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ROUND TABLE



A Cold War endgame or an opportunity missed? Analysing the Soviet collapse Thirty years later

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Cold War History organised this roundtable to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Soviet Union – one of the two superpower poles that defined the Cold War confrontation and international order. In recent decades, historians have begun to write about ‘global Cold War(s)’, seeking to move the focus away from the superpowers and enhance the roles of other actors. While the United States still looms central in this new research, due to the predominance of US scholars, the English language and the accessibility of archives, the Soviet Union has begun to fade from the literature on the Cold War, sometimes making a cameo appearance, sometimes appearing only as a footnote. It is understandable that fewer people want to study the foreign policy of a vanished state. There is also a perceived impression that Moscow archives are largely closed – while there has actually been a declassification of massive collections of Soviet documents on external political and diplomatic affairs. There is a danger that the Soviet Union will fade away quietly from the study of the Cold War, just as it was eclipsed in 1991 by international politics.

This discussion puts the Soviet Union back into focus and invites readers to reflect again on the causes and impact of its extinction. The roundtable includes scholars who study both the last years of the Soviet Union and the changing international history before and after the Soviet collapse. The majority of these scholars have a living memory of 1991, yet the roundtable also includes voices from a younger cohort of scholars, reflecting the rapid transformation of the Soviet Union from a menacing reality to an academic history. I thought it was particularly

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*This collection of essays is the first publication in the new section Conversations on Cold War History. This “roundtable” commemorates the anniversary of the Soviet Union’s collapse and reflects professional and generational diversity, including perspectives of Russian scholars. The participants focus on a relatively non-violent dissolution of the second superpower, the causes of this development, its relevance to the end of the Cold War, to the debates on empires, and studies of international relations, especially the US-Russian relations.

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important to give a say to Russian and Russia-born scholars, whose voices are normally absent in discussions in the West. After all, the Soviet collapse was largely their internal affair.

The convenor and editor of the roundtable is **Vladislav Zubok**, Professor of International History at the LSE. He has published widely on the history of the Cold War, as well as on Soviet political history. His most recent book is *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (London: Yale University Press, 2021).

Other participants include the following:

Michael Cox is Emeritus Professor of International Relations and one of the Founding Directors of LSE IDEAS. He is the author or editor of several books, including most recently a collection of his own essays, *The Post-Cold War World* (Routledge, 2018), a centennial edition of J. M. Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and a new edition of E. H. Carr's 1945 classic, *Nationalism and After* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). His next book, *Agonies of Empire: US Power from Clinton to Biden*, will be published in early 2022.

Vladimir O. Pechatnov is Professor of American Studies at Moscow State Institute of International Relations. He has published widely on US-Soviet relations during the Second World War and the Cold War. His most recent work is David Reynolds and Vladimir Pechatnov, eds., *The Kremlin Letters: Stalin's Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

Rodric Braithwaite has been dealing with Russia on and off for about eight decades. He studied Russian at Cambridge in the 1950s, served in the British Embassy in Moscow in the 1960s and was the last UK ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1988–91. He has published widely on Russian history. His next book, due out next year, is called *Russia: Myths and Realities*.

Kristina Spohr is Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her most recent book is *Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989* (William Collins, 2019; Yale University Press, 2020), with its German edition *Wendezeit: Die Neuordnung der Welt nach 1989* (DVA, 2019) having been awarded the 2020 'Das politikwissenschaftliche Buch' prize in Germany.

Sergey Radchenko is the Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. His next book, *The First Fiddle: a History of the Cold War and After*, will be published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.

Sergey Zhuravlev is Deputy Director of the Institute of Russian History, Moscow. He is the author of a number of books, including *History of Contemporary Russia: The Period of Economic Reforms, 1992–99* (together with R. Pikhov and A. Sokolov, 2011) and, most recently, *Fashion Soviet Style: Luxury in a Country of Deficit* (with Jukka Gronow, 2019).

Isaac Scarborough is University Lecturer in Russian Studies in the Institute for History, Leiden University, and Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the School of Humanities and Social Science, Liverpool John Moores University. His forthcoming book, *Moscow's Heavy Shadow: The Violent Collapse of the USSR*, refocuses attention on the harsh consequences faced by those who experienced the end of the Soviet experiment.

Svetlana Savranskaya is senior analyst and director of Russia programmes at the National Security Archive, George Washington University. Her most recent book, with Thomas Blanton, is *The Last Superpower Summits: Gorbachev, Reagan and Bush. Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

M. E. Sarotte is the Kravis Distinguished Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She is the author, most recently, of *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

Vladislav Zubok: 'A puzzle, conclusions and delusions'

During the first three decades after the Soviet collapse, most analysis and discussion of the event originated in the West. Jack Matlock, former US ambassador to the USSR, famously concluded early on that the end of the Cold War, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the fall of the Soviet Union constituted three separate developments that should not be conflated.¹ The vast majority of Western commentators, however, did exactly that. Americans took the lead. On 29 August 1991, in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, William Safire wrote:

The Soviet empire is breaking up . . . This is a glorious moment for human freedom. We should savour that moment, thanking God, NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization], the heroic dissidents in Russia and the internal empire, and the two-generation sacrifice of the American people to protect themselves and the world from despotic domination.²

These lines continue to express the mainstream thinking in the United States about the Soviet demise.

The Bush administration (1989–93) shared this discourse in principle, while using tactical prudence in practice. In an internal discussion in June 1991, Secretary of the Treasury Nicholas Brady argued that it would be in the interests of US security to change 'Soviet society so that it can't afford a defence system' and the Soviet state would become 'a third-rate power, which is what we want'. In September 1991 Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney argued that the United States should immediately recognise an independent Ukraine: 'If democracy fails, we're better off, if they [the Russians] are small'. President George H. W. Bush adopted a triumphalist discourse in both his Christmas 1991 speech and in the State of the Nation address in January 1992. Morality, geopolitics and history conditioned and fed the US reaction.

In Europe, while many applauded Gorbachev's attempt to reform his country, others gave a great sigh of relief when the long-time geopolitical rival, and a military giant, vanished – bringing an end to recurring nuclear nightmares. The historian Odd Arne Westad summed it up in 2017: the disappearance of the Soviet Union 'removed the last vestige of the Cold War as an international system . . . The final drama of the Cold War

¹Jack Matlock develops this concept in his books: *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2005) and *Superpower Illusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

²William Safire, 'After the Fall', *New York Times*, August 29, 1991.

became a purely Soviet tragedy'.³ For Westad and many others in the West, the Soviet collapse marked the final end of the Cold War – not in November 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, but December 1991.

Scholars in the field of Soviet studies produced sophisticated explanations of what happened in 1991. Yet for them, the structural factors in the Soviet Union's demise made the story self-evident. The disintegration of the Soviet state proved *after* the event that it could not be reformed. The leading 'school' defined the USSR as the last empire, cobbled together by blood and terror; nationalism in one way or another was bound to rip up the union. One iconoclast continued to argue that the Soviet Union was 'reformable', and got a reply: was the Soviet Union worth saving? The failure of Gorbachev's reforms disappointed Western intellectuals: those who had once admired the Soviet Union as a child of the great revolution, now rejected it as being a totalitarian deadlock and an unfortunate detour for humanity.⁴

And yet nobody anticipated the Soviet Union's demise. The speed of its crumbling remains a puzzle to this day. On 25 December 1991, the day of Gorbachev's resignation, Bush dictated to his diary that the United States was 'blessed' by the extraordinary nature of the Soviet disappearance. Perceptive observers in 1991 pointed to Gorbachev's remarkable style of leadership that transformed the unfathomable into the inevitable. 'For all his brilliance', Scowcroft later reflected,

Gorbachev appeared to have a fatal flaw. He seemed unable to make tough decisions and then stick with them. He made a fine art of temporizing and trimming his sails Had Gorbachev possessed the authoritarian and Stalin-like political will and determination of his predecessors, we might be still facing the Soviet Union.⁵

Years later, in her comparative study on the end of European communist regimes, political scientist Valerie Bunce expressed amazement, describing the development as 'puzzling' and Gorbachev's role as 'crucial'. The collapse, in her analysis, was the product of the conscious devolution of power and bargaining among elites. This line of argument was amplified by Stephen Kotkin and Jan Gross, who argued that the revolutions of 1989–91 were in fact the coups of communist elites, who successfully travelled from communism to capitalism.⁶

When Gorbachev and his entourage launched *perestroika* in 1985–7, very few in the Soviet Union expected anything but conservative reforms from above. A few more imagined a negotiated end of the East-West confrontation on mutually acceptable terms. The Soviet leadership and most of the Party and economic bureaucracy welcomed the 'conversion' of the military-industrial complex, the decentralisation of the economy, the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, a settlement with the People's Republic of China and autonomy for the 'socialist bloc' in Eastern-Central Europe. Yet almost nobody wanted or expected the uncontrollable chaos and decline that occurred in just three years and consumed the Soviet economy, institutions and state.

³Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 613–14.

⁴Stephen F. Cohen, 'Was the Soviet System Reformable?' and Karen Dawisha, 'The Question of Questions: Was the Soviet Union Worth Saving?' *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (2004): 459–88, 513–26.

⁵George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 559–624.

⁶Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 128, 133; and Stephen Kotkin and Jan Tomasz Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2009).

A great number of people among the elites and within the bureaucracies of the USSR celebrated the end of the Cold War as a time of new opportunities. Some even warmed to the victory of the West, hoping that it would be accompanied by Western generosity, and would open the gates for Western technology and investments. The narrative of the benevolent US power that turned former enemies, like Germany and Japan, into prosperous societies, was highly attractive in the Soviet Union in 1991. And Gorbachev's foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze and his assistants even argued that the Soviet Union could be preserved only by leaning on the United States – in essence transforming Moscow from the main foe into a special ally. This turned out to be a grand delusion. The US leadership and other Western governments never had political incentives to prop up the giant in the East. And the growing chaos and uncertainty undercut earlier commercial interests and plans for investments.

I recall how much hope and enthusiasm Gorbachev's *perestroika* had initially evoked. It was only during 1989 that the credibility of the Gorbachev leadership began to fade. In 1990, expectations and rumours of some kind of authoritarian dictatorship began to circulate around Moscow. Yet that spectre of a new authoritarianism pointed more to an uncertain future than to the terrible Stalinist past. An increasing number of people, in the streets and among the elite, concluded that Gorbachev had exhausted his potential as a leader; those people pinned their hopes on the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, who represented the Russian Federation, the most important republic of the Union.

Nobody around me at the time realised that the Russian 'sovereignty' and separatism that Yeltsin promoted would quickly lead to the destruction of the country. It was a shock, when instead of a new authoritarianism came the farcical coup of 19 August 1991, which ended in the suicide of all key state structures. After August, it became clear that power was in the hands of Boris Yeltsin and other potentates of post-Soviet republics. Then came the final shock: Yeltsin's decision to recognise Ukraine, which was until then considered inseparable from Russia, and dissolve the Union.

There was strikingly little research done and remarkably few historical narratives of the Soviet collapse written in the post-Soviet space – as if intellectuals avoided this subject. Some of the existing interpretations parallel Western arguments. In the Baltic states and in Ukraine, the story about the inevitability of the collapse of 'the last European empire' was promoted to boost the legitimacy of the new nation-states. Leonid Kravchuk, a Party ideologist elected as the first president of Ukraine on 1 December 1991, claimed that the Ukrainian referendum on independence on that day was the final push that led to the collapse of the Soviet Empire. 'Ukraine should take credit for it'. A prominent US-Ukrainian historian from Harvard University later supported this claim in an influential book.⁷ In Moscow, Boris Yeltsin had to tread carefully on this topic. Initially, he adopted the discourse of 'national-democratic revolution' inside the Soviet Union, where 'Russia' was the leader, yet he quickly changed tune. Soon nobody mentioned that the Russian Federation had indeed been the leading vehicle of separatism and the destruction of the Soviet state. A vocal opposition accused Yeltsin of destroying the common state in order to seize power in one republic. In his memoirs, Yeltsin fudged the issue, and placed the main blame on the makers of the August coup.

⁷Serhii Plokhyy, *The Last Empire: The Last Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Yegor Gaidar, the person whom Yeltsin appointed to lead market reforms *in Russia only*, had perhaps the largest stake in the promotion of the thesis of the inevitability of the Soviet collapse. An economist and intellectual, Gaidar devoted the last years of his life (he died in 2009) to a study of the end of the Soviet state, pointing to structural factors such as systemic rigidity, macroeconomic disbalances, overdependence on oil, vast and costly social-economic commitments and others. Today a group of Russian liberal researchers constitute what may be called the 'Gaidar School'. They adhere to the conclusions that Gaidar reached.⁸

Some post-Soviet scholars in Russia adhere to the view that the Soviet collapse was the outcome of a power bargain among Party elites – in lieu of a democratic revolution. A leading historian of late Soviet political history, Rudolf Pikhoya, devoted years of archival research to this topic, and concluded that the Soviet elites had privatised the Soviet economy even before August 1991, and therefore did not want to fight for the Soviet state.⁹

Western predominance, one can even say intellectual hegemony, in studying the Soviet collapse may seem to be a logical extension of the end of the Cold War. After all, the Western victory was not a military one, but an economic, political and also ideational one. But this Western dominance has obvious limitations and downsides. Many threads in the Western and select Russian analyses of the Soviet collapse overlapped and created a widespread sense of determinism – with the result that ultimately the event came to be viewed as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet, in my opinion, for historians the Soviet collapse continues to present a puzzle that does not quite click together. Some participants of this roundtable, including me, want to revisit the thesis of inevitability, widely accepted in the Western literature. One astute scholar wrote of the Soviet collapse in 1993: 'We tend to confer the mantle of inevitability on accomplished facts, and arguing that what happened did not have to happen is likely to be dismissed as inventing excuses for the losing side'.¹⁰ This roundtable is guided by the spirit of intellectual quest, that has everything to do with the duty of historians and nothing to do with any nostalgia for the Soviet past.

This roundtable revealed a diversity of perspectives and conclusions among scholars three decades after the event. It would be presumptuous on my part to systematise and categorise the contributions. It would be more fruitful to add another voice to the chorus, with some conclusions from my own study.

George Kennan jotted in his notebook in 1946 that the Soviet threat to the West could be removed by a 'gradual mellowing of Soviet policy under influence of firm and calm resistance abroad'. Yet this mellowing, he warned, would be 'slow and never complete'. Another, more radical option, Kennan wrote, could be 'internal dissension which would temporarily weaken Soviet potential & lead to situation similar to that of 1919–20'.¹¹

⁸Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007).

⁹Rudolf Pikhoya, 'Why the nomenklatura did not defend the Soviet Union?' <http://www.russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Rudolf-Pikhoya-Pochemu-nomenklatura-ne-stala-zaschischat-Sovetskij-Soyuz> accessed 27 September 2021; also his presentation at an international workshop, 'Reevaluating the Soviet Collapse: Domestic and International Frameworks of Politics and Economics', London School of Economics, London, March 23, 2018.

¹⁰Vladimir Kontorovich, 'The Economic Fallacy', *The National Interest* 31 (1993): 44.

¹¹Frank Costigliola, ed., *The Kennan Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 199.

Kennan did not consider this option likely, yet this was closer to what happened in 1989–91. Fortunately, it was short of a civil war. But what caused such a profound crisis? And was indeed such a development, that even Kennan found unlikely, inevitable?

When I worked on my book about the Soviet collapse, I experienced a constant cognitive dissonance. I harked back to my memories and feelings from 1990–1, but found them differing from Western and Russian determinist narratives. Ultimately, I decided to translate my memories into an emotional history of the period: the story of hopes, fears and despair, a major part of revolutionary times. I focused instead on checking the validity of dominant narratives against the primary sources that Western and post-Soviet archives provide. I also leaned on the research of a few scholars who worked outside the mainstream. The outcome of my search confirmed some established points, but is overall revisionist.

I found no evidence that the Soviet Union's Cold War commitments were major factors in the Soviet crisis and fall. Afghanistan, contrary to various pundits and media claims, did not turn out to be 'the graveyard of Soviet superpower'. While this war caused grievous losses and social tension, it never generated a political crisis similar to the US crisis during the Vietnam War. Soviet troops withdrew in good order, and the regime installed by Moscow stayed in power, with the help of Soviet arms and money, for the next four years.

While Soviet military expenditures were a big burden for the economy, they were not 'crushing', as some Western narratives go. The Soviet military and the military-industrial complex (MIC), as well as research and development (R&D), were also remarkably cheap in comparison with their US counterparts. The overall cost never exceeded 15% of gross domestic product (GDP), a constant number that began to decline in 1989. A leading scholar on the Soviet economy concludes that nobody in the Soviet leadership 'saw the Soviet Union being crushed under an unbearable military burden'. In economic terms, he acknowledged, 'the Soviet Union had a revealed comparative advantage in military activities'.¹² It was not the Cold War overextension that doomed the Soviet economy and state.

Nor did a drop in world oil prices in 1986–7 deal 'a death blow' to Soviet economic and financial stability – contrary to the claims of Reagan's fans in the United States and Yegor Gaidar. While the Politburo documents contain complaints about the loss of oil revenues, Soviet finances in 1989–91 were disrupted much more by other developments: the runaway costs of social programmes mandated by newly elected populist parliaments; the absence of much-needed monetary and fiscal reforms to stem the inflationary trends; and the loss of state controls over credits and taxes caused by the misguided reforms of the Gorbachev government. The thesis about the 'crushing' military-defence costs that allegedly forced reforms on the Soviet leadership belongs to a set of Western Cold War legends.

