

From Sovnarkhoz to Siloviki

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Introduction

This book follows a simple intuition: institutions rarely disappear; they recombine. From the waning years of Soviet central planning to the consolidation of security-service elites in contemporary Russia, the architecture of governance has been less a story of rupture than of refashioning. By tracing personnel biographies, organizational blueprints, and ideological vocabularies across three turbulent decades, we will see

how habits of rule—allocation by command, surveillance as management, and hierarchy as virtue—were repurposed rather than replaced. The title signals this arc. “Sovnarkhoz” evokes the Soviet experiment with territorially based economic administration, while “siloviki” names the contemporary constellation of actors rooted in coercive institutions. Between these bookends lies the practical politics of continuity.

The Sovnarkhoz reform, though formally short-lived, distilled core features of Soviet governance that outlasted its abolition: the privileging of administrative coherence over market coordination, the expectation that technical expertise would serve political directives, and a conviction that territorial scale could be mastered through bureaucratic design. Even when ministries reasserted themselves, the reform left organizational sediment—cadres trained to translate plans into commands, and an ethos that equated control with capacity. These legacies mattered in the late Soviet decades, as economic strain grew and informal workarounds multiplied. The system survived not by efficiency but by adaptability, incubating networks that would later navigate the dislocations of transition. Institutions are repositories of routines; those routines travel with people.

Perestroika cracked open these routines without dissolving them. New laws and councils proliferated; oversight was redistributed; veto points multiplied. Yet the security organs, planning agencies, and party-state personnel remained enmeshed in the everyday work of governing. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the aspiration for a decisive “reset” met the reality of inherited organizations, entrenched careers, and a cultural grammar of order. Privatization and market making were layered atop this substrate. The result was not an overnight creation of capitalist institutions, but a hybrid field in which old and new actors bargained over resources, rules, and symbols of legitimacy.

It is in this hybrid field that the siloviki rose. Their ascent was not simply a return of repression; it was an institutional solution to problems defined as disorder: tax noncompliance, capital flight, regional defiance, oligarchic rivalry, and geopolitical shocks. Security-service veterans offered tools that resonated with inherited administrative logics—investigations, prosecutions, audits, and the coordination of “strategic sectors”—and they positioned themselves as guardians of sovereignty and stability. State corporations, regulatory agencies, and law-enforcement bodies formed interlocking directorates that fused coercion with control over assets. The language of patriotism and legality supplied ideological cover; the circulation of cadres supplied capacity.

The chapters that follow map this transformation along three dimensions. First, they reconstruct organizational change across ministries, agencies, and state corporations, showing how formal reforms interacted with informal practices. Second, they trace personnel flows, identifying career ladders that connect late Soviet training grounds to

contemporary command posts. Third, they analyze ideological frames—sovereignty, conservatism, order—that stabilize authority and justify intervention in markets and society. The empirical materials range from legal acts and budget lines to corporate registries, procurement records, and media archives, read with attention to both design and practice. Throughout, the argument is comparative in spirit: Russia's path is distinctive, but the mechanisms of institutional recombination are not.

This is therefore not a tale of predestination, nor a morality play about betrayal of democratic promise. It is a study of path dependence under pressure: how organizational habits, elite networks, and justificatory ideas made some choices easier, others harder, and many more thinkable than they would otherwise have been. From Sovnarkhoz to siloviki, the through line is the politics of control—its techniques, its personnel, its evolving moral vocabulary. Understanding that through line clarifies how post-Soviet governance came to look as it does, why it has proven resilient in the face of crises, and where its vulnerabilities lie. The pages ahead invite the reader to follow the people who carried the institutions forward, the institutions that carried the people upward, and the ideas that carried them both.

CHAPTER ONE: The Last Plan: Late Soviet Administration at Dusk

Even at its quietest, the Soviet administrative machine did not sleep, only slowed. By the late 1980s the rhythm had become unmistakable: ministries inhaled targets, held them briefly, then exhaled commands that ricocheted down branch and regional ladders with predictable losses in translation. There is something stately about a system in which everyone knows the choreography even as the music goes tinny, and this was the Soviet Union on the eve of its unraveling, a place where paper carried more weight than prices and where the filing cabinet remained the true arbiter of possibility. The last plan did not arrive with trumpets, nor did it depart as a tragedy of great clarity; instead, it lingered like fog over ministries and councils, thick enough to navigate by, too thin to breathe. Into that fog stepped cadres who would later resurface across a changed landscape, carrying the habits of command as if it were winter clothing.

