"JUST A COMMON MAN"

"I am Oz, the Great and the Terrible," said the little man, in a trembling voice, "but don't strike me—please don't—and I'll do anything you want me to."

Our friends looked at him in surprise and dismay.

"Making believe!" — cried Dorothy. "Are you not a great Wizard?"

"Hush, my dear," he said; "don't speak so loud, or you will be overheard—and I should be ruined. I'm supposed to be a Great Wizard."

"And aren't you?" she asked.

"Not a bit of it, my dear; I'm just a common man."

The Wizard of Oz
by L. Frank Baum

The end of the Gorbachev era seems to have been not unlike Dorothy's discovery that the Wizard of Oz was nothing but a tiny timid man behind a curtain of special effects and hype. In the end, the "superpower" that was the Soviet Union simply dissolved into a rump of something without any real structures, as republic after republic defied all the old rules and declared independence. The weakness of the old shell was all too clear: it took no intrigue, military assault, dramatic economic collapse or mass uprising to break it, nor was there any great visionary leader urging the masses to change.

The "unveiling" of the fake Wizard was yet another proof that what we thought we saw, we didn't: the coup de grace was the Keystone Cops' version of a coup that failed in August, 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union ended up being more about who occupied what office or what strip of land and who needed
to create a new nation and a new office for himself than it was about defeating Communism and creating capitalism. The "masses" were virtually silent. All of this has been a new kind of historic transformation. It also has been one for which the scholarship of the last fifty years on Communism, totalitarianism and even democratization did not prepare us.

However wrong the images have been of Soviet strength both externally and internally, fifty years of Communist studies can not simply be handed off to historians. They are now able to check their own research wizardry with almost open access to Soviet archives. We need to check our theoretical assumptions with reality. How our assumptions came to be so far from reality is important and, so far, virtually unanalyzed. It is far more than an intellectual history to be written. It raises critical questions for the way we approach these new systems and other systems. Until we can answer these critical questions, our understanding of the present and our picture of the past will continue to be dramatically distorted. We run the risk of continuing to see stability where there is weakness and revolution where there is continuity.

"Revolution" or Continuity

The once touted "transitions to democracy," in fact, reflect more continuity than change.

—The postcommunist leaders in the territories that were the Soviet Union, with the exception of the Baltic states, have yet to risk elections or even talk of holding them. Most are men who learned politics as Party members and activists.

The postcommunist leaders in Eastern Europe and the Baltics have been elected. Almost all of them come out of the dissident movement or, with few exceptions, had no practical experience in governing during the Communist era.

Yet, whether the new rulers are old Communist leaders or dissidents who survived Communism outside of it, most are as elitist and distrustful of the demos they rule as the leaders they replace. They know they have not been able to fulfill their promises any more than the Communist leaders did. They are increasingly worried about opening up the floodgates of criticism. And so they too engage in trying to censor, shame and belittle their critics. They too see the world as "us versus them,"