¹²Mark Harrison, 'Secrets, Lies, and Half Truths: The Decision to Disclose Soviet Defence Outlays' (working paper no. 55, Political Economy Research in Soviet Archives, September 2008), <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/mharrison/archive/persa/055.pdf> accessed 27 September 2021. On the Russian view see: Iu. D. Masliukov and E. S. Glubokov, 'Planirovanie i finansirovanie voennoi promyshlennosti v SSSR', in *Sovetskaia voennaia moshch ot Stalina do Gorbacheva*, ed. A. V. Minaev (Moscow: Voennyi parad, 1999), 82–129.

What about the role of nationalist mobilisation in the story of the Soviet collapse? This role was definitely central, but not linear and determinist, as many claim. A leading scholar of national mobilisation in Gorbachev's USSR admits his surprise: 'Despite the seriousness and complexity of Soviet nationality issues on the eve of *perestroika*, at the time Soviet ethnic problems appeared to most observers to be significant but hardly unmanageable'.¹³ The Soviet leadership before Gorbachev knew that the Soviet federation, with its territorialised title nationalities, and with suppressed Russian nationalism, was potentially unstable. Gorbachev and his reformist advisors moved to stabilise it, but in a bizarre way: they enhanced federated structures at the expense of the centre; and they provided nationalist movements with institutions for mobilisation and legitimacy. Inspired by a myth of 'socialist democracy' and armed with the works of Vladimir Lenin, Gorbachev provided the Baltic separatists with more than they could ever have dreamed of: 'self-accounting' in economy and 'people's fronts' in politics.

The Baltic nationalists were much more pragmatic. They realised that they could squeeze concessions from the Soviet leadership only if they got help from the pro-reform Russians in Moscow. They cultivated with stupendous success an alliance with 'Democratic Russia', a broad movement that *perestroika* made possible, on the basis of an anticommunist, anti-imperialist consensus.¹⁴ And again, Gorbachev consented to this development by providing a perfect constitutional vehicle for Russian opposition – and Russian separatism. The outcome of the Gorbachevian course of 'stronger republics' was the quick formation of a parallel Russian political elite, which co-existed with the Soviet government in Moscow. The new elite included 'Democratic Russia', but largely consisted of the provincial Party cadres estranged by Gorbachev's course. Many of them voted for Boris Yeltsin and backed a 'sovereign Russia' in May–June 1990. They also wanted the 'Russification' of all economic assets on the territory of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR). For the Balts, and for the Ukrainian and Georgian nationalists, this was a gift from heaven: a unique split in the centre of Empire that benefitted their bid for national independence. An emotional and chaotic *Rexit*, that preceded by almost three decades a more measured Brexit, pulled the rug out from under Gorbachev's leadership and the Soviet state. Boris Yeltsin became an implacable and opportunistic rival of Gorbachev.

Analysis of the last decade of Soviet history shows that the state structures of coercion, fear and conformism – such as the Army and the KGB – were still important, but not the most important power instruments that held the Soviet state and society together. The centralised Party apparatus incorporated all segments of the Soviet elites and provided a powerful cementing structure for the common statehood. There were other important tools of power as well: a centrally managed economy with industrial conglomerates that encompassed all 15 republics, and a financial system that provided investments and stability that allowed the USSR to act as a superpower at a competitive cost.

A severe crisis of the Soviet state erupted only once Gorbachev's reforms, intentionally or unintentionally, pulled out those three props one after another in quick succession. From 1988 on, Gorbachev refused to use the Party as a political tool of governance and

¹³Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilisation and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 54, 55.

¹⁴More detailed analysis is in: Una Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty: The US, the Baltic Question, and the Collapse of the USSR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

reforms. Acting in the spirit of ‘socialist democracy’, he removed the Party nomenklatura, initially loyal to him, from economic affairs and forced Party officials to compete against anticommunists in fair elections. This course of action earned him the nomenklatura’s confusion, then contempt, and, ultimately, hatred. At the same time, Gorbachev hardly tried to build a substitute for the powerful tool he rejected. He did not even try to build a super-presidency based on a new constitution and direct national elections.

The Soviet government also devolved its unique economic power – control and possession over enormous economic assets and lucrative external trade – to thousands of state enterprises and a few national republics. Meanwhile, there was no political will to launch a market deregulation on the Soviet scale – a process that could have overshadowed nationalism and separatism and might have generated new incentives to keep a common economic and trade space, so that the federal state could profit from its massive properties and taxes on production and trade.

As to financial power, the central government dismantled it as well. It ceded control over the State Bank to the supreme legislature and failed to create a new financial system autonomous from democratic populism and the inflationary political pressures of the time. The state budget was rapidly defunded by the political and economic decentralisation that Gorbachev promoted and hailed. Just one example: the abolition of the old monopoly of the state on external trade – while keeping artificially low prices on raw materials – cost Soviet finances many times more revenue than the drop in world oil market prices.

What about ideology? True, in the 1980s nobody believed in communist fairy tales. Yet there was a powerful common historical narrative, rooted in the still-vivid memories of the Second World War, not in the distant myths of the revolution. Its potential to hold the country together was real, unlike the exhausted potential of communist promises. The deluge of *glasnost* swept away not only the old rags of communist ideology, but also put in doubt historical foundations of Soviet legitimacy and Russian–Soviet identity. As the Russian poet Okudzhava famously concluded: ‘the kingdom falls not when life becomes hard, but when the people lose respect for it’. In 1990, the majority of Soviet people were given numerous reasons to hate and despise their common recent history – and this cleared the way for the competitive narratives of ‘great Russia’, ‘organic Ukraine’ and so on.

By the end of 1990, well before the coup, Gorbachev found himself a leader without major control over institutions and policies and with only one form of power left to him: that of armed force, coercion and policy controls. The Army was dismayed and demoralised by the retreat from Eastern Europe, separatism in the borderlands of the Soviet Union and the anti-militarist mood at home, yet remained intact as a giant force. The KGB, however besieged in the Baltics and in the South Caucasus, also maintained strong allegiance to the state to whom its officers gave an oath of allegiance. This was exactly the form of power, however, that Gorbachev rejected as a matter of principle, as inimical to the ideological nature of his reforms. Ultimately, as some Balts and Ukrainian nationalists understood, the Soviet leader ended up being ‘a sorcerer’s apprentice’: he lacked the magic and gumption to check the forces he unleashed. Ultimately, even before the August coup, Gorbachev *de facto* agreed to dismantle the shreds of the old unitary state: he allowed Yeltsin to remove the last Party controls over economic and state structures; shared control over state finances, the Army and the KGB with him and other republican

potentates; and accepted the 'sovereignty' of the RSFSR and other republics over enormous economic assets – all this just for a promise to support a refurbished confederation where he, Gorbachev, would stay at the helm.

The Soviet collapse was by no means unavoidable. Instead, Gorbachev's reforms and leadership style, not the structural flaws of the Soviet economy and political system, achieved what seemed to be impossible: the destruction of the Soviet state within three years. In fact, much of what I found in my research into the last months of 1991 pointed to the remarkable tenacity of Soviet statehood. I also disagree with those who argue with absolute certainty that Soviet bureaucracies and elites were so retrograde and degenerate that they made alternative, less destabilising reforms impossible. There is ample evidence that in 1990 the main Soviet elites, including the managers of industrial and defence industries, Party cadres and even the KGB were in favour of market transition and tolerated ideas of a multi-party polity. All those bureaucracies waited, however, for an authoritarian leader with political will to smooth this transition. Gorbachev let down their expectations repeatedly: with full constitutional rights for emergency measures granted to him, Gorbachev became a placeholder for a dictatorial reformer. Ultimately, he was pushed aside by Yeltsin, who acted with customary resolve and ruthlessness, in the name of 'great Russia' and 'Russian democracy'.

It is not a fruitful approach for historians to scapegoat Gorbachev as a politician and person who ruined what was otherwise a great country. Instead, my analysis of the Soviet collapse testifies to a remarkable synergy between Soviet structural vulnerabilities and the dangers of misguided reforms, but also to the power of human beliefs and illusions.

A unique ruler that ran against the grain of the Soviet tradition of violence and authoritarianism, Gorbachev shared many beliefs and myths typical of his cohort of enlightened apparatchiks, the so-called 'Party intelligentsia' that had emerged during the cultural and humanistic thaw after Stalin's death. The story of the Soviet collapse was to a great extent the outcome of a leadership failure, but also of the conclusions and delusions of a great number of actors around Gorbachev.

The last Soviet leader, along with a cohort of 'people of the Sixties', concluded that the Cold War was primarily a product of Stalin and Stalinism, just like the structural problems of Soviet economy and society. By dismantling Stalinist structures, ideological myths and lies, along with the centralised economy and finances, Gorbachev and his assistants believed they would simultaneously create the necessary preconditions for the end of the Cold War. They also believed that, by trying to dismantle the Cold War via arms reductions and trust-building measures, they would prepare the ground for bringing the Soviet Union into 'the family of civilised, normal countries' like the United States and Western European states.

After 1989, when the Berlin Wall collapsed and history accelerated, a new 'Russian elite' led by Boris Yeltsin overtook this agenda by arguing that Gorbachev and his Union state's entourage were not radical enough and could not 'break with the past' in one go. Yeltsin and radicalised Soviet intellectuals from Moscow and the Russian provinces, almost all of them Party members, decided to renounce not just Stalinism, but the entire Soviet period. The Soviet Union, they argued, would remain a totalitarian construct, no matter how much one reformed it. Thus 'Russia', the largest republic of the USSR, should liberate itself from 'the totalitarian empire' – and by this heroic act liberate the West and

the rest of humanity from a nuclear and conventional menace that the Empire inherently generated. These conclusions were remarkably similar to the views of William Safire and the Republican Right in the United States, of anti-Soviet nationalists in Eastern Europe, Georgia, Finland and other countries that had been historically dominated, subjugated and invaded by their big eastern neighbour.

Those common conclusions shaped ‘the moment of 1991’ politically and ideologically. Instead of nationalist despair at the Soviet collapse, the victorious Yeltsin and his people celebrated ‘the rise of Russia’ and new democratic and economic opportunities that stemmed from the destruction of Soviet statehood. Yeltsin’s ideologue, Gennady Burbulis, shared a story with this author: right after the three leaders declared the Soviet Union extinct, Yeltsin sent Burbulis to Paris to meet with French president Francois Mitterrand, as well as to Brussels, to speak to Jacques Delors of the European Community and Manfred Wörner, the secretary-general of NATO. ‘I told [Mitterrand]’, Burbulis recalled, that ‘we managed to abolish the most totalitarian empire of the twentieth century with the maximum of legitimacy, within the Soviet constitution, and with a peaceful transfer of nuclear weapons to Russia’. In Yeltsin’s and Burbulis’ imagination, by dissolving the Soviet Union, they finally brought the Cold War to an end. The Russian emissary told Wörner that Russian reformers, now in control of the Russian Federation, ‘decisively consider a possibility of joining NATO, as part of our primary mission to remove all conditions for confrontation’. Burbulis recalled that his words left the NATO general secretary

confused, if not shocked. He was silent for a couple of minutes and then looked into my eyes and said: ‘Your confession is very unexpected for me. I think this is a very complicated task’. And almost without searching for arguments, he said: ‘You are such an enormous country. I cannot imagine under what configuration this may become reality’.¹⁵

Nobody thought so at the time, but perhaps at this moment the first seeds of misunderstanding, then frustration and growing tension, were sown in the relations between post-Soviet Russia and the West. Yeltsin and Burbulis misunderstood the power of historic narratives and geopolitics. For the Western leaders, the Soviet collapse was indeed a political miracle of epic proportions, probably unprecedented in world history. Yet the US leadership and the collective Western powers never had the political imagination to integrate the entire Soviet space. They also had no incentives to invest in the collapsing Soviet economy. Western leaders, experts and opinion-makers could not comprehend how their Soviet adversaries could suddenly transform into eager partners and even supplicants. The Americans, after decades of Cold War rivalry, continued to view the internal Soviet tug of war through binary lenses: ‘communists’ versus ‘democrats’; ‘reformers’ versus ‘hard-liners’; and so on.

In the historical imagination of Mitterrand, Delors and Wörner, as well as Bush, Scowcroft and countless other people from Nordic Europe to Romania and West Ukraine, what happened was merely a *translatio imperii* from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. The Eastern giant, however well-intentioned now, was a historical threat to its small neighbours and did not fit into Western alliances and spaces, be they United States-led or Brussels-constructed. The conclusion drawn by Yeltsin and Russian

¹⁵Vladislav Zubok, interview with Gennady Burbulis, April 20, 2021, by phone.

democrats that they liberated Europe and the world and earned something back quickly turned into a grand delusion. ‘Russia’, rather than a liberator, appeared to many in the West as a big country with unstable, unpredictable conduct and an absence of liberal-democratic traditions, such as the rule of law and peaceful compromise-making. Fast forward to Vladimir Putin, when those expectations became self-fulfilling prophecies under the rubric of Russian path-dependency.

History cannot be undone – and not only in the sense that old empires cannot be repaired and failed reforms cannot be re-tried. History also remains a primary background for assessments that will always divide Western and Russian perceptions of the Soviet collapse – and the assessment of Gorbachev, Yeltsin and the other actors who were on the political stage at the time. In the West, the collapse of the Soviet Union became conflated with the happy exit from the Cold War, victory over communism, the triumph of liberal values, and the expectation of eternal peace and prosperity. Across Eastern Europe, this event would be seen as the historic liberation from an imperial yoke and a period of great opportunities. And in Russia, millions will continue to listen to Putin and remember the period of 1989–99 as the time of chaos, violence and misery. In sum, the contrasting approaches to the collapse will remain ‘the twain’ that ‘never shall meet’, like in the famous Kipling poem. Still, as this roundtable demonstrates, scholarly conclusions stand very far from mythology and illusions both in the West and in the East. Further academic research and discussions cannot change mass perceptions, at least any time soon, but they can create a counter-current. In particular, they can help to better explain the shaky ground underpinning Western triumphalism and Russian resentment, as well as thwart the political instrumentalisation of a false sense of grandeur or victimhood that the historical turn of 30 years ago produced.

Michael Cox: ‘From Soviet studies to Soviet collapse’

I have no idea why I became a ‘Sovietologist’ other than the fact that one of my undergraduate lecturers was the best teacher I ever had, and whose chosen subject just happened to be imperial Russia and the USSR (there was not much difference between the two in his view). Tibor Szamuely was no ordinary lecturer, however. His uncle (of the same name) had been a senior member of the revolutionary Bela Kun government of 1919. He himself had been born in Moscow in 1925. He then received his early education in England. Later he served in the Red Army. He was arrested in the USSR in 1950 as a spy. After his release he went on to serve as vice-rector of the University of Budapest. Finally, by one means or another, he got to England (via Ghana) where, like many ex-communists, he teamed up with a group of ‘Cold War’ luminaries such as Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis while writing columns for conservative publications such as *The Spectator*, *Encounter* and the *Daily Telegraph*.¹⁶

Tibor’s teaching style was unique to say the least. Indeed, we only reached the Russian Revolution half-way through the course, having spent a good deal of it discussing the various strands of Russian thought in the nineteenth century. Yet he instilled in me a fascination for the country of his birth; he also tried, perhaps less successfully, to show that the USSR was less a revolutionary state originally inspired by Marxism (he had no

¹⁶Tibor Szamuely, *The Russian Tradition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974).

time for Trotsky) and more the successor of what he termed in his only book, a great 'Russian Tradition'. This tradition, he insisted, went back a thousand years before going on to shape the USSR. Stalin in this reading was not so much a Marxist who had turned Russia upside down, but rather the latest in a long line of rulers who believed that only the firmest of hands could keep the country together and ensure the continued survival of the regime against its enemies. Nor, it seemed, was there very much chance of the USSR escaping its fate. Tibor died in 1972 and thus did not witness the rise of Gorbachev, and it is difficult to know what he would have thought about his efforts to reform what Tibor thought was an unreformable totalitarian system. But he would certainly have understood Putin – another leader in the 'Russian tradition' who believed that post-communist Russia (and even ordinary Russians) much preferred the firm hand of government than the anarchy that always followed when democracy raised its alien head in this vast, almost ungovernable, nation.¹⁷

I make the point about Tibor not so much to tell a story about an interesting man, but rather to point to something that helped many of my generation to make sense of a country which claimed to be a model of a new society – a 'new civilization' as the Webbs called it – but whose practices seemed to bear little relationship to Marx's vision of a classless society.¹⁸ Even so, being able to engage directly with people who had actually lived through the Soviet experience (and more often than not suffered for their pains) provided me with insights it would have been impossible to have acquired in any other way. But my contact with their 'reality' was hardly unique. In fact, anybody who came into Soviet studies in the late 1960s and 1970s was bound to meet up with all sorts of remarkably interesting human beings. Indeed, as a budding 'Sovietologist' I learned an enormous amount from all manner of people, including one well known economist of the Soviet system who could actually recall the Russian Civil War of 1919, another whose father had escaped from Ukraine after the Second World War and who had finally settled in Canada, and a whole raft of 'émigrés' from Eastern Europe whose knowledge of 'actually existing socialism' was second to none.¹⁹ I also got to know a South African Marxist who had lived in the USSR for four to five years (yet still remained a Marxist) and probably came as close as anybody to foreseeing the long-term decline of the Soviet economy, as well as a number of Czechs who had got out after 1968 (including one who went on to hold a senior position in the Czech government after 1989), not to mention one of the founders of the Institute in which I was then studying who could even recall the purges of 1937.²⁰ It was a unique immersion in a world that had until the 1960s been completely alien to me.

¹⁷According to one reviewer, if one wanted 'to understand Putin's actions' one 'should read' Szamuely's 'book', <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Russian-Tradition-T-Szamuely/dp/0070626618> accessed 27 September 2021.

¹⁸Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

¹⁹Alec Nove was born in Petrograd in 1915. His family emigrated to England in 1924 which, according to one of the many obituaries written about him, was perhaps 'wise . . . especially given the family's Menshevik associations'. See Archie Brown, 'Professor Alec Nove: 1915–1994', *Development Studies* 31, no. 2 (1994): 7–11.