The Sovnarkhoz experiment, though formally buried by the mid-1960s, had left sediment in the marrow of Soviet governance that late-period planners could still feel. Regional economic councils had once promised to compress distance between plan and production, to make geography itself an instrument of coordination. That promise died when ministries reclaimed their prerogatives, yet something of their logic survived in training schools, in promotion criteria, and in the unshakable belief that

territorial scale could be mastered by bureaucratic artifice. When the late Soviet state groped for solutions to bottlenecks and imbalances, it did not reach for markets; it reached for the oldest tool in the drawer, which was to redraw boxes and hope the contents would behave. Administrative coherence continued to be treated as a substitute for economic coordination, and the people who lived inside those boxes learned to speak the language of feasibility while mastering the arts of noncompliance.

Gosplan sat at the center of this world like an air traffic controller in a storm, trying to vector flights that were increasingly willing to fly by feel. Its corridors smelled of coffee, damp wool, and earnest calculation, a combination that reassured those who believed that quantity had a scent. The planning apparatus had long since perfected a method for turning ambitious slogans into columns of figures that summed to optimism, and in the late 1980s it continued to churn out five-year guidance with the same steady pulse, even as inputs grew ragged and promises rang hollow. There is a dignity to doing one's job well under impossible constraints, and Gosplan's staff possessed plenty of it, yet their expertise was increasingly devoted to documenting shortfalls rather than preventing them, calibrating expectations downward while keeping the machinery of targets in motion.

Ministries behaved less like managers than like estates, each with its own climate and etiquette, its own sense of what counted as reasonable. They hoarded capacities the way noble families hoarded silver, redistributing them only under duress and with maximum ceremony. This produced a kind of feudal modernism in which steel and cement acquired lineages, and in which success often depended on knowing which assistant to the deputy minister could be persuaded to add a line to a resolution. The late Soviet command economy was therefore not simply a system of planning but a system of brokerage, where access to signatures mattered as much as access to supply, and where the right to ask was an asset that compounded over time. It was, in its own way, a market, except that the currency was administrative rather than monetary.

Within this setting, cadres learned to read plans the way sailors read clouds. The nomenklatura system ensured that trust could be converted into assignments, and assignments into further trust, so that personal loyalty and professional skill became braided in ways that defied easy separation. A ministry head who survived more than one five-year cycle typically did so by cultivating a network that spanned branch and region, by mastering the art of saying yes while meaning later, and by keeping a ledger of favors that never appeared in any official register. These were not rogue operators but practitioners of a sanctioned informalism, people who understood that the plan was a script to be performed rather than a law to be obeyed. Their performances kept the system moving long after its design had begun to fray.

Information moved through this ecosystem the way water moves through cracked

pipe, sometimes in gushes, often in seepage. Reporting channels were numerous but rarely neutral, each ministry and agency polishing its own lens before presenting reality upward. The result was a late Soviet version of the Rashomon effect, in which shortage and surplus could coexist in adjacent paragraphs depending on who authored them. Officials at the center learned to triangulate rather than believe, using hints from procurement patterns, labor turnover, and the tone of telephone calls to infer what lay beyond the paperwork. This improvisational intelligence proved more durable than the plans it surrounded, a skill set that would later serve the same actors well in less structured environments.

By the time perestroika began to unsettle these routines, the administrative apparatus had already spent years rehearsing for crisis through small, contained failures. Supply shocks arrived with metronomic regularity, each prompting a new circular from the Council of Ministers, each prompting a scramble to classify certain outputs as strategic so that they might be protected from the general entropy. The vocabulary of defense crept into civilian planning, and with it a moral distinction between those who kept the machine running and those who merely discussed it. This division would later harden into a hierarchy of competence in which technical authority shaded into political authority, and in which the ability to deliver under pressure became a form of legitimacy.

The Soviet twilight was therefore not devoid of energy, only of direction. Ministries continued to issue permits, inspectors continued to inspect, and local officials continued to negotiate with enterprises in ways that preserved appearances while quietly adjusting to scarcity. The system's resilience lay in its capacity to absorb contradiction, to allow informal bargains so long as formal hierarchies remained intact. This produced a distinctive late-Soviet condition in which everyone seemed to be following rules that nobody fully believed, yet the rules still mattered because they were the only maps available for territory that was shifting underfoot.

