong evidence for the continuing power of the political cartoon, for better or worse.3
It is difficult to imagine a contemporary newspaper completely void of cartoons. Some newspapers, such as the Asahi Shinbun in Japan, consider publication of cartoons to be one of the mainstays of its editorial policy. For thirty-eight years, between 1954 and 1992, the Asahi Shinbun had a special illustrated column providing satirical insight into contemporary society (shakai gihyō) usually drawn by Yokoyama Taizō and published once a week. In addition, cartoons by Yamada Shin, Hari Sunao, Kojima Kō and other artists appear on the second page of the newspaper in nearly every issue. The political cartoons are placed next to the editorial, although the editorial itself may not address the same topic. The Asahi Shinbun is also noted for its strong coverage of foreign affairs. It maintains correspondents in major cities in Europe, Asia and the United States, and subscribes to more than twenty international news services. Finally, the Asahi Shinbun enjoys wide readership in Japan with a current circulation of some twelve million. Cartoons published in the Asahi Shinbun, therefore, are an important, but sometimes overlooked, visual source able to help us see how the disintegration of the Soviet Union was represented in Japan.

This chapter will look primarily at the cartoons that appeared in the December 1991 issues of the Asahi Shinbun – during the last and most critical month of the existence of the Soviet empire. Even a fleeting glimpse of the cartoons published during this month reveals an overriding interest in the fate of the Soviet Union. Of course, this news item appeared prominently in newspapers around the world. The collapse of the Soviet Union was an event, comparable with the 1917 Russian Revolution, that significantly affected the history of the global community. However, during the same period, the Mainichi, another major Japanese daily, published only two cartoons related to the event while five political cartoons appeared in the pages of The New York Times. The Asahi Shinbun featured eighteen cartoons related to events in the Soviet Union during the course of December 1991 at an average rate of one every other day. From 23 to 29 December, the cartoons appeared on a daily basis for seven days in a row, something unprecedented, especially with regard to events taking place outside of Japan. These cartoons are an extraordinary resource for researchers interested in Japanese views of Russia.

This chapter sets out to examine how the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 was interpreted in Japan, focusing on images of understanding published in the form of political cartoons. It first describes the political events of 1991 that brought about the dissolution of the Soviet Union and examines aspects of this process that attracted the attention of cartoonists. Second, it compares the content of cartoons with articles published in the Asahi Shinbun and with cartoons appearing in The New York Times at the same time, hoping to identify differences and similarities in approach. Third, it examines images of Russia and its political leaders that cartoonists sought to imprint on the minds of the Japanese newspaper (cartoon) reading public. In sum, Asahi cartoons described the