²⁰Hillel Ticktin, founding editor of the journal *Critique*, and author of *Towards a Political Economy of the USSR: Essays on the Political Economy of a Disintegrating System* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992). The institute in question was the Institute of Soviet and East European Studies, Glasgow. Amongst other things, the Institute published the main British journal on the USSR, *Soviet Studies*. The Institute was founded by Jacob Miller and Rudolf Schlesinger. Schlesinger was born in 1901 in Vienna and later went to Moscow to study under the Soviet economist, Eugene Varga. In 1936 he was declared to be 'alien to the Communist Party'. He left on the last boat to leave Poland for Great Britain England in 1939. He died in 1969.

And there was no shortage of discussion, either. Thus the political Left, in which I had by now become involved, was constantly debating whether the USSR was socialist, a workers' state or even state capitalist (none of the above, I concluded). Meanwhile, conservatives tended to divide between those who thought the USSR was seeking world domination – a view more widely held amongst Americans than Europeans – and others who assumed its primary interest lay in security. Then there was the ongoing battle of the economists, with some of the more optimistic hoping that some kind of 'market socialism' might provide an answer to Soviet economic problems, and others of a more 'free market' persuasion (Hayek being the best known), who believed that the two simply could not be blended together.²¹ There was, in addition, the clash of the 'number crunchers' who brandished their economic facts as if they were weapons in a wider ideological war.²² Here the polemics came thick and fast, with writers like Abram Bergson doing his best with the dubious statistics handed him by the USSR, and others arguing that all Soviet statistics were the equivalent of Potemkin villages whose only purpose was to mislead unwary foreigners into believing the Soviet economy was either bigger or more dynamic than it really was.²³ Here, ironically, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was, in the eyes of its many critics, as guilty as anybody in exaggerating Soviet economic strengths, and by so doing failing to show how vulnerable the Soviet system had become by the 1980s, around the time when Gorbachev was taking over the reins of state.²⁴

Nor was the discussion about the Soviet Union only determined by the economic 'facts' or different views about whether these facts were true or not. The late 1970s also witnessed one of the great US debates about the nature of the Soviet system, with 'Team A' on one side insisting that the system was much less of a threat than it was purported to be by the people around presidential hopeful Ronald Reagan, and 'Team B' on the other, led by that old Cold Warrior Paul Nitze, who insisted that after a 'decade of neglect' and drift on the US side, it was now time to abandon superpower détente and reboot containment with a major military build-up.²⁵ Some on the US side, including Reagan's adviser on Russia, Richard Pipes, went even further. Containment, Pipes insisted, was much too passive. The United States now needed to go beyond this defensive posture and seek nothing less than the reform of the USSR: regime change by any other name.²⁶ Moreover, in his view (and by 1982 it appears to have become Reagan's too), there was every reason to do so given that the Soviet Union was now in terminal decline. Therefore, why not help it along the way by placing as much pressure upon it as possible? It is of course true that Reagan later decided

²¹The Polish economist, Oscar Lange, was perhaps the most famous advocate of 'market socialism'.

²²For a summary of these often torrid discussions see Mark Harrison, 'Soviet Economic Growth Since 1928: The Alternative Statistics of G.I. Khanin', *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, no. 1 (1993): 141–67; and John Howard Wilhelm, 'The Failure of the American Sovietological Economics Profession', *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 1 (2003): 59–74.

²³Abram Bergson, *The Real National Income of Soviet Russia Since 1928* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961). One of the first attacks on those writers in the West who, in his view, were far too uncritical of Soviet statistics was launched by Naum Jasny in his *The Socialised Agriculture of the USSR* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949). This was followed by his *The Soviet Economy during the Plan Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951). Jasny's main target was Abram Bergson and Bergson's associates at RAND. Founded with support from the US Air Force, RAND as a public policy body pioneered, in its own words, 'the social scientific analysis of Leninist systems'.

²⁴However, for a robust defence of the CIA, and whether or not there was 'a failure of intelligence', see Marc Trachtenberg, 'Assessing Soviet Economic Performance During the Cold War: A Failure of Intelligence?' *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/02/assessing-soviet-economic-performance-cold-war/> accessed 27 September 2021.

²⁵For a critical guide to this debate see Jerry W. Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984); and Christopher L. Xenakis, *What Happened to the Soviet Union? How and Why American Sovietologists Were Caught By Surprise* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002).

²⁶Richard Pipes, *Survival is Not Enough: Soviet Realities and America's Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

to engage the USSR rather than confront it. It is also true that what we might call the Neo-Conservative Right (of which Reagan had been a spokesperson since the 1950s) had always claimed the USSR was about to fail! Still, the view he expressed to the British Parliament in 1982 that the Soviet system was 'inherently unstable' and that its guiding ideology, Marxism-Leninism, would soon be consigned onto 'the ash-heap of history' did at least suggest that some on the US side did not view the USSR as being viable.²⁷

Nor was Reagan alone in thinking the USSR was entering into a very challenging period. Even those who may not have agreed with Reagan's Cold War rhetoric did agree that by 1980, the Soviet system was entering into a more critical phase, during which it would be facing problems on every front. Taken together these would not necessarily lead to collapse. At this point in time, nobody was talking in such apocalyptic terms in the Sovietological community. But problems inherent in the Soviet economy – low labour productivity, poor quality goods and shortages of even the most basic foodstuffs – now looked as if they were about to become a whole lot worse, as the traditional formula of throwing masses of inputs at the Soviet economy in order keep it moving forward now looked as if it would no longer be able to work.²⁸ To this more basic problem of transition from an extensive model of growth to one where the economy would have to become more efficient was then added a series of new headaches. One which got a lot of attention at the time was a demographic crisis revealed in the sharpest form possible, when it became clear that important and worrying changes were 'occurring in the structure of the Soviet population . . . relating to its internal distribution and age structure'.²⁹ To this was then added another big policy challenge: how to lower the cost of running the Soviet Empire, here understood to mean the empire at home, the empire in Eastern Europe and the empire 'abroad'.³⁰ Agriculture also remained highly inefficient and continued to face what one official report noted was a 'failure of output to keep pace with the growth in demand', not to mention 'the very high costs of producing livestock products (and associated subsidies and the requirements for high allocations of investments)'.³¹

Even so, there were few who ever thought these accumulated problems (and many more besides, such as the inept decision to go into Afghanistan in December 1979), would lead to an implosion of the whole Soviet project in Eastern Europe and a few years later to the end of the USSR itself. Indeed, whilst Reagan might have been happy to talk

²⁷It should be added that there were several other 'predictions' about the end of the USSR made in the 1970s and 1980s, all of which made some fairly questionable claims about why the USSR would come to an end. One writer, for instance, claimed the end would come following a war with China. See Andrei Amalrik, *Will The Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). In a widely cited study, Helene Carrere 'd'Encausse, the French writer (of Georgian background) argued more persuasively that it would be nationalism that would hasten the end of the USSR, though did not foresee that it would be the imperial centre in the form of Russia that would deliver the coup de grace to the 'empire'. See her *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of the Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

²⁸In the traditional extensive Soviet model, economic growth was limited by capital and also depended on the availability of a labor force and of cheap circulating capital inputs (raw materials). But, since the end of the 1960's, the USSR was suffering both of labour scarcity and of the depletion of natural resources at a low cost that existed during the earlier phase'. Numa Mazat, 'Structural Analysis of the Economic Decline and Collapse of the Soviet Union', https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/v_2015_10_24_mazat.pdf accessed 27 September 2021.

²⁹According to the leading Western demographer, the average life span of a Soviet man had 'decreased sharply from 66 years on the average for 1965–66 to 64 years on the average for 1971–72', then falling to as 'low as 62–63 years' by the late 1970s. See Murray Feshbach, 'Reading between the Lines of the 1979 Soviet Census', *Population and Development Review* 8, no. 2 (June 1982): 347–61.

³⁰See Charles Wolf et al., *The Costs of the Soviet Empire*, RAND Report, September 1983.

³¹See the relevant sections in *Soviet Economy in the 1980s: Problems and Prospects*, Joint Economic Committee of the United States, December 31, 1982.

up the challenges facing the 'evil empire', possibly the majority of Western Sovietologists thought the system would endure – not because it was economically dynamic or especially attractive (by the 1980s the world communist movement was only a shadow of its former self and Soviet allies were few on the ground) – but because it still retained several critical assets. One of these was vast amounts of oil and gas; another was a huge apparatus of repression and surveillance; and yet a third was a not unimpressive scientific and educational base. Moreover, while some members of the intelligentsia may not have been especially content with their lot – Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov being perhaps the most famous of the 'dissidents' – from all accounts, ordinary Soviet citizens did not appear to be clamouring for radical change. Their living standards might not have compared to those in the West. Yet the system did provide some very basic public goods including a job (however badly paid), an apartment (however small) and some degree of material security. Workers were not even required to work very hard. Some Sovietologists concluded from this that even if the USSR could hardly be regarded as being economically dynamic (and was becoming even less so by the late 1970s) there did seem to exist some kind of unwritten 'social contract' between Soviet citizens and Soviet rulers that rendered the system more stable than some at the time were arguing.³²

Taking all this together, it is perfectly understandable why Sovietologists in the West might have found it difficult, if not almost impossible, to anticipate something as dramatic as what finally came to pass between 1989 and 1991. Even the study of other 'great powers' in history did not point to sudden collapse, but rather to slow, long-term decline, and there was every reason to suppose that this might be the USSR's fate as well. Moreover, even if the economic costs of running an empire were as great as some suggested, the political and strategic benefits of remaining one (especially when it came to Central and Eastern Europe), seemed immense. Indeed, until it actually began to happen, the consensus amongst the Sovietologists I knew (including myself!) was that the USSR would probably remain where it was, partly because in historical terms the USSR had expended a great deal of blood and treasure on liberating Central and Eastern Europe during the 'Great Patriotic War', partly because Moscow did not wish to see a change in the status of a divided Germany, and partly because if it were to withdraw from Europe, this would be seen as a massive victory for NATO. Even Gorbachev's famous United Nations (UN) speech of December 1988 pointed to a perhaps less intrusive relationship with Central and Eastern Europe, not the complete end of Soviet rule.³³

There was perhaps even less reason to believe the USSR would collapse. The economic situation by 1990 and 1991 may have looked dire, and already the Baltic states were on their way out of the Union. But it was one thing to recognise the depth of the economic crisis, and quite another to conclude that this would necessarily lead to the collapse of the USSR.³⁴ Indeed, from a Western viewpoint the idea was almost incomprehensible. After all, throughout the Cold War the official line had always been that the USSR was a dangerous threat and a serious superpower rival. So how could such a rival, with all its

³²See Linda J. Cook, 'Brezhnev's "Social Contract" and Gorbachev's Reforms', *Soviet Studies* 44, no. 1 (1992): 37–56.

³³The full text of Gorbachev's speech to the UN on December 7, 1988 can be found in *The Wilson Center Digital Archive*, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116224> accessed 27 September 2021.

³⁴'The economy ... approaches the borderline, beyond which one can speak not of economic crisis but of catastrophe' noted *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 23, 1991. Quoted in Alec Nove, 'The Soviet Economic Crisis', *The National Economic Review*, no. 138 (November 1991): 84.

nuclear warheads and military hardware, just go under? Nor in fact did most Western policymakers appear to be that enthusiastic about seeing the Union implode. Certainly, when the ever-cautious George Bush senior and his allies were contemplating the future following 1989, the last thing they appeared to be looking forward to was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only would this be more disturbing than stabilising, leading to, amongst other things, a possible proliferation of nuclear weapons. It might also make reform, not to mention US diplomacy, much more difficult. As has been suggested, Bush preferred to deal with one government not 15, and one hopefully stable regime, not several nation-states, all with their own competing demands.³⁵

In the end, of course, all roads lead back to Gorbachev and what in the end turned out to be his failed attempt either to revive the Soviet economy (the opposite happened), give new life to the idea of socialism with a human face (when he departed office Russia adopted the most Darwinian form of capitalism) or change the way international relations ought to be conducted.³⁶ If ever the road to hell was paved with good intentions, then Gorbachev walked along it. Yet at the time this was not how things appeared. Indeed, something close to 'Gorbymania' swept the Western Sovietological profession after he took over in 1985, and proceeded to attack old ideas born of a Stalinist past and replace them with what he termed 'new thinking'. It was really quite an extraordinary moment. There were of course sceptics on both the Right ('he's still a communist don't you know') as well as on the pro-Soviet Left who feared that he was undermining the cause of socialism by constantly attacking the failings of the Soviet system. But they were in the minority. Moreover, when Soviet rule came to an end in Europe and Germany, he was almost elevated to the status of a political saint in the West – and one can perfectly understand why. He did, after all, try and put relations with Central and Eastern Europe on a very different footing and then allowed the countries there to find their 'own way'. Moreover, when the edifice of Soviet power finally collapsed, it happened peacefully.³⁷ And to his immense credit, he refused the 'Chinese' option of using force to push back the forces which he himself had unleashed – though whether or not he ever intended to liberate Central and Eastern Europe, or oversee the final unification of Germany, remains a moot question which scholars will no doubt be debating for many years to come.³⁸

Like any major event in history, the final denouement of the USSR has itself been the subject of enormous debate ever since, both amongst Sovietologists, who now found themselves cast adrift without a system to study, as well students of International Relations, who proved just as wayward when it came to predicting the end of the bipolar order. If nothing else, it has given scholars a very big historical bone over which to fight, with so-called IR 'realists' on one side insisting that the main reason for the collapse was the material decline of the Soviet Union, and a new cohort of 'constructivists' on the

³⁵Mark Katz cited in Patrick J. Kiger, 'How George H. W. Bush Finished What Reagan started in ending the Cold War', *History* (December 5, 2018).

³⁶For a more sympathetic discussion of Gorbachev's role than the one presented here, Archie Brown's work remains the indispensable source. See his *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³⁷In 2006, an interviewer asked Gorbachev if he had contemplated the use of lethal force as a means of keeping the USSR intact. 'Of course not', Gorbachev insisted. 'It never came into my head, because if it had, I wouldn't have been Gorbachev'. Quoted in Strobe Talbott, 'The Man Who Lost an Empire', *New York Review of Books* (December 7, 2017).

³⁸For one of the best studies still on the 'enigma' that was 1989, see Jacques Levesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For the definitive work on the 'accident' that led to the unification of Germany see Mary E. Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

other arguing with equal intensity that it was the change in Soviet ideas under Gorbachev that led to the end.³⁹ In the meantime, some in the first camp have been warning ever since that we will all soon be missing the stability which the bipolarity apparently introduced into world politics; liberal theorists, on the other hand, have been far more positive about the collapse of the old order and the victory of their preferred liberal ideal.⁴⁰ Yet one is still left pondering the ‘what might have beens’ of history and whether different paths might have been followed. There are many historians who would resist such an approach, including one who wrote at great length about the early USSR.⁴¹ But having failed to anticipate one of the great seismic shifts in world politics for over a century, it would be somewhat unfortunate, to say the least, if we all now fell into the intellectual trap (as I suspect some have done) of believing that what happened in the end was bound to happen because in the end it did. It is perfectly legitimate for scholars to look for the complex causes of big events: less so, I would suggest, to conclude that they were inevitable.⁴²

Vladimir Pechatnov: ‘The system was unable to defend itself’

On a personal level, it was my lot to observe the Soviet collapse from a far-away Washington DC, where I was stationed as a junior diplomat with almost no opportunity to return to the country. Although we tried to follow events back home, they seemed almost surreal, bizarre and incomprehensible. I vividly remember the red flag going down in late December 1991 over the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street with some of my colleagues gloating, but most worried and sombre. So it was only in retrospect that I began to look back and think about what happened to our country and why.

The sudden dissolution of the last great empire of the twentieth century raises many questions. One of the most intriguing in my view is the puzzle of the Soviet system’s inability to defend itself. After all, it was armed with the huge and seemingly omnipotent mechanism of control and repression, had all the levers of power in its hands, and a total domination over a weak and subservient society. An open internal resistance to it looked absolutely hopeless, as Maxim Litvinov lamented in a hair-raising 1952 interview with CBS correspondent Richard Hottelet that nearly cost him his life.⁴³ It was presumed that regime change could only come from the outside as a result of a major military defeat. Instead, the system simply melted away – why?

First of all, it had very few defenders. The Soviet populace has historically been alienated from the ruling nomenklatura, whose rule was arbitrary and brutal. The deep economic crisis of the late 1980s coupled with *glasnost*’s defamation of the Soviet past only widened this gap, and, as a result, there were very few people ready to mount barricades to defend the old regime. Actually, with the old fear of repressions dissipated

³⁹William C. Wohlforth, ‘Realism and the End of the Cold War’, *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994–95): 91–129; and Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁴⁰John Mearsheimer, ‘Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War’, *Atlantic Monthly* 26, no. 2 (August 1990): 35–50; it is no longer fashionable to quote Francis Fukuyama, but in 1989 he did talk of ‘an unabashed victory of political and economic liberalism’ in his hugely influential essay, ‘The End of History’, *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.

⁴¹For a typically robust attack on counterfactual history, see E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

⁴²For my own early contribution to the debate about Soviet collapse see Michael Cox ed., *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism, and the New Russia* (London: Francis Pinter, 1999).