Personnel in this environment developed a kind of bureaucratic sixth sense, an ability to discern which directives were meant to be implemented and which were meant to be weathered. They cultivated relationships across sectors not out of ideological solidarity but from the recognition that survival required redundancy of access. A plant director who could pick up a telephone and reach a ministry planner in another republic possessed a hedge against uncertainty, and such hedges were traded, tested, and renewed with the same care that others gave to contracts. These connections formed a shadow lattice of coordination that ran parallel to the formal command structure, often better informed and more agile.

Ideology in these years grew quieter without disappearing, replaced by a moral vocabulary of stability and stewardship. To maintain output, to avoid layoffs, to keep trains running, acquired a quasi-ethical weight that transcended plan fulfillment. This allowed the administrative class to see itself as society's anchor even as the anchors

themselves began to drag. The language of duty provided cover for a great deal of discretion, and discretion provided the grease that allowed shrinking resources to stretch across expanding obligations. In this way, the system managed to look purposeful long after its original purposes had begun to dissolve.

The reforms of the late 1980s did not so much dismantle this world as force it to adapt in plain sight. New committees appeared, statutes proliferated, and talk of democratization and acceleration filled the air, yet ministries continued to guard their prerogatives with practiced indifference. Planning targets were softened and then softened again, but the expectation that commands would shape outcomes persisted. As a result, the administrative apparatus learned to live in a state of partial suspension, operating under rules that were increasingly unenforceable yet impossible to abandon. It was a limbo that rewarded those who could balance competing signals without committing to any.

Into this suspended state entered the security organs, already accustomed to navigating ambiguity. The KGB, the MVD, and the Procuracy had long treated the Soviet legal order as both a constraint and a toolkit, and they brought that sensibility into the economic sphere as ministries faltered. They understood better than most that paperwork could be weaponized, that investigations could serve as audits, and that surveillance could double as planning. Their personnel watched the administrative crisis with interest, noting which levers still moved things and which people still knew how to pull them. In doing so, they positioned themselves as the heirs to a certain kind of order, one based on capability rather than consent.

Regional officials, meanwhile, found themselves caught between central demands and local realities, a space in which improvisation became governance. The Sovnarkhoz tradition of territorial administration had never fully died at this level, and in the late 1980s it resurfaced in informal councils and ad hoc committees designed to pool resources and smooth distribution. These efforts rarely made it into central reports, but they kept factories open and cities supplied long enough for everyone to pretend that the plan still meant something. The skills required to sustain such efforts—networking, negotiation, selective compliance—were precisely those that would prove portable into the post-Soviet era.

The last plan was therefore less a document than a mood, a collective agreement to proceed as if direction were still possible. It bound ministries and enterprises in rituals of forecasting and approval that felt increasingly ceremonial yet could not be abandoned without admitting the scale of change. Cadres performed their parts with varying degrees of conviction, aware that the system's longevity depended on their willingness to keep writing signatures even as the ink lost its authority. This performance created a reservoir of administrative momentum that would carry people and practices forward long after the Soviet Union itself had vanished.

When collapse came, it did not erase this reservoir; it redirected its flow. Ministries fractured, but their personnel did not. Planning agencies shrank, but their logic expanded into new domains. The tools of command were repurposed to manage privatization, regulation, and even violence, while the habits of hierarchy proved useful in conditions of rapid redistribution. The late Soviet administrative class, far from being swept away, entered the post-Soviet world with its networks intact, its skills sharpened by years of scarcity, and its moral vocabulary intact. They would not remain unchanged, but they would remain in position to shape what followed.

The significance of this twilight period lies not in its achievements but in its rehearsals. It was a time when the Soviet state learned how to function without faith, how to govern without growth, and how to command without control. The people who mastered these lessons carried them forward, moving from ministries to banks, from regional committees to state corporations, from planning offices to security councils. Their ability to translate old capacities into new settings would define the trajectory of Russian governance, blurring the line between reform and restoration. In understanding how they did this, we begin to see not only how the last plan survived its own obsolescence but also how its ghost helped assemble the state that came after.

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