⁴³*Washington Post*, January 22, 1952.

by Gorbachev's soft line, there were many people mounting the barricades on the opposite side. George Kennan, who, in my view, remains the best prophet of the Soviet collapse, almost four decades before the event, predicted what would happen:

[I]f fortune were really to turn against them [the Soviet leaders – VP] – if the belief in the firmness and certainty of their power were to be widely shaken in the minds of their subjects and their enemies – then there would be no extensive reserve of loyalties and interests to which they could make their final appeal.⁴⁴

Second, there was hardly anybody to make that 'final appeal'. By 1989–90, the nomenklatura itself became divided and disoriented. The more pragmatic and enterprising elements began to adapt to the quickly changing environment of relaxing state regulations and privatisation. *Enrichissez-vous!* became their motto of the day. If anything, they sought to legalise and expand their new opportunities and had no interest in preserving the old command and control economy. The more conservative and rigid parts of the nomenklatura, who did not see any prospects for themselves in the emerging order, were demoralised and caught off guard. These elements also lost their former belief 'in the firmness and certainty' of its power. When it was finally apparent where things were headed, any attempt to stop the train was too little and too late.

The 'final appeal' of the inept State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) to the Soviet people in August 1991 was met with public indifference and disbelief. The coup leaders, unlike their predecessors in Stalin's times, had no determination to shed blood on a massive scale. Besides, their control over power institutions was shaken, as were those institutions themselves: the military was demoralised by the public criticism and incapable of playing a political role; the KGB and internal security forces lost their former status and sense of mission and were in disarray suffering massive defections. When ordered, they would not shoot their own people. Most importantly, the Party itself was already marginalised, discredited and fragmented. Its constitutional 'leading and guiding role' was repealed under strong public pressure, as well as by the Party's own consent in March 1990. The Party had been the core of the political system with all other bureaucracies hanging on it, so when it lost its monopoly on power, the whole structure went down. Something similar took place in February 1917 when, following Nicholas II's self-abdication, the Tzarist autocracy collapsed, bringing down the whole system of government. It looks like the Soviet nomenklatura was never a real class endowed with either a consciousness of its interests, or a readiness to defend them.

Yet there was no alternative political force ready to replace the Party-state, because Soviet society, suppressed for many decades, was incapable of democratic self-organisation – even less so than Russian civil society had been in 1917. The end result was predicted by Kennan many years before the fall: 'if disunity were ever to seize and paralyze the Party, the chaos and weakness of Russian society would be revealed in forms beyond description' and, consequently, 'Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies'.⁴⁵ No

⁴⁴G. Kennan, 'The Foundations of Soviet Policy', Record Group 59, Policy Planning Staff Records, PPS Members – Chronological File, National Archives (NARA), College Park, MD, USA.

⁴⁵George Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947): 580–1.

wonder that the only forces which preserved some capacity for self-organisation – organised crime and the former KGB network – emerged from under the ruins of the Soviet system among the principal political actors.

The question remains: were the Soviet system and the Union itself reformable? Given the abovementioned factors, at that juncture the Soviet collapse was highly likely but not inevitable. Preconditions for its prevention were an effective long-term strategy of reform and instruments available for its implementation. Both were absent. An effective strategy required a correct diagnosis of the system's flaws and working out a road map to amend them. The late Soviet leadership did not possess that level of self-analysis ('we didn't know the country we lived in' was Andropov's bitter admission): they were too complacent about their system and took it for granted. The instruments for implementation were lacking, without the Party controls or their equivalent.

Here is a key difference with the Chinese transition from communism, which was based on a long-term strategy and preserved the Communist Party of China (CCP) as the main instrument of reform. As someone aptly put it, the transition from communism to capitalism can be done only under the leadership of the Communist Party. Deng, as one of the founding fathers of Chinese communism, knew only too well both the fragility of the system and its weak points. He also had a good strategic sense to map out a sequence of steps necessary to transform it in a market direction. There were clear strategic priorities: economic reforms under tight Party control unhampered by political liberalisation. When the latter threatened to interfere with this strategy (as in 1989) the Deng team did not hesitate to use force to suppress it. In time, the success of the economic reforms raised standards of living, creating time and space for the incremental modification of the socialist model and its acceptance by the populace. In the Soviet case it was the other way round: *glasnost* and democratisation preceded economic reforms, weakened the Party controls and disrupted orderly administration, while the Centre didn't dare use force to restore it. Growing economic deprivation and political chaos killed whatever remained of the system's legitimacy and paved the way for radical new solutions in shock therapy form.

Another question posed by the Soviet collapse is its connection to the Cold War and its end. There is an interesting symmetry in interpretations of this linkage in Russia and the United States. US conservatives explain the Soviet break-up in terms of successful Western pressure, while liberals emphasise the system's internal weaknesses. In Russian discourse, conservatives blame the cunning West for the Soviet demise while liberals think that the system itself was rotten to the core. In reality, both factors played their roles. The Soviet system had some basic flaws which the US containment strategy successfully exploited. In the short and medium terms, Cold War competition energised Soviet mobilisation potential in the arms and space races, but in the long term, given the preponderance of resources, dynamism and strategy in the West, Cold War attrition took its toll and contributed to Soviet imperial overstretch and economic stagnation. Thus Western pressure was instrumental in forcing the Soviet elite to realise that 'their historical dogma is flawed, that there is no Marxist gold at the rainbow's edge, [and] that they deceive themselves' (as stated at one of the Policy Planning Staff meetings).⁴⁶ In

⁴⁶Meeting of November 20, 1950, RG 59, Records of Policy Planning Staff, Country and Area Files, USSR1946-1950, Box 23, NARA.

other words, the Cold War helped to bring the Soviet leaders to the point of making a radical change in direction, but it did not predetermine what kind of choice they would make – the age-old problem of determination and free will. That was up to the Soviet authorities themselves, and their ability to make the post-communist transition while maintaining their power and control over events. Gorbachev and his circle were not equal to this task.

At the same time, the break-up of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union itself finalised the end of the Cold War by devaluing the main geopolitical assets of the Soviet bloc: its strategic presence in Central and Eastern Europe and its allied system and combined military potential. But the whole internal/external interplay may be more complicated (very schematically): the Cold War facilitated *perestroika*, *perestroika* cut the ground from under Soviet-type regimes in Europe and paved the way for Warsaw Pact dissolution, which in turn became a contagious example for the Baltic and was later followed by other Soviet republics. Years ago, Kennan foresaw this chain reaction: once the Soviet Empire began to crumble, it would ‘unleash an avalanche downfall of Soviet influence and prestige which would go beyond satellite countries to the heart of the Soviet Union itself’.⁴⁷

The role of ideology in the story of the Soviet collapse was very important. Along with the Soviet Union’s international standing and economic growth, official Marxist-Leninist ideology was an important source of the system’s legitimacy on both the elite and mass levels. It was also a prism for the Soviet view of the world. No wonder its rejection was one of the key goals of Western strategy during the Cold War. The erosion of the Soviet ideological doctrine started long before Gorbachev’s time and was more pronounced and consequential at the elite level and in the centre than in the provinces and wider society. The Soviet nomenklatura was more exposed to Western ideas and the Western way of life, which had a corrosive effect on the official belief in socialism’s superiority. Most of the Soviet intelligentsia, in Moscow and elsewhere, had always been critical of the system and looked West for inspiration. This process was greatly accelerated in the late 1980s as the Soviet systemic crisis deepened, with *glasnost* exposing past Soviet crimes and the present system’s sins and information about the outside world becoming widely available. The official ideology became an empty ritualistic shell. The loss of faith created an ideological vacuum to be filled by other visions. If Gorbachev’s generation (‘children of the XX Party Congress’) still believed in socialism with a human face, the younger radical reformers of Yegor Gaidar’s generation (‘children of stagnation’) were staunch anti-communist followers of Reagan and Thatcher, inspired by market fundamentalism as the latest Western wisdom. Under Yeltsin’s auspices they became the grave diggers of the Soviet system and of the Union itself.

Still, it is worth asking whether the Union, if not the Soviet system, could still have been saved. In my view its dissolution was made possible by three main factors of different duration converging in 1990–1. A uniform administrative structure with ethnically neutral demarcation lines would have been more resistant to centrifugal dissolution. This potential was made even more explosive by the Soviet policy of cultivating national cadres in those republics which became the base for a future ‘ethnocracy’ rule when the Union began to crumble. At that point, regional national elites (including the cadres of

⁴⁷Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 36.

the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, which constituted a second tier under the Union elites) acquired their own incentives for separate existence. The second factor was the economic crisis of the late 1980s, which weakened the republics' economic dependence on the centre. The final push came from the catching example of separatism provided first by the Baltic republics and then by Russia itself.

In conclusion, major new studies like Vladislav Zubok's *Collapse* enrich our understanding of the Soviet collapse, but it was such a momentous and complex phenomenon that its analysis remains far from being complete. Thirty years may be too short a time period to fully comprehend its development and significance. The agenda for future studies of this epic event must include more empirical research on elite transformation during those years, and its interaction with changing mass beliefs, as well as microanalysis of the process on regional and local levels.

Rodric Braithwaite: 'Could Gorbachev have done better?'

A fruitful way of looking at the Soviet Union is to think of it as the old Russian Empire under another name. It too was dominated by Russians. They had always believed that Ukraine and Belorussia were an organic part of their historical inheritance, in which they were the elder brothers: many of them still do. The Soviet system did allow the ambitious to rise to the top, whatever their origin: Stalin himself, after all, was a Georgian. But Stalin had no compunction about uprooting bourgeois nationalism wherever he found it. These imperial tensions contributed heavily to the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Stalin's dysfunctional system and the accompanying terror could not survive his death. Khrushchev emerged victorious from a brutal succession struggle. His immediate task was to tackle the mess. He permitted a public debate between those who thought that only market mechanisms could save the economy and those who insisted that computers could make state planning work. My job in the British embassy at the time was to follow it. Soviet growth was visibly slowing. You could see for yourself how very poor Russia was. Just outside Moscow, villages still had no running water, and the sidewalks were still paved in wood. The gap between pretensions and reality was huge. The Soviet Union could never hope to overtake the United States by 1980 as Khrushchev had boasted.

Khrushchev's half-baked reforms did not work. He was deposed by the hard men in the army, the Party and the KGB. His successors turned the Soviet Union into a nuclear superpower and somewhat improved the lot of the consumer. The economy continued to stumble. Andrei Sakharov, the brilliant scientist and dissident who had helped build the Soviet bomb, prophesied that the country would become a second-rate power unless its 'bureaucratic, ritualistic, dogmatic, openly hypocritical, and mediocre style' were replaced by 'democratisation, with its fullness of information and clash of ideas'.⁴⁸ Nikolai Baibakov, the head of the State Planning Bureau, warned the Politburo that the economy was in serious trouble. Boris Yeltsin, the bull-like First Party Secretary of the Sverdlovsk Region, son of a peasant, immensely ambitious and with finely tuned political instincts, told his people that food rationing would continue. Marshal Ogarkov, the

⁴⁸Quoted in Geoffrey Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 199.

Soviet chief of staff, lamented to a US journalist, 'We will never be able to catch up with you in modern arms until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we have an economic revolution without a political revolution'.⁴⁹

We in the West knew much of this, but were mesmerised by the Soviet Union's prowess in space, its growing military power and its successes in the developing world. We exaggerated Soviet strength and determination. We feared – without serious evidence – that the Russians might attack us unprovoked. To deter them, our nuclear power ballooned until it could destroy the world many times over. We overthrew governments and invaded countries that got in our way. After all, the Russians were doing the same.

From 1969 I was in London dealing with the Soviet proposal for a European Security Conference and with the idea – popular in Europe – that conventional arms in Europe should be reduced. Our military thought our ability to counter Soviet aggression was already marginal. They feared that the Soviets would outsmart us in negotiation. Yet the Helsinki Agreement proved a success for the West, though conventional arms reductions got nowhere before Gorbachev.

The United States was still expanding its nuclear forces to overmatch the Russians. They planned to fight a local nuclear war in Europe to deter or repel a Soviet attack. It seemed implausible to me. The Russians were at least as afraid of us as we were of them. Once the first rocket was launched, things could spiral fatally out of control. I assumed I had missed the point. Decades later I concluded that nuclear deterrence theory was rather simple-minded. A former Whitehall nuclear expert admitted privately that he too had had doubts. So did people in Moscow and Washington.

The claim is that it worked: the Russians were deterred. Casper Weinberger, the US defence secretary, justified the multiplication of weapons thus: 'You can't afford to be wrong. If we won by too much, if it was overkill, so be it'.⁵⁰ Those who suggested anything different were ignored or vilified.

The men in the Politburo were elderly, conservative and unimaginative. But they were not stupid, and they could not ignore the crisis. In March 1985 they chose Mikhail Gorbachev – young, energetic, effective, apparently orthodox – to put things right. The man they hoped would save the Soviet Union accelerated its collapse. Gorbachev came from a poor peasant family in Southern Russia: the Moscow intelligentsia sneered at his provincial accent. Brilliant at school, he studied law at Moscow University. He worked as an increasingly senior Party official back home until he was brought first into the Party secretariat and then into the Politburo.

His ideas were rooted in that debate under Khrushchev. He believed that bureaucratic central planning was strangling the economy. The crippling burden of defence spending could only be reduced by bringing the Cold War under control. The country was stagnating because the initiative of ordinary people had been stifled. They needed to be brought into the business of running the country.

⁴⁹Leslie H. Gelb, 'Foreign Affairs: Who Won the Cold War?' *New York Times*, August 20, 1992, 27, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/20/opinion/foreign-affairs-who-won-the-cold-war.html> accessed 27 September 2021.

⁵⁰Anne H. Cahn, *Killing Detente: The Right Attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), 1–2.

Russians forget how popular Gorbachev was at first. They flocked to listen as he spoke with a lively frankness unmatched by his predecessors. Russians believed he might give them what they called a normal country: open to the world, prosperous, at peace with its neighbours and itself, where their rulers at last listened to their views and acted accordingly.

Gorbachev hoped to save the Soviet Union from itself: he had no intention of overseeing its demise. His first steps were tentative, intended to preserve the socialist essence of the system. The economy continued to decline. In 1985 he invited Yeltsin to join the Politburo, hoping he would support reform. Instead, Yeltsin made himself popular by publicly attacking Gorbachev's policies as fraudulently inadequate. In Stalin's day he would not have escaped with his life. In Khrushchev's he would have been exiled. Gorbachev threw him out of the Politburo but allowed him to continue in politics. It was a measure of how far things had already changed.

In April 1986 the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine exploded after a routine but mismanaged test. The government immediately undertook remedial measures. The people on the ground acted heroically to limit the damage. But the fall-out and the news leaked to the West. Gorbachev mismanaged the publicity. Some Russians trace their final disillusion with the Soviet system to this catastrophe. When I visited Moscow in 1987 people were openly saying that the Bolshevik experiment had failed.

Gorbachev now set out to revolutionise Soviet politics. He encouraged *glasnost*, 'openness' about the conduct of public business. The press attacked official abuse relentlessly. Sakharov demanded that the Communist Party be stripped of its constitutional monopoly on power. History became a national obsession. Individuals burrowed into the archives to reveal the details of Stalin's crimes. Some blamed Lenin for starting it all. Others complained that they could no longer take pride in their country's history. People joked that the Soviet Union was a country with an unpredictable past.

Jill and I arrived in Moscow in September 1988 to find a country in breathless turmoil. Gorbachev had just allowed the Orthodox Church to celebrate the millennium of Russian Christianity. Churches and monasteries were rebuilt from the ruins into which the Communists had allowed them to decay. Young people found the vocation to become priests and nuns. The church flourished. Its leaders grew closer to the politicians, the source of prosperity and influence.

Next, Gorbachev announced elections at which voters could choose freely between candidates. Previous Soviet elections had been rituals in which electors voted in droves for the only available candidate. The new electoral system was more democratic, but far too complicated. There were multi-million-person constituencies in some big cities. Professional organisations could vote for closed lists of candidates. The Communist Party had 100 places reserved for it; stamp collectors had one. Yeltsin stood for the seven-million-strong Moscow constituency. Gorbachev competed only for the votes of the Central Committee.

March 1989 saw the first real vote in Russia since 1917, complete with the trappings of democracy: vicious intrigue over the selection of candidates, noisy meetings on the streets, vitriol in an unleashed press. We attended exhilarating public meetings and the polling stations where people voted with an orderly sense of duty.

The vote swept senior Communists from seats they had held for years as of right. Yeltsin was elected by four fifths of Moscow's voters, Gorbachev by less than the 600 members of the Central Committee. His authority suffered accordingly. A firestorm of criticism of the Party, the government and the KGB broke out in the new Congress of People's Deputies which opened in May. It was all shown on television: glued to their TV sets, people abandoned their everyday work.

Our Russian friends feared it could end in bloodshed and civil war: they knew what had happened in Tiananmen Square. But in March 1990, under pressure from the streets, the Congress abolished the Party's constitutional monopoly on power. Political pluralism was no longer illegal. A kind of fragile democracy had arrived.

Gorbachev passionately believed that the nuclear confrontation was absurdly dangerous. He was determined to dismantle it. He was fortunate in his interlocutor. President Reagan called the Soviet Union an evil empire, expanded his predecessor's rearmament programme, and allowed his military to mount provocative probes against the Soviet frontier. But he too was profoundly concerned about the confrontation. He reached out to Gorbachev. When the two met in Reykjavik in 1986 they made an unsuccessful attempt to abolish nuclear weapons altogether. Cold Warriors in Washington and London were appalled. When Gorbachev announced in December 1988 that he was withdrawing significant forces from Eastern Europe, advisers to the incoming president, George Bush, called it another Communist trick.

But the international scene was now changing beyond recognition. In the past, the Russians had crushed rebellions by Germans, Czechs and Hungarians. But three years before we arrived in Warsaw in 1959, the Poles threw out their Soviet advisers, freed the collectivised peasants, opened the press and curbed the secret police. Khrushchev prudently let them alone: the last thing he or his generals needed was a Polish rising on the lines of communication to their army in Germany. We all hoped that the Poles had shown how to humanise Communism. But as we left Warsaw, our friends sadly told us that Poland could not be free until reform came to Russia itself.

The East Europeans were naturally unconvinced when Gorbachev told them in June 1988 that they could find their own way. But the elections demonstrated how far Russia itself was changing. The Poles immediately held their own elections: the Communists were thrashed. The Berlin Wall came down. The other East Europeans followed the Poles to freedom.

Moscow and Washington realised that the only alternative to chaos was negotiation. The Russian negotiating position was so weak that by October 1990 Germany was reunited inside NATO. Angry Soviet conservatives accused Gorbachev of selling out.

Gorbachev's star began to wane. Russia's middle-class liberals concluded that Yeltsin was the more authentic democrat and began to switch their support to him. Ordinary people were tired of his failure to improve their lives. His closest allies deserted him. He recruited replacements from among the reactionaries. When Soviet special forces killed 13 people in Vilnius in January 1991, he could not escape responsibility.

By 1989 it already seemed to many of us that the last European empire was disintegrating. The Ukrainians, the Balts and the Caucasians pressed for independence. The hard men opposed any weakening of centralised rule. Now Gorbachev manoeuvred desperately between them as he tried to recover the centre ground. But his time had run out.

Gorbachev knew that he might go the way of Khrushchev. Rumours of a coup never ceased. But almost nobody – not the leaders of the West nor their intelligence agencies, nor Gorbachev himself – foresaw the actual event.

Nor did I. On 18 August 1991 Jill and I went to Northern Russia on holiday, only to scramble back the next morning when we heard on the BBC that conspirators from the Party, the Army and the KGB – the combination that overthrew Khrushchev – had arrested Gorbachev in his Crimean holiday home, moved tanks into Moscow, and formed an emergency administration. But they had bungled their plans to arrest Yeltsin. He was besieged and defiant inside his office, the Russian White House. Thousands of people flocked to support him. That evening the plotters tried to explain themselves on TV. Some were drunk. Jill christened it ‘The Muppet Show’. The coup already reeked of defeat.

Jill was with Russian friends on the barricades outside the White House the following night, when three young men were killed in a scuffle with soldiers. The conspirators lacked the guts to settle matters by storming the White House. Next day they withdrew the tanks. Yeltsin had them arrested, banned the Communist Party, and confiscated its property.

Gorbachev returned to Moscow. But Yeltsin had won the game. By now the economy was in free-fall. Gorbachev had taken advice from good economists but may not have fully understood it. He pressed the Group of Seven for US\$13 billion to plug the gap: far less, he pointed out, than we had just spent on the Gulf War. We refused to give him money until he came up with convincing plans for economic reform.

Meanwhile, even basic commodities failed to reach the shops. Doctors, teachers, public servants, military officers and pensioners went unpaid for months. Factory workers were paid, if at all, in kind not cash. The health service collapsed. Old women sold their possessions on the sidewalks. Sailors in the Far Eastern Fleet died of starvation.

That autumn Yeltsin whittled away at Gorbachev’s authority, using the economy and the prospect of Ukrainian independence as levers. On 8 December 1991, he secretly met his colleagues from Ukraine and Belarus to declare that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. It was a breathless piece of opportunism for a man who, like most Russians, believed that Ukraine was an integral part of his country. For the Soviet Union, it was the death blow. On Christmas Day 1991 Gorbachev resigned. We watched the flag of Russia replace the Soviet flag over the Kremlin.

In January 1992 President Bush told the world: ‘By the grace of God, America won the Cold War. . . . A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America’.⁵¹ Though there was much sympathy for the Russian people in the West, Western governments ignored Russia’s international interests while insisting that Russia follow their lead. Western businessmen ruthlessly exploited the opportunities for profit. Overpaid Western consultants lectured the Russians, though they too had no experience of dismantling a continent-wide state economy.

Western statesmen at first assured the Russians that they did not intend to expand NATO. Then the intentions changed. NATO gave membership to the Balts and to Russia’s former East European satellites. Russians believed they had been double-

⁵¹President George H. W. Bush, State of the Union message, January 28, 1992.

crossed. They were shocked by NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999: a foretaste, they feared, of what Russia itself might expect. One intelligent young woman, typical of those we believed would embrace change, told me that our talk of democracy was a smokescreen to hide our determination to destroy her country. Millions of her compatriots still think the same.

As Bush was making his damaging speech, Yeltsin was implementing a radical economic reform. When, like Gorbachev, he asked for financial aid, the West turned him down. There followed a decade of economic misery, political dysfunction, deeply rooted corruption and a jungle capitalism where rivals murdered one another for profit. The military budget collapsed. Officers were sacked, tanks rusted in their bases, the strategic nuclear forces were unable to maintain their equipment. As Yeltsin declined into alcoholism and ill health, his regime became increasingly incoherent. He groomed Vladimir Putin, an intelligent and able former KGB officer, as his successor. Putin took over in January 2000. A new era of Russian politics began.

Gorbachev was an unusual figure in Russian politics, charming, intelligent, imaginative, allergic to bloodshed, and more interested in spending time with his wife than drinking vodka with his colleagues. He is now unduly criticised on all sides for excessive caution, lacking a strategy, failing to solve the economic problem, caving in to the West, and letting the Union fall apart. By contrast, Yeltsin appealed to ordinary Russians as one of them, a real *muzhik*. Jill and I found him lacking in charm, more interested in ousting Gorbachev than in the democratic principles he proclaimed so noisily. Our bias was unprofessional, but my relationship with Yeltsin remained workable. He had been told of Jill's presence on the barricades, and that doubtless helped.

We are still discussing the reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire. Theories about the collapse of the Soviet Union will also compete indefinitely, as eyewitnesses disappear, new evidence emerges and fashions for writing history change. The questions multiply. None of us can be sure we've got the right answers.

Was the collapse of the Soviet Union foreseen or foreseeable? The short answer is yes, though the details were obviously obscure.

Could Gorbachev have done better? His task was unprecedented: to reform an authoritarian structure in deep crisis, while negotiating with a superpower rival which held many of the cards. The 'Chinese' alternative of tight one-party control over a state-dominated capitalism was never available. Gorbachev did adequately in difficult circumstances. Complete success was beyond any one man or any one generation.

Would the 'Chinese alternative' have worked? Many people inside and outside Russia believe that the Soviet Union could have been saved if its leaders had imposed a system of tight one-party control over a state-dominated capitalism. But by the time Gorbachev came along, Party discipline was tottering, and the ideology was increasingly scorned, even within the Party and the official machine: the monolith was already cracking. Unlike the Chinese, the Russians were facing a crisis of empire. Some peddle the simplistic argument that Russians are 'traditionally' less entrepreneurial than Chinese. In all those circumstances, even someone as determined and clear-minded as Deng Xiaoping would have found it hard to push through their ideas.

Could the Union have survived had it not been destabilised by Gorbachev's fumbled reforms? I doubt it: the system was too far gone. At best it might have stumbled on for some years towards an ignominious or a bloody end. The hard men thought Gorbachev should have held it together by force. That would have risked an international conflagration. Luckily, he did not have the stomach for it.

How far was US policy responsible for what happened? Could it have been wiser and more generous? The United States was economically and technologically so much more sophisticated that the Soviet Union was almost bound to lose the Cold War competition. Gorbachev's attempt to fix the problem by adopting 'Western' political and economic ideas might have failed anyway when it came up against Russian reality. It was certainly impeded by US intransigence and lack of imagination. Even a wiser US leadership would have moved into the power vacuum left by the collapse.

Will we ever see a recognisable democracy in Russia? Even the most determined historical determinist can't rule it out. But it will happen only if the Russians themselves so decide, not because the West tries to foist its own ideas upon them.

Kristina Spohr: 'Structures and agency were both key'

Thirty years ago, on Christmas Day 1991, the Soviet Union disintegrated – unexpectedly and peacefully. One of the most powerful countries in the world had gone – dying the quiet death of an empire that fractured along the lines of its constituent republics' boundaries. Gone, too, was the 'Soviet experiment' – Communist Party rule and the attempt to create a society beyond capitalism.⁵² Significantly, for many commentators, the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the map also represented the definite endpoint of a distinct and recent historical epoch: the Cold War.

This was a momentous event in global history, though at first Russians did not appear to treat it as traumatic, or even negative. It came two years *after* the '1989 revolutions' in Central and Eastern Europe that had swept away communist dictatorships and command economies and eroded the Soviet security glacis that had been in place there since the 1940s. It was also one year after divided Germany, cause and cockpit of the Cold War, had become one. Mikhail Gorbachev's tone was regretful but positive. His successor in Russia, Boris Yeltsin, talked exuberantly of a 'new' and 'democratic' Russia that had freed itself from the 'yoke of Communism' and left 'tyranny' behind. And despite the great uncertainties that sudden Soviet death naturally triggered and the bitterness of diehard communists, the atmosphere across the former USSR was generally one of hope and optimism for what was felt to be the 'dawn of a new era'.⁵³

⁵²Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the U.S.S.R., and the Successor States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵³Yeltsin's words at the United Nations cited in Robert D. McFadden, 'Leaders Gather in New York to Chart a World Order', *New York Times*, January 31, 1992; 'Dawn of a New Era', *New York Times*, February 2, 1992. For a discussion of the global 'hinge years' of 1989–92, see Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989* (London: William Collins, 2019 / New Haven, NJ: Yale University, 2020).

Tentative hope for perhaps a less tension-ridden future, for a new departure in European and world politics, those are also the feelings that I recall when seeing the lowering of the Soviet flag flicker across Finnish newsreels that Christmas. I was only a teenager then; my parents, however, had lived through the Cold War and my Finnish grandparents had survived the Second World War. My grandfather had been born when Finland was still a Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire. He had witnessed the empire's collapse and experienced the Civil War that ensued; he had fought in the Second World War against the Soviet Union from 1939–45 and lost a brother in the Winter War. Aged 80, he watched with me and the rest of the family as the USSR came apart on TV. After 1991, hope for him and my grandmother was always laced with apprehension about the big neighbour to the east. The exact name of the country did not matter to them – they always just spoke of 'Russia'. What, if anything, would be different about Yeltsin's Russian Federation?

Almost a decade later, Hannes Adomeit's *Imperial Overstretch* (1998) and Angela Stent's *Russia and Germany Reborn* (1999) would pique my first serious academic interest in how one might begin to situate the events of '1991': events that had triggered a wave of optimism especially in the former USSR's periphery, in Central, North- and South-Eastern Europe.

Fast forward to our own times, and '1991' – at least in Russia – appears in quite a different light. Soviet collapse, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared in 2005, constituted 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century'.⁵⁴ It was, he said, a 'disaster' for which Gorbachev and Yeltsin were to blame, as each in his different way had sold out on the Soviet Empire, leaving post-Soviet Russia to lick its wounds on the margins of Europe. An even worse calamity, however, was what he called in 2019 the 'humanitarian' dimension of the collapse. For the end of the USSR had tragically left tens of millions of Russians stranded outside Russian territory.⁵⁵ The Russian minorities issue has been a central element in the Kremlin's sphere-of-influence thinking since 1991. And, certainly under Putin, Russia has sought to gradually re-extend its control over key parts of the former USSR (most coercively in Ukraine/Crimea, Transnistria and South Ossetia).⁵⁶

Given this dichotomy, between how the Soviet Union's disappearance was perceived in 1991–2 and how it is presented officially in Russia today, we must ask: is Putin's apocalyptic interpretation historically merited? Or are we looking here at an attempt to manipulate history as part of a political project? The Soviet story could, after all, have ended so differently – in a 'People's Tragedy' as in 1917.⁵⁷ Then the dissolution of the Russian Empire had culminated in an escalating cycle of violence. Because as the Bolsheviks forged the Soviet state, it was shaped by the brutalising experiences of the

⁵⁴Putin's address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 'Послание Федеральному Собранию Российской Федерации', April 25, 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> accessed 28 September 2021.

⁵⁵Putin's interview with the Financial Times in the lead up to the G20 summit, 'Путин разъяснил свои слова о "геополитической катастрофе" в контексте распада СССР', June 27, 2019, <https://tass.ru/politika/6603347> accessed 28 September 2021.

⁵⁶See, for example, George Soroka and Tomasz Stępniewski, 'Russia and the Rest: Permeable Sovereignty and the Former Soviet Socialist Republics', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 6, no. 2 (2020): 3–12; See also William Safire, 'ON LANGUAGE: The Near Abroad', *New York Times*, May 22, 1994.

⁵⁷Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891–1924* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996).

First World War and the Civil War – leaving several million dead. Yet, the ‘Soviet century’ ended not with a bang but almost a whimper, as the Red Flag was lowered on the Kremlin flagpole and the Russian tricolour was hoisted in its place.⁵⁸

In this light, let us consider another, even more positive perspective. When the Nobel committee awarded Gorbachev its peace prize in 1990, they honoured him for the ‘greater openness’ he allowed ‘in Soviet society’, for promoting ‘international trust’, and for contributing to a ‘peace process’ that could open up ‘new possibilities for the world community’.⁵⁹ From that standpoint, the dissolution of the Soviet Union could be told as a story of peace preserved. In many of the former Soviet republics – from Ukraine and the Baltics to Transcaucasia, 1991 was hailed as a triumph of self-determination. And for all the subsequent border wars, a real catastrophe, a bloody Yugoslavia on a much bigger scale and with nukes, had been avoided on Soviet soil. So, what actually happened to the USSR? How are we to understand ‘1991’ and the Soviet denouement?

It is crucial to note that neither the ‘revolutions of 1989’ that brought the loss of the Soviet outer empire nor the collapse of the Soviet state were pre-ordained or predicted by international relations (IR) theorists and commentators, in spite of all the structural shifts that were witnessed since the late 1970s in the global economy, technology and the military balance, as well as the rising transnational salience of people power. In fact, for most ‘experts’, Moscow’s withdrawal from the Cold War rivalry, the disappearance of Kremlin-led Communism in the Soviet satellites and the Soviet break-up were simply deemed inconceivable.

Putin is right, in this respect. Mikhail Gorbachev, secretary general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) since 1985, would prove a key change agent. His choices of policies, and the reception of them, did have a major impact on the fate of the USSR. What Gorbachev aimed for, when he came to power, was Soviet Communist *reinvention* – to be able to peacefully compete with the West. He sought to *preserve* the Soviet Union and its wider empire by *adapting* its structures. Unlike his immediate Soviet predecessors, he was willing to take drastic steps to liberalise the Soviet polity and eliminate the Stalinist legacy – goals that required a transformation of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe (such as the abolition of the ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’) and ultimately meant he had to let go of the former satellites. He was convinced the Soviet Union could not merely live with this, but would thrive as a result.

Like other historic leaders of Russia before him, going back to Peter the Great, Gorbachev saw his country’s identity bound up with Europe. He believed in mutual East-West rapprochement, a gradual coming together on the basis of ‘common’, ‘universal’ and ‘democratic’ values. But in truth, this normative language and the philosophical outlook expressed in his idea of a ‘Common European home’ only papered over the fact that in reality his reforms seemed to be an attempt for the USSR to catch up with the West by turning to it and emulating its methods.⁶⁰ Gorbachev dreamed of a prosperous Soviet Union, a socialist democracy – in his

⁵⁸Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2003).

⁵⁹The Nobel Peace Prize 1990, Press release, October 15, 1990, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1990/press-release/> accessed 28 September 2021.

⁶⁰‘Europe as a Common Home’, Address given by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, July 6, 1989, https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/gorbachev-speech-7-6-89_e3ccb87237.pdf accessed 28 September 2021.

mind modelled on Sweden – that could deliver growth and wealth. This was his clear goal, but he had little idea how to achieve it – and therein lay the seeds of his reform experiment's downfall.

The following four intertwined developments are central to identifying how and why the unravelling of the Soviet Union occurred the way it did: (1) plan to market; (2) Party monopoly to pluralism; (3) centre to periphery; and (4) Gorbachev to Yeltsin.

The move out of a command economy to a consumer market was total *terra incognita*. It had not been done before and came with many unforeseen problems. The USSR was bankrupt – financially insolvent and indebted to the West – and its economic system inflexible, inefficient and dominated by the powerful interest groups of collective farm managers, generals and industrial bosses.

Gorbachev's first steps – the re-mobilisation of the industrial base under the slogan acceleration (*uskorenie*) and the launch of an anti-alcohol campaign – failed. As a consequence, he quickly became more radical. To achieve real results, he now believed that he needed to foster an atmosphere of greater societal *glasnost* and liberalisation of the press for far-reaching economic restructuring in combination with political liberalisation.

As he fought an economy in free-fall, Gorbachev stumbled aimlessly from one half-baked reform plan to the next, hovering between ideas of longer-term, phased structural renewal and immediate attempts at full price liberalisation and austerity measures. He resorted to printing more roubles, which caused spiralling inflation, panic buying and massive consumer goods shortages, as well as the descent for many Soviets into poverty. At the same time, he still offered some of the largest state subsidies in history to the agro-military-energy lobbies, all clamouring for their own – not national – interests. Gorbachev knew that to cut costs and to get the ever-growing budget deficit under control, he had to confront the triumvirate; but, if he wanted to stave off the Soviet Union's implosion, he just could not afford to uproot these competing, politically conservative forces altogether. The Soviet leader thus found himself in a real dilemma. The hold of the entrenched lobbies and the political gridlock they caused forced Gorbachev into ever more difficult political splits and ill-thought-out reform efforts. Cumulatively, this politico-economic chaos inside the USSR proved much more damaging to the country than the effects of the comparatively larger US defence spending and of the United States' technological leap epitomised in the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). In other words, Soviet domestic handling of the deathly crisis and Gorbachev's inability to set a coherent course within this destructive forcefield, more than US actions, are to blame for the USSR's catastrophic unravelling.

The bottom line was that the more Gorbachev undermined the command economy, the more he compromised his country's stability while he found himself losing support on all sides of the political spectrum. The latter phenomenon was the result of his own doing. As part of his political liberalisation (that he needed to be able to push his reformist economic agenda), he had instigated a creeping dismantling of the one-party state. Yet, while that left him bereft of his old power base, Soviet governance was left in total disarray.

The moment that pluralism replaced Communist Party monopoly and devolution of power from the Centre to the Republics was introduced, the political landscape of the Soviet multinational entity irrevocably changed. As the old glue of centralised leadership,

state-party symbiosis and omnicompetent Soviet bureaucracy dissolved, acute political battles ensued, and Gorbachev was less and less able to control his polity and populace. New leaders in the Republics now depended on their electorates' satisfaction and local political consensus at the top to stay in power – and interests in the periphery were often diametrically opposed to those of the Kremlin, with the desire to re-gain independence particularly strong in the Baltic republics. As the different nationalities from Estonia to Georgia were beginning to pull the Soviet fabric apart, the Soviet leader found it difficult to defend (without resorting to coercion) the centre's position against these centrifugal forces. In the end, despite Gorbachev's best efforts always to prove otherwise – to himself as much as everybody else – it was the introduction of electoral democracy that turned out to be incompatible with the continuing existence of the Soviet state.

To be sure, the Soviet Union might well have survived without the three small Baltic Republics, had Gorbachev let them break away earlier on the basis of their special position in the Union, but he did not. And he was certainly not particularly pressured, because the West said fairly little until the 1991 Soviet crackdown in Vilnius. Too great was the general fear of Soviet descent into anarchy and inter-ethnic strife, of a military-backed reactionary coup, or of uncontrolled total collapse in the USSR. The Western political focus on peace, stability and territorial integrity then evidently trumped their legalistic rhetoric of upholding the non-recognition policies of Baltic annexation and the UN principle of self-determination.

As things played out, Gorbachev's problem was not only the loss of the Soviet periphery but, crucially, the danger of losing the heartland itself. There could be no Soviet entity without Russia (and Ukraine). And here, in its final consequence, the personal and systemic challenge posed by the political rise of Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev's long-term CPSU rival, was of critical importance.

Ironically, it was Gorbachev's electoral reforms – the establishment of a Soviet Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 as well as new Congresses in the Republics the following year – that gave a Yeltsin a power-political platform at the heart of the empire. By May 1990, when he was voted into the chairmanship of the Russian Supreme Soviet, he had effectively become Russia's leader. This was a key moment. Because it was from this elected position (with his own grassroots support) that Yeltsin, self-proclaimed Russian nationalist and committed democrat, would begin to confront Gorbachev – who lacked real democratic legitimacy.

A first hint at the danger Yeltsin and the Russian government might pose to the Soviet state came with Russia's declaration of sovereignty from the USSR on 12 June 1990. In doing so, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) joined the 'parade' of SSR-proclamations for independence. While this move played well with ordinary Russians, it served as a warning signal that Yeltsin was above all interested in power: for Russia and thus for himself. The RSFSR had entered into a political battle and a struggle for resources with the Soviet centre. Only one month later, Yeltsin resigned from the Soviet Communist Party and provocatively declared that he only answered to the Russian people. An irreparable rift had opened up between Gorbachev and Yeltsin; from then on, they would more often than not pull in completely different political directions over how to take the Union forward – economically and politically.

After the thwarted August 1991 coup by diehards trying ineptly to hold together the Union, and with Yeltsin hailed as the courageous hero of Russia who had saved democracy, Gorbachev appeared a crumpled figure – the Soviet Union's future as a unitary state hanging in the balance as various republics made their final exit. Among the remaining Soviet entities, Russia and Belarus called for a looser 'Union of States', while Ukraine pulled away from any potentially Moscow-driven Russia-dominated confederative ideas. Independence was the only viable option in the eyes of the majority of Ukrainians (including in the Donbass region and Crimea) as their December 1991 referendum underscored. And since Yeltsin could not imagine a future Union without Ukraine, while Belarus and the Central Asian republics could not imagine a future without Russia, the USSR was dead.

Soviet death had by now been long coming. A multitude of causes – both systemic and contingent – had combined to cumulative effect. The timing and the way it occurred, however, were surprising to all. Most immediately, one might argue, the Soviet construct had been, in one sense, peacefully voted out by its citizens; in another, Yeltsin effectively walked out on the Union, having set out on his 'Russian path' 18 months earlier. Gorbachev's dream of Communist reinvention had certainly evaporated. In a tragic twist of fate, the Soviet leader, in his bid for his country's renewal, had lost his subjects and his state.

Could Gorbachev have chosen a different path – one akin to Deng Xiaoping's successful Communist reinvention of China that was based on gradual economic reform, firm party control, and the use of military force to maintain the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in position? The Soviet leader may be faulted for many things. His political naivety, his impulsiveness, and for his unstrategic approach as he embarked on his dual-reform course of restructuring economy and polity. But we must also remember that here was a Soviet leader who wanted a more open Soviet society, who wanted all change to be managed without coercive power, and who dreamed of a better integrated Soviet Union – globally and in Europe. For Deng, openness, peaceful change and genuine integration were never on the cards. Ultimately, once Gorbachev threw his balls in the air, he could not stop juggling, all the while he was running out of time. He was powerless in the ever-worsening socio-economic chaos and amidst the different political forces that constantly pulled him in different directions. And there was little he could have done without resorting to the troops, once the nationalist 'landmines' that Lenin had planted under the Soviet federative construct truly exploded.⁶¹ Clearly, structures and agency were both key. The Soviet Empire was totally different from the Middle Kingdom – and Gorbachev was not Deng.

In Vladimir Putin's eyes, these historical nuances and complexities are of little import. What matters is that the Soviet Union, which for nearly half a century had stood as one of the two pillars of global power, was sold out in the 1991 'catastrophe' and left Russia as an international irrelevance. For him, Gorbachev was not a misguided reformer, but

⁶¹Putin cited in 'Заседание Совета по развитию гражданского общества и правам человека', December 10, 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62285> accessed 28 September 2021.

a traitor who had lost Russia's historic empire. To restore the greatness of Russia – as a cohesive nation and a strong state with global clout – has been Putin's mission since he took charge at the dawn of the new millennium.

Sergey Radchenko: 'The Soviet collapse was neither "positive" nor "negative"'

Academic writing on the Soviet collapse after 1991 has retained two distinctive features, each with some common tropes. The first is the expression of surprise. It has become quite mandatory to acknowledge that no one saw it coming, while at the same time there were good reasons – economic, political, ideological – that make this collapse appear inevitable in retrospect. It is also customary to mention that the Soviet collapse was largely peaceful and that we are very fortunate that it was – that the Soviet Union did not sink into a civil war with nuclear weapons on the loose, and that its various contradictions were semi-amicably resolved without major ethnic or religious strife. The second feature is the investigation of the reasons for Soviet collapse, constructing a hierarchy of causes – a subject of many excellent academic articles and books. My short intervention will not attempt to re-engage with this literature – a subject far too complex for such a brief essay – but will pose a broader normative question about the meaning of Soviet collapse and, in particular, whether it is to be regarded as a positive development.

Thirty years on, the informed public is still far from seeing the events of 1991 with the kind of calm detachment with which we view, say, the collapse of the Roman or Mongolian empires. There is, instead, a polarised spectrum of emotionally charged opinions. At one end are the murmurs of approval of those for whom the USSR was an evil empire and a prison of nations. On the other are the unapologetic imperialists, primarily in the Russian Federation, who describe the Soviet collapse as a terrible catastrophe because it ruined such a fine country. They hasten to add, however, that the USSR itself was an unfortunate aberration that unjustly trimmed and perhaps even fatally undermined a still finer country – the Russian Empire.⁶² Since most respected academics would not want to find themselves in the company of these apologists for Soviet and Russian imperialism, the academic opinion – certainly in the West – is generally in favour of the USSR's demise.⁶³

There are at least three interrelated sets of arguments among those who hold the Soviet Union as inherently and irredeemably bad and thus worthy of its fate. The first is connected to the notion that it was a 'police state' – that is to say, it possessed highly centralised effective mechanisms of repression, from the ever-present KGB to psychiatric wards for political dissidents.⁶⁴ It denied its citizens the rights of speech, religion, assembly and political participation. Looked at from this angle, the Soviet Union was a 'totalitarian' monstrosity, and we should regard its collapse as natural and inevitable, and as a triumph for justice and human rights.

⁶²The most prominent advocate of such a view is of course Vladimir Putin. For a discussion of his take on the former USSR, see Sergey Radchenko, 'Putin and Xi Eye Soviet Collapse', *Asian Forum*, March 19, 2020, <https://theasanforum.org/putin-and-xi-eye-the-soviet-collapse/> accessed 27 September 2021.

⁶³With notable exceptions – for example, see Stephen Cohen, 'Was the Soviet System Reformable?' *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 459–88.

⁶⁴For example, Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

One wonders, though, whether we are wilfully conflating and confusing two Soviet Unions: the one that preceded Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms with the one that followed them. A reasonable argument may be made (and is in fact made by Sergey Zhuravlev in this collection) to the effect that by the late 1980s, the Soviet Union was no longer what it had once been, that its repressive powers had been curtailed, and that it was undergoing rapid democratisation. Ronald Reagan was among those who admitted it in May 1988, while walking around the Kremlin. Would it make any difference to our analysis if we allowed that what collapsed in December 1991 was actually not a 'police state' (to cite Stephen Kotkin), but was a democratic polity, however imperfect? Proponents of the unreformability of the USSR (e.g. Karen Dawisha) draw attention to the fact that it was a system that 'could not be maintained without institutionalized force'.⁶⁵ But there is a degree of essentialism to such assertions, which leads one to understate both the possibility of systemic change, and the human agency in bringing it about. Such analysis also tends to confuse the Soviet state with the Soviet system.⁶⁶

Setting this aside, there is a broader question about the connection between the internal constitution of a state and its legitimacy as a state. If we allow such a connection (i.e. as we do when we argue that the Soviet collapse was a 'good thing' since the USSR was a monstrosity), then we may be called upon to follow this logic to the end and welcome the break-up of Putin's Russia, since it has embraced the same mechanisms of oppression once held dear by the Soviet authorities, and in this regard is a successor to the USSR and ruled by a repressive regime. Furthermore, we might also welcome a further break-up of the former Soviet constituent republics, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, because they are notably repressive and undemocratic. Indeed, if every police state in the world were to be broken up, one might end up with an ever greater number of ever smaller police states.

The second set of arguments would see us acknowledge the Soviet collapse as a positive development because such was the will of the people. Proponents of this argument will point to expressions of *vox populi* in the Baltic Chain (August 1989), or in the Ukrainian referendum in favour of independence (December 1991), which clearly showed that Soviet statehood was not legitimate. Opponents might draw attention to the Soviet referendum of March 1991, which suggested continued popular support for the preservation of the USSR in some shape or form.⁶⁷

The key problem with drawing conclusions about the justice of Soviet collapse on the basis of appeals to the democratic process is that in most cases this process was flawed and contradictory, and was highly susceptible to manipulation by demagogues and

⁶⁵Karen Dawisha, 'The Question of Questions: Was the Soviet Union Worth Saving?' *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 513–26.

⁶⁶On this see, in particular, Mark Kramer, 'The Reform of the Soviet System and the Demise of the Soviet State', *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 505–12.

⁶⁷The proliferation of public opinion polls in the final months before the Soviet collapse (many of which do not in fact inspire confidence due to their small sample size and dubious methodologies) makes it difficult to arrive at clear conclusions about the direction of public opinion in the USSR. Scholars have thus been free to pick and choose data that aligns best with their convictions. One (random) example: Mark Beissinger argues that 'a majority of Russians in December 1991 favoured the Belovezhskoe Treaty that put an end to the USSR'. His source for this statement is Matthew Wyman who, in his analysis of Russian public opinion, in fact presents a much more nuanced picture: 'this decision [Belovezha] was itself strongly supported by citizens throughout the USSR, despite their support for maintaining a union'. Matthew Wyman, *Public Opinion in the Postcommunist Russia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 166; and Mark Beissinger, 'Soviet Empire as "Family Resemblance"', *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 295.

political entrepreneurs. For example, there has been a growing recognition of this in the historiography of the questionable side of the Belovezha Accords of 8 December 1991, when the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine signed away the USSR in the absence of anything like a transparent democratic process. Stephen Cohen has gone so far as to call it a 'coup', and although one might conclude that Belovezha was 'inevitable' in view of the pro-independence sentiment in Ukraine, this does not in itself legitimise the agreement, nor provide sufficient grounds for seeing it as a historically positive development.⁶⁸ One might just say, only slightly exaggerating: no one asked the average Turkmen what she thought of Belovezha.⁶⁹ One might even contrast the dramatic dismantlement of the USSR with the slow, orderly pull-out of Britain from the European Union following the Brexit vote. Yet this orderly British exit triggered spirited discussion about the legitimacy of the 2016 referendum. Such discussions rarely arise in relation to the Soviet Union, whose very collapse is seen as proof of its basic political illegitimacy, presumably in contrast to the inherent political legitimacy of the national units that emerged from its ruins.

Mark Beissinger has argued that one difference between the Soviet Communist regime that did not survive the demise of Marxism, and, say, the Chinese, that did, is that the Soviets were unable to draw on the force of ethnonationalism for self-legitimation, while the Chinese succeeded in doing exactly this.⁷⁰ One may therefore posit that regardless of the 'process' that led to the Soviet collapse, it is beyond doubt that the Soviet Union succumbed to nationalist sentiment harnessed by republican elites: it is as simple as that. But if we allow that nationalism is a 'good thing' insofar as it hastened Soviet demise, is it not then also fair to admit that nationalism is a 'good thing' insofar as it provides legitimacy to the otherwise illegitimate Chinese Communist regime? Is nationalism not a 'good thing' insofar as it legitimises repressive authoritarian regimes that have inherited much of the post-Soviet space? Celebrating nationalism thus becomes a double-edged sword, even if one granted that national self-determination was what the majority of ex-Soviet citizens, now identifying with their respective 'nations', really wanted. Part of the problem is that with few justifiable exceptions, we will never know what most of those people really wanted. Not only was the proverbial Turkmen never asked, but the nationalist agenda was generally hijacked by populist self-promoters and ex-communist officials who donned nationalist caps.⁷¹

The third set of arguments is by far the most appealing to most analysts, and it is here that we find the strongest confirmation that the collapse of the Soviet Union was unquestionably a positive development. These are arguments to the effect that the USSR was an empire and that it was therefore unjust by definition because it was structured around patterns of domination. Few (with well-known exceptions) lament the collapse of the British or the French empires, for, whatever they may or may not have

⁶⁸Stephen Cohen, 'Was the Soviet System Reformable?'

⁶⁹Now, this is strictly speaking not true. Occasional opinion polls were conducted even in the Turkmen SSR with numbers showing a distinct opposition to the prospect of secession. See, for example, Matthew Wyman, *Public Opinion in the Postcommunist Russia*, 158. The reliability and scientific accuracy of these polls cannot be taken for granted. Turkmen SSR also took part in the flawed March 1991 referendum, with 97.9% voting for the continuation of the Union.

⁷⁰Mark Beissinger, 'Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism', *Journal of Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (2009): 331–47.

⁷¹For an insightful discussion of how populist slogans about the economic benefits of independence helped sway opinion in the December 1991 Ukrainian referendum, see Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

accomplished for their far-flung colonies, there is no disputing the inherent violence and injustice of the colonial enterprise. Because the Soviet Union was the last European empire, the argument goes, its demise was not only timely, but also eminently justifiable from the perspective of humankind's march towards freedom. By contrast, anyone who questions the desirability of the Soviet break-up must be viewed with utmost suspicion as a potential neo-imperialist.

There is much to be said for the post-colonial critique of Soviet statehood, although there is much here that is also swept under the rug. One interesting example of where the colonial framework falls woefully short relates to Georgia, which, one might argue, was a Soviet colony. Since it was a colony, its liberation in 1991 must of course be welcomed – as it was in many quarters. Yet Western countries did not grant diplomatic recognition to Georgia right away, because at the time of the Soviet dissolution its regime was an extremist dictatorship of rabid ethno-nationalists. Also, it was ridden by ethnic strife, because its constituent nations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia sought their own 'liberation' from Georgia. From their perspective (which may be defended or challenged) it was not only Moscow that was the imperial overlord, but Tbilisi as well. Should one therefore not also welcome and recognise the liberation of ethnic enclaves from Georgia much as one welcomed Georgia's liberation from the USSR?⁷²

The same kind of critique may be applied to many other post-colonial relationships in the former USSR, because many former republics have their large ethnic minorities, more or less unsuccessfully integrated within their new nation states. Although under ideal circumstances, competing nationalisms may be reconciled within a liberal democratic framework, such ideal circumstances are hard to come by in the former USSR. If anything, ethnic wounds continue to fester 30 years after the Soviet collapse, with full potential for bloodbath anywhere from Central Asia to Nagorny Karabakh to eastern Ukraine. It is precisely to this kind of dilemma that George H. W. Bush referred in his much-maligned Chicken Kiev speech of 1 August 1991, when he spoke of the dangers of 'suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred'. In retrospect, one might argue George H. W. Bush was not far off in his assessment.

Although there are important reasons why the Soviet Union can in fact be called an 'empire', there are also limits to the term's analytical utility. It is not uncommon, for example, to see a degree of confusion as to what the 'empire' actually refers to – the so-called socialist camp (which in all fairness began to collapse with the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s) or the actual USSR. The more nuanced commentary distinguishes between the two by calling the former the 'external empire', in contrast to the 'internal' one.⁷³ More often than not, the Soviet Empire is called 'empire' merely as a matter of convention, or to signal one's disapprobation, not to analyse its internal workings, much less to compare it to other European or non-European empires. One useful exercise would be to pose a question about what (we think) made the Soviet Union an empire, and whether some or

⁷²For a discussion of related concepts, see Alexander Murinson, 'The Secessions of Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabagh: The Roots and Patterns of Development of Post-Soviet Micro-secessions in Transcaucasia', *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 1 (2004): 5–26.

⁷³Even among the more nuanced writers, there is an astonishing confusion of terminology. For example, Charles Wolf, while attempting to define the term, extends the Soviet Empire all the way to Angola, Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam (among others). See Charles Wolf, 'The Costs and Benefits of the Soviet Empire', in *The Future of the Soviet Empire*, eds. Henry S. Rowen and Charles Wolf (London: The Macmillan Press, 1987).

all of these characteristics are also applicable to contemporary⁷⁴ Russia or, for instance, China. How different was Moscow's relationship with Moldovan and Turkmen SSRs from Russia's relationship with, say, Chechnya, Dagestan or Tuva? How different was the forcible Soviet incorporation of the Baltics in 1940 from China's incorporation of Tibet in the 1950s? The answer to these questions is far from straightforward, which helps draw attention to uncritical use of terms in social science.

Confusion in terminology sometimes leads to conflation of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which were in fact two separate developments, two years (or more) apart. It is difficult to argue that the Cold War was not yet over in 1989. (One recent study convincingly argues that 1988 is even more appropriate as the end date).⁷⁵ Mikhail Gorbachev hoped and expected that the Soviet Union would participate in the construction of a new world order because, as he put it to George H. W. Bush at Malta, it was the Cold War itself – or 'Cold War methods' – that suffered defeat in 1989. Bush wasn't buying into such rhetoric. As the Soviet Union retreated from Eastern Europe, he (rightly or wrongly) pursued policies aimed at securing long-term US interests in what previously counted for the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet Union, no longer the United States' actual adversary, remained something of a potential adversary, which is why its ultimate collapse, as far as Washington was concerned, became a logical extension of the Cold War itself. With the empire vanquished, victory became final. This was something that Gorbachev did not quite foresee in 1989.

In conclusion, does it even matter whether the Soviet collapse was a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing'? There are several reasons why engagement with the normative side of the question is of importance.

First, now that the dust has settled, we can more confidently assess what the Soviet Union has left behind. If the USSR were replaced with prosperous liberal democracies, then the normative question would hardly be relevant. All's well that ends well. However, not everything ended well. Other than the Baltic exception, the post-Soviet space is a veritable hodgepodge of autocratic rule, human rights abuse, poverty, corruption and – in more than a few sad instances – ethnic strife. Having embraced ethnic nationalism, instead of liberal democracy, as its *raison d'être* under Vladimir Putin, Russia nurtures its irredentist grievances, posing a long-term threat to its neighbours. Thus, it is important to understand what went right and what went wrong.

Second, taking a more nuanced view on the normative aspects of Soviet collapse will help the reassessment of the key actors involved in the dismantling of the USSR, including, centrally, Boris Yeltsin. Such reassessment of Yeltsin's role is already

⁷⁴Examples abound. Among many are Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), where McFaul repeatedly refers to the 'Soviet empire' without exploring the meaning of the term (though he does in fact briefly compare it on one occasion to the British, French and Portuguese empires). Beissinger defends the use of the word 'empire' in relation to the USSR but not because it resembled any other empires (it admittedly did not) but in that it entailed an element of 'foreign domination'. However, he does not attempt to explain either the meaning of 'foreign' or the meaning of 'domination' and merely alludes to perception of such domination by some Soviet citizens. See Mark Beissinger, 'Soviet Empire as "Family Resemblance"', 302. The problem with seeing empire (as Beissinger does) as merely a term that denotes how 'populations came to relate to authority as a large-scale system of foreign domination and appropriated a similar vocabulary of resistance' is that the term becomes too blurry to be of any, but polemical, use. Such 'vocabulary of resistance' has, for instance, been appropriated by various anti-US and anti-EU activists, which does not make the US, much less the EU, any more (or less) 'imperial'.

⁷⁵Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

underway. Thus, in his biography of Mikhail Gorbachev, William Taubman presents Yeltsin as a power-hungry schemer who was quite capable of undermining his own country in pursuit of political ambition, and there is a similar assessment in Rodric Braithwaite's contribution to this collection of essays.⁷⁶ Such Yeltsin stands quite in contrast with the passionate revolutionary who ended Communism and broke the Soviet Empire when he climbed the tank in August 1991. In general, as we move away from the events of 1991, the heroes begin to appear a little less heroic, the villains a little less evil. This is because we are becoming more aware with the passage of time of the predictable and unpredictable consequences of the momentous decisions made by those who held the fate of a country in their hands.

Third, questioning the established truths around the Soviet collapse will help reflect on the rife dangers of ethnic nationalism – dangers that are barely hidden from view in many of the post-Soviet polities. We like to celebrate national self-determination as an inherently democratic process, but Wilsonian idealism sometimes does not square with the nasty realities on the ground: ethnic hatreds, exclusion, misery and strife. And these don't go away easily. If anything, the persistence of ethnic conflict in the post-Soviet space – from Eastern Ukraine, to the Caucasus, to Southern Kyrgyzstan – is a reminder that even if the Soviet collapse was largely 'peaceful', its aftershocks are anything but. The persistence of tyranny in the post-Soviet space is a reminder that in our once-bubbling enthusiasm for national liberation from the clutches of Soviet imperialism, we have inadvertently oversimplified the meaning of freedom. A progressive, linear reading of history that hailed the Soviet collapse as the final victory in the battle between good and evil has thus succumbed to a post-triumphalist disillusionment.

My preferred approach to the thorny subject of Soviet collapse would be to view it in value-neutral terms: it was neither 'positive' nor 'negative'; it was just something that happened. At the same time, we must be clear that the discourse of post-Soviet liberation from the prison of nations is unsatisfactory because it woefully undertheorizes a complex socio-political phenomenon, leaving us at pains to explain why that moment of freedom that beckoned in December 1991 ultimately proved so fleeting and illusory for so many former subjects of Europe's 'last empire'.

Sergey Zhuravlev: 'Discussions on the break-up of the USSR: a view from a Russian historian'

What actually happened in 1991? It is possible to give a very concise answer: 'In 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist due to a combination of various reasons'. In actual fact, the answer would depend on one's priorities and on the angle that one uses to view the problem. Western politicians, for example, considered the disappearance of the Soviet Union as evidence of their victory in the Cold War against world communism. For liberal economists, it came as the final proof of the ineptitude of the centrally planned economy and state interference in market processes. For Soviet dissidents, it was the hour when history itself recognised their cause as righteous. For Mikhail Gorbachev, the Belovezha Accords are still something that 'violated the will of the people' expressed in the 1991 referendum on the future of the USSR. Vladimir Putin insists that the collapse of the

⁷⁶William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, and this position also has a right to exist, considering the humanitarian consequences of the country's disintegration. Therefore, we can say that the process of the USSR's collapse and its aftermath were multifactorial in nature.

My position is that there were a combination of factors that led to the break-up of the Soviet Union and these factors were both inherently structural and personalised. Accordingly, I focus on investigating the multitude of reasons and mutual effects of various factors, as separating a single one and giving it priority may create a false picture.

It seems difficult to find the words in English that would capture the difference between the Russian words '*raspad*' (break-up) and '*razval*' (deliberate and shambolic break-up). Modern Russian historiography and textbooks prefer to use *raspad* of the USSR, however, opponents are becoming more insistent on using the term *razval*. By *razval* they mean the 'subversive activities' of external and internal forces, the mistakes made by the Soviet leadership, and the reckless actions of politicians who either deliberately or inadvertently steered the course to the weakening and disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is not difficult to predict that the *razval* version of events will gain more and more adepts and will be actively supported by the Russian political elite, given the increasing popularity of historical conspiracy theories in modern Russia, coupled with the new round of animosity with the West. However, the influence of recent events and blame assignment is, unfortunately, not a uniquely Russian phenomenon: it is international.

When studying the break-up of the USSR, which problems should be looked at more closely? I tend to believe that the history of power and power institutions during the time of *perestroika* is a relatively better-researched topic. It is true that although the number of published memoirs is plentiful, it is still difficult to understand the mechanisms behind the political decisions made at that time and the real role of certain people who were surrounding Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Not everything is fine with the preservation of documents and ease of access for historians to the records from *perestroika* and the 1990s reform period. Unlike the Bolsheviks, who were keen to leave a clear mark in history and, to that end, initiated document collections, the *perestroika* politicians and ruling Russian elite of the 1990s were, sadly, not too concerned with keeping thorough records of their deeds. For example, it was quite common for government figures to destroy or take with them some of their official documentation when they left their high positions. Archives of joint-stock companies, banks and industrial enterprises are usually inaccessible to researchers under the guise of commercial secrecy. Political parties and organisations are not obliged to file their materials with state archives and, when they do so, they provide only 'cleansed' versions. In the last days of the CPSU, the apparatchiks destroyed the secret parts of the party records from the time of *perestroika*. Records of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) suffered damage in the shelling of the 'White House' in Moscow in October 1993. The materials that had then been salvaged from the fire were moved to the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), and are now in very high demand among researchers.

Recently, historians, economists and lawyers have been focusing on the economic problems of the reforms conducted at the end of the 1980s. People argue about the reasons for their failure and analyse the economic legislation brought in by Gorbachev. It is becoming more obvious that the inability of the central power to stabilise the economic

situation in the country was one of the main reasons for society losing trust in its power, for the growth of regional separatist sentiments and for people becoming mentally prepared for 'shock therapy' as an inevitable and only alternative to the 'gentle treatment' that did not bring any positive economic results. In contrast to the mid-1980s, when the central power on the whole managed to prevent sharp drops in living standards despite growing problems in the economy, just a few years later the full-blown economic crisis that was to a degree caused by the failure of Gorbachev's reforms mainly hit the welfare of the common man. People's discontent with the falling quality of life, a drop in the rouble's purchasing power and the destabilisation of the consumer market became a political issue. But that was not everything. There is a well-known English common-sense proverb that says, 'what can't be cured must be endured'. Well, on the eve of 1991, the ability to endure was approaching a threshold, and people began to act and react unreasonably. At times, emotions took over and people were ready to believe in miraculous transformations that would happen in 500, 400 or even fewer days (here we are referring to the reform programmes for transitioning to a market economy offered at the time. – [S. Zh.]). The environment was ripe for the growth of not only unrealistic hopes, but also for populism, power-grabbing ambitions, bursts of nationalism and separatist sentiment.

It seems that currently, most experts agree that from approximately 1987 the economic measures adopted by Gorbachev were objectively leading to the destruction of the Soviet economic model and loss of state control over the economic processes in the country (even though these measures had been designed not by amateurs, but by the leading Soviet scientists who were receiving general guidance on the reforms' direction from the Central Committee of the Communist Party).

In other words, the hidden 'Soviet liberalisation' of the economy (and covert privatisation of public property) was gaining momentum even before the radical reforms introduced by Yegor Gaidar in 1992. However, how it all happened in reality has yet to be thoroughly researched. The disintegration of the USSR came at various levels and in different stages. On the surface we have the process of member republics of the Union gaining political independence. Yet, in the first instance, they demanded economic self-governance, and then the processes of economic and political disintegration became linked and fed each other. This linkage deserves a more detailed analysis. For example, between 1990–1, the government of the RSFSR, a key republic in the Soviet Union, was encouraging Union-owned enterprises and institutions located in Russia to change their jurisdiction to Russia. Now we can see that the consequences of this political struggle played a critical part in the deepening of the economic disintegration of the USSR and bringing the country's economy to collapse. The question would be why the leaders did not think about the destructive effects that their actions had for the people as well as for other areas. The most likely explanation is that at the last stage of *perestroika* they were so stuck in the trenches of political battles that they could not bring themselves out of the conflict paradigm. (Here we refer to the conflict with Gorbachev and the central government of the Soviet Union).

When we step down from the macro level to the level of material production, we will see that political disintegration led to the destruction of previous systems of cooperation and contractual relations across the entire USSR. A significant proportion of the

producers that used to supply materials and components suddenly found themselves in different republics, and these republics were busy with the introduction of their own currencies as well as customs, tax and other barriers. To give an example: just before the break-up of the USSR, about 80% of partners (100 producers altogether) in the supply chain of AutoVAZ, the leading Soviet car manufacturer (Lada cars) based in Togliatti (Russian Federation), were located outside of Russia. If we take into account the high degree of monopolisation in the Soviet economy and the absence of competition (the Western market was still inaccessible), we will see that in many cases it was impossible to find a quick replacement for missing links in the supply chain. The biggest victims in such circumstances were complex and high-tech industries that manufactured end products and depended on the suppliers of quality components who, in their turn, were experiencing the same problems cascading down the line. Therefore, the political and economic processes at the time of *perestroika* can hardly be separated from each other. Yet, in my opinion, they were most visible at the level of production enterprises and their employee teams.

I believe that all this calls for a resurgence of studies of the specific production enterprises, institutions, agricultural companies, banks and so on that played a momentous role at the time of *perestroika*. It would be very exciting to research specific state-owned corporations and enterprises such as Gazprom and AutoVAZ. (In the latter case some work has been done already with a contribution from this author). It would be appealing to study various regions (especially in the national regions of Russia), as well as conduct micro-level studies of cities or even city districts and small communities, because in this way it will be easier to track the changes in business practices, day-to-day life and people's reactions to political events during the reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Due to the general tendency to study the political side of the break-up of the USSR, Russian historians do not pay enough attention to the social initiatives and sentiments of the time, for example, which factors and events influenced them, how they were evolving in the centre and the periphery, how they radicalised towards the end of the 1980s, how spontaneous they were, whether any psychological trends in society had any influence on the actions of the government and politicians, and so on. In my opinion, V. P. Buldakov, a Russian historian, draws some interesting parallels between the political crises of 1917 and 1991; both were accompanied by populist tendencies and even mass psychosis.⁷⁷

As for the last stage of the crisis in the USSR, there are many aspects for discussion. As often happens, the expansion of knowledge brings up new questions. I believe that on the whole the focus has been shifting from political events in the centre (Moscow) towards regional life during *perestroika*. In recent decades much has been published on what had happened in Russian regions and in the post-Soviet republics, now independent states. Since these republics strive to create their national histories, this moment of gaining independence is especially important for them and becomes a primary object of study. Unfortunately, because of this, their interpretation of *perestroika* events, both in scholarly literature and the media, is sometimes biased against the role played by the Union's centre. It is particularly evident in the publications that commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the Soviet break-up in the former republics.

⁷⁷V. P. Buldakov, *Quo vadis? Кризисы в России: пути переосмысления*. М.: РОССПЭН, 20.

Recently, the discussion has become focused on the role of the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) in the developments leading to the Soviet demise. The current crisis in the relationship between Russia and Ukraine and certain nostalgic sentiments towards the USSR also have their impact. Some Russian commentators leave the main responsibility at the door of Ukraine, specifically noting that the All-Ukrainian Referendum on Independence that took place on 1 December 1991 allegedly made the break-up of the USSR inevitable. In fact, the political process in Ukraine as well as in other republics of the USSR proceeded with an eye on Moscow and was greatly dependent on the stand-off between the two power centres – the Union and Russia.

I believe that much was defined by the position taken by Russia and its leader Yeltsin from summer 1990 and, most critically, in the currently understudied ‘transitional’ period from the end of August to December 1991 (after the *coup d’état*). Russia’s political weight and impact were comparably bigger than that of the Ukrainian SSR or any other Soviet republic. The RSFSR was the cornerstone of the USSR from its birth up to its collapse. In 1991, the RSFSR covered three quarters of the USSR’s territory and was home to more than half of its population. Another important theme is the disintegration processes within the RSFSR itself. These were threatening the RSFSR’s integrity and were developing in conjunction with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This problem came to the fore in summer 1990. It is well known that the crisis of Russian federalism has transitioned to the post-Soviet era and that discussions around it are still politically sensitive today.

When considering the lines of research that have influenced my evaluation of Gorbachev’s and then Yeltsin’s reforms, I ascribe great significance to a comparative angle, i.e. the correlation between the economic and political transformations in the USSR and Russia and similar processes in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe as well as China. A lot has been done in this area, but still, much remains to be done.

Another question for discussion is where lay the fine line that divided the dismantling of the communist chains of the past and the destruction of a state that was already on the path of democratisation. The recent thirtieth anniversary of the *coup d’état* demonstrated that this issue is very relevant for Russia and that it causes very intense arguments. Almost nobody disputes that the failure of the *coup d’état* by the ‘State Committee on the State of Emergency’ significantly accelerated the USSR’s collapse. And now a pamphlet appears called ‘Political Chernobyl of the Party and Soviet Totalitarian Empire’ edited by G. E. Burbulis, formerly an influential comrade-in-arms of Yeltsin. In 1991, Burbulis had consistently supported the destruction of the Union State and, as a secretary of state, he participated in the signing of Belovezha Accords together with Yeltsin. The title of this pamphlet conveys a controversial assessment of the events of August 1991. In reality, there was no ‘Party and Soviet Totalitarian Empire’ in existence by this point. If this empire had existed, any politicians who took steps towards the destruction of the USSR would have been arrested and tried according to Soviet law. Thanks to *perestroika*, the USSR became a totally different country with ‘*glasnost*’, democratically elected people’s deputies and an actual multi-party system. Some historians go so far as to consider (and not without grounds) the 1990–1 period to be the most democratic time in Russian history. If we take this angle, then many developments in the last years of the Soviet Union would appear in a different light.

Was the collapse of 1991 inevitable because of the ‘birth defects’ of the Soviet system? I believe that the answer to this question will largely depend on the answer to a more general problem statement: was the Soviet system and its constituent parts – economy, politics and ideology, social sphere, culture and education – reformable in principle? Or, perhaps, were radical changes in the country only made possible through the destruction of the Soviet system? I have already had a chance to comment on this matter.⁷⁸ Here we encounter a situation wherein the difficulties in reforming some components of the Soviet system were accompanied by definite success in reforming its other constituent parts. The *perestroika* period demonstrates more than other periods in Soviet history the reformability of the system. In my view, the success of the political reforms was the most significant achievement, for example, the reform of the local soviets (councils) that became democratically elected and turned into a platform for the democratic transformation of the country.

This is why I do not believe that the collapse of the USSR was inevitable, nor that the USSR itself was destined for destruction because of its inability to adjust to changing times. When I read statements like this, I cannot help thinking of Soviet historiography which, as we know all too well, diligently tried to prove the inevitability of the collapse of the Russian Empire followed by the fall of the Provisional Government followed by the historic predestination of the Socialist Revolution. We know now that events in Russia could have taken a different turn both in February and in the summer and autumn of 1917, as well as during the Civil War. If we really want to obtain a balanced picture of the complexities of the Soviet past, especially in the last years of the USSR, without posing as wise in hindsight, then we’d better reject determinism of this kind – and all the more so since, unlike in 1917, when people actually could foresee radical changes ahead and left many personal records of this, nobody predicted the total collapse of the USSR – neither Western intelligence nor Soviet citizens.

The ‘imperial’ theme in the discussions on the causes of the break-up of the USSR has become one of the most prominent in both international and Russian historiography. To comment on this in brief, I do not consider the USSR to be the ‘last empire’ of the modern world. I am not sure that there is a correlation between the rapid disintegration of the USSR and such a notion (even if such a notion really existed). I agree with Terry Martin’s definition of the USSR as an ‘affirmative action empire’ with structures and dynamics that were different from other imperial and colonial formations. I would treat the Baltics factor during the time of *perestroika* as a completely peculiar and separate subject. Even then, it was seen from the Soviet centre as a special, albeit painful, problem. We all know that the inclusion of the three Baltic republics in the USSR had never been recognised by the West and the separatist sentiment was ever-present in the Baltics for the entire Soviet period. It was not a secret to the Soviet leadership that the Baltics were ready to ‘leave’ at the first opportunity. I tend to believe that if it were possible to preserve the USSR, it would have been done without the Baltic states. As far as the rest of the republics are concerned, the position taken by Russia was, I believe, the key. The role

⁷⁸S. V. Zhuravlev, К вопросу о способности советской системы к реформированию (на примере периода перестройки) // Распад СССР: дискуссии о причинах, обстоятельствах и последствиях: Сб. статей / отв. ред С.В. Журавлев. М. Центр гуманитарных инициатив, 2019), 13–22.

played by Ukraine was important, but it has been largely exaggerated recently for the benefit of the current political sentiments. The Central Asian republics, as we know, never actively sought an exit from the USSR.

The Union Centre headed by Gorbachev was manifestly weak. It refused to accept any responsibility for unpopular measures and thereby discredited itself in the eyes of the people. In the final days, the Centre completely lost control over the situation in the country. After the failure of the *coup*, the process of power devolution from the Union to Russian structures was happening, yet the Russian political elite headed by Yeltsin had already decided against preservation of the Union. The *de facto* ban on the Communist Party in the RSFSR was aimed at elimination of the only serious opponent and – as it was correctly considered – the ‘binding block’ of the Union.

Could the Soviet Union have been saved without the single unifying ideology? Is it correct to assume that the democratisation of the Soviet stratum inevitably led to its destruction? It would be prudent to move away from the terms that may be interpreted in different ways and confuse the reader. Democratic and liberal values, when applied to Russian realities, are perceived differently in Russia and the West. I would also be very cautious when defining the Soviet society of the late 1980s as ‘undemocratic’. There is no doubt that ideology played a very significant part in the USSR crisis. Another special issue is to what extent the CPSU, stereotyped as a conservative force, was truly incapable of reforming. There were complex processes taking place within the party during the *perestroika* years. The previously established postulates were under revision (such as negative attitudes to religion and believers, to private entrepreneurship and to others). It became very apparent that the party existed in two guises – the party *apparat* and thousands of democratic-minded ranking members. Led by Gorbachev the party first initiated the democratic reforms and then gave up its monopoly on power. The party was an important source of talent for the democratic movement. Almost all leaders of the Russian democrats – B. N. Yeltsin, G. E. Burbulis, E. T. Gaidar, A. B. Chubais and others – came from the CPSU. Gradually, the party lost its leading positions (and not just formally, which manifested itself in scrapping from the Constitution Article 6, which established the leading role of the Communist Party in the Soviet State) and became divided into various platforms (factions) which was testimony to an ideological crisis and lack of unity. The behaviour of the party leader Gorbachev aggravated this situation. On 24 August 1991, after the *coup d'état* and Yeltsin's decree to ban the CPSU in the Russian Federation, Gorbachev distanced himself from the party and gave up his position as the CPSU Secretary General. In November 1991, even before the break-up of the USSR, Gorbachev officially took leave of the CPSU, rejected the communist ideology and adopted a social democratic stance.

We should also bear in mind that the crisis of the Communist doctrine of a Soviet type had long predated *perestroika*, but was deepened around 1987 by *glasnost* publications on the crimes of the Stalin regime (gulags, mass political repressions and so on). Although the central authorities authorised such publications, as a result the entire Soviet period became associated with Stalinism. A critique of Soviet power which was initially meant to ‘cleanse the socialism’ eventually became an instrument of its rejection. Thus, instead of the ‘ideology of the sixties’ the Russian political class adopted an anti-Soviet ideology in various shades. This became an ideological backdrop for disintegration processes.

What was the role of external economic factors and the so-called ‘burden’ of the Cold War? Those factors cannot be ignored. They include the impact of Western economic sanctions such as the ban on supplying modern machinery and technologies (especially for dual use) that made the Soviet economy lag behind. One should also mention the serious budget problems caused by the drop in world energy prices, and other factors. The Soviet leadership made a bad mistake in reacting to the US ‘Star Wars’ programme as a real threat and spending enormous amounts of money on similar military space technologies (such as the Buran Project, and others).

Regarding the USSR’s defence expenditure: apparently, it is still impossible to calculate how much the country was spending on its military needs, but there is very little doubt that it was a very sizeable part of the state budget and that the attempts to catch up with the United States in the new round of the arms race were doomed to fail. I would not, however, go as far as to say that the USSR was ‘crushed’ only by the burden of militarisation. Some recently published studies show that the second burden comparable to defence spending was the social commitments of the state.

In conclusion, we may hypothesise that Gorbachev or somebody else could have managed to preserve the USSR in some form – either as a federation without the Baltics and Georgia or as a confederation (also without these republics), as was envisaged in the new Union Treaty due to be signed in August 1991. In any event, it would have been a totally different, much weakened and far less internationally influential centre of power. Could this weakened Union that had also lost its advance positions in Central Europe have preserved its former place in the post-war world order? Highly unlikely. And in any case, all this is just guesswork.

Isaac Scarborough: ‘Surrendering the economic Cold War’

In a recent interview with the newspaper *Kommersant*, Petr Aven, once an architect of early 1990s Russian market reform and now chairman of Alfa-Bank, was asked how he and fellow reformers had felt about the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. ‘The destruction of such an expansive state’, Aven replied, ‘certainly did not have our sympathies On the other hand, some things are simply unavoidable’. The economic decline of the USSR, Aven went on, made the choice clear: economic reform was inevitable, but this reform would only be possible in Russia, not the USSR. ‘We were writing an economic reform program’, Aven said, ‘with the understanding that it was being created for Russia alone’.⁷⁹ If there was a choice between the market and the USSR, Aven made clear, the choice had been made in favour of the market. Aven’s fellow reformer Anatolii Chubais echoed his former colleague’s thoughts in a parallel interview: ‘From that moment it was necessary to work on reforming Russia, not the USSR’.⁸⁰

From the perspective of Chubais, Aven and other former reformers of the late Soviet economy, by the final years of the USSR there was no doubt about the bankruptcy of the Soviet system: ‘disgusting lies from the first to the last word’, as Chubais put it.⁸¹

⁷⁹Petr Aven: “U Gaidara bylo vpolne imperskoe soznanie”, *Kommersant* – 30 let bez SSSR (2021), <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4702608> accessed 27 September 2021.

⁸⁰Anatolii Chubais: “Ia izvestnyi liberal’nyi imperialist”, *Kommersant* – 30 let bez SSSR (2021), <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4803922> accessed 27 September 2021.

⁸¹Ibid.

Hollowed out and unable to fulfil its promises of achieving, the USSR's socialist economy was sooner or later doomed; the question was how and in what circumstances this collapse might occur. At first glance, this position also seems to dovetail with the story frequently told in (Western) academic accounts about the Soviet collapse: having slowly declined in productivity and output growth throughout the post-war period, the Soviet economy took a nosedive in the mid-1980s, a collapse that Mikhail Gorbachev failed to halt with his economic reforms. Instead, Gorbachev's attempts at social development, such as his policy of *glasnost* ('openness'), created the economic and political downfall of the state by exposing the 'lies' on which it was built and giving national republics and elites alike the opportunity to exploit state resources. From here, both the collapse of the USSR, economically and politically, and the end of the Cold War with the West were just a matter of (short) time.⁸²

This frequent narrative, however, overlooks the explicit *choices* made: by those like Aven or Chubais, who advised reform in 1991, or Gorbachev himself, who had promoted reform earlier. Without accounting for these choices, as Aven and Chubais hint, it is impossible to see why the USSR's economy nosedived when it did, and why the loss of legitimacy was so sudden and sharp when it came. Notwithstanding innumerable accounts to the contrary, the Soviet economy was not collapsing, nor even contracting, in 1985. In fact, compared to the United States, which had faced years of recession, rising unemployment and even armed movements of insurrection in the decade prior, the Soviet economy was relatively robust.⁸³ What it clearly failed in, however, was providing the level of material consumption that Soviet elites observed in the West. Socialism, it seemed to Gorbachev and his advisors, just could not compete with markets when it came to the provision of consumer goods. Contemporary sources and memoirs alike are filled with flabbergasted expressions of frustration at the Soviet Union's failure to produce and distribute everything from watermelons to computers at the rate and level of the United States, Japan or Britain.⁸⁴

Gorbachev's frustration at the limited production of consumer goods reflected decades of academic debate in the USSR about the potential advantages of market distribution. It also, however, struck at the heart of what distinguished the USSR from the West, and what had been, at least in the beginning, the ideological trappings of the Cold War. Although the decades-long conflict between the United States and the USSR often seemed better couched in terms of *realpolitik* rather than ideology, the basic conflict from the beginning had been at least partially about the expansion of the Soviet Union's model of socialist economic planning and control (the 'command economy') at the expense of global markets. The Soviet Union held itself up as the supporter of socialist economies and states: the backer of planned development, collective-style farms and widespread cultural revolutions in the

⁸²The literature espousing this view is extensive; for perhaps the most succinct and influential version, see Stephen Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁸³On the (surprising) robustness of the Soviet economy in 1985, see Isaac Scarborough, *Moscow's Heavy Shadow: The Violent Collapse of the USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), ch. 3.

⁸⁴See, for example, Gorbachev's frustration over the production of undergarments in the USSR, expressed to the Politburo in 1986: A. Cherniaev, A. Veber, and V. Medvedev, eds., *V Politbiuro TsK KPSS ... Po zapisiam Anatolii Cherniava, Vadima Medvedeva, Georgiia Shakhnazarova (1985–1991). Izdanie vtoroe* (Moscow: Gorbachev-Fond, 2008), 50. Most memoirs by prominent Soviet politicians of the 1980s contain similar remarks.

name of the communist (and thus non-market) future. Instituting market production and distribution in the USSR, whatever consumer benefits this might accrue, would call into question the basis for the conflict with the West.

This, however, is exactly what Gorbachev did over the course of 1987–91. Having considered and tried more traditionally socialist-style reforms in his first years of power, Gorbachev shifted tactics to an embrace – at first hidden, and then increasingly open – of markets. He did so as a politician, choosing to side with increasing frustrations in the Party and Soviet elite over the lack of consumer goods provided by the command economy; he did so equally as an international statesman, interested in finding a ‘common European home’ for Russia and Western states alike. The use of the West and its economic system as a model for the USSR was very much in line with Gorbachev’s ambitions to decrease tensions with the United States and European powers: by asking ‘why do we live worse than in other developed countries?’, as he, his wife, Raisa Gorbacheva, and many of his advisors did, he also implied ‘how can we live more like them?’⁸⁵

The answer was through markets, which Gorbachev’s team created within the Soviet command economy through a series of laws passed primarily in 1987 and 1988. These reforms fundamentally changed the Soviet economy, bringing it closer to the market systems on display in Europe or the United States. By 1989 and 1990 the USSR was now home to hundreds of thousands of private businesses, employing millions of people; goods were increasingly priced according to market whims, and not Gosplan dictates; ministries were being replaced with privatised ‘concerns’ or corporate-style structures; foreign investment was funding the import of computers and jewellery and the export of industrial inputs. Peripheral Soviet politicians complained that they ‘honestly no longer know where we are living, in the Soviet Union or in a foreign country’.⁸⁶

It has generally been argued since 1991 that Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempts to both enliven the Soviet economy and bring about significant change failed, and that the post-Soviet states that arrived on the scene on 25 December 1991 were left to build markets more or less from scratch. This argument, however, conflates markets with economic growth and idealises, much like Gorbachev did, the immediate promises of capitalism. It is inarguable that Gorbachev’s reform programme failed to improve the Soviet economy – in fact, economic outcomes, whether output, productivity, per-capita income or basic standards of living all began to decrease in 1988 and plummeted after 1989.⁸⁷ At the same time, however, markets grew entrenched, increasing in size and importance as the economy shrank. This marketisation of the Soviet economy from the inside – and the hollowing out of the economy in the process – has been largely obscured since 1991 because of the emphasis placed on Gorbachev’s own stated intentions and the politicisation of the results of his programmes in major cities like Moscow. Outside of Moscow –

⁸⁵M. S. Gorbachev, *Zhizn’ i reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 169; and Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), 56.

⁸⁶As remarked by the Deputy of the Tajik Supreme Soviet, Nazarshoev, in early 1991. See Stenogramma zasedaniia Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta Tadzhikskoi SSR ot 08.04.1991, Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan (TsGART), f. 297, op. 40, d. 1237, l. 22.

⁸⁷Later calculations showed that the Soviet economy went into recession from 1989, a trend that had initially been masked by the rise in profit margins at enterprises, which were now holding onto – and often siphoning off – large portions of their profits. For supporting data, see V. N. Pavlov, Iu. A. Petrov, and A.V. Kiselev, ‘Otsenka dinamiki promyshlennoi produktsii v 1986–1989 godakh’, *Ekonomika i organizatsiia promyshlennogo proizvodstva (EKO)* 20, no. 5 (1990): 105–7; and Nikolai Nestorovich, ‘Reform of the Supply System’, in *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insider’s History*, eds. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 264.

in the vast geography of the USSR – however, the scale of marketisation becomes much clearer. Research into the final years of the USSR in Tajikistan, for example, has shown the degree to which ‘*perestroika*’s reforms were implemented and created an entirely new, partially market-driven economy. By 1988, local enterprises in Tajikistan were choosing to produce fewer but more expensive goods; by 1989 and 1990 they were holding on to massive profits instead of sharing them with the republican and federal budget.⁸⁸ Private businesses (‘cooperatives’) were buying and selling foodstuffs and exporting basic goods, such as nails, wooden boards and chickpeas to foreign countries.⁸⁹ Wages were growing varied, and inequality was increasing. Gorbachev’s reforms had brought the market he and his advisors had chosen and had long discussed.

Gorbachev had chosen markets over the command economy; there should be no doubt on this count. As early as July 1986 he had clearly stated his position: ‘[We need] to open up the question of the market. To say that we are in favor of healthy competition, of the development of cooperative business’.⁹⁰ By making this choice, he had essentially surrendered the economic Cold War that had underpinned the global conflict of the twentieth century. If the USSR was no longer a bastion of anti-capitalist rhetoric, state planning and limitations on finance that it once had been, the underlying cause for conflict seemed much less imminent. Unsurprisingly, the USSR also began to cut its support for socialist systems abroad as it promoted markets internally. Internationally, this joint approach of accepting markets and ending support for other states opposed to global capitalism paid political rewards, as Gorbachev was heralded in Europe and the United States as a peacemaker and a reformer. The surrender of the economic Cold War presaged the one-sided end of the Cold War proper. Inside the USSR, however, the choice to wave the economic white flag would prove far more pernicious. If the Soviet Union were no longer a socialist state – if it were no longer striving towards communism – questions had to be asked about what it was, and where it was heading.

For those Russian reformers like Chubais, Aven and others, the answer was clear: the USSR was lost, but Russia, as a capitalist state, could be built from its wreckage. This was, in their view, preferable anyway. As more and more Russian politicians began to focus in 1990 and 1991 on the Russian economy and state exclusively, so too did many other republican elites, who also began to see the brightest possible future in the pursuit of independence in the capitalist world.⁹¹ Without the veneer of socialism and the promise of communism, there was little glue left to hold together the USSR: even more than the end of conflict with the West, it was the surrender of the economic Cold War that brought down the edifice of the Soviet Union. This was not an inevitable shift, but one

⁸⁸Take, for example, the case of the Tajik Silk Factory ‘Tajikatlās’, which after the passage and implementation of the 1987 Law on Enterprises increased prices, decreased production and shrunk its workforce, allowing it to increase profits by an aggregate of more than 70% by 1990 – profits that it now retained, legally, and neither reinvested nor provided to the Republican or federal Soviet budget. See: Finansovyi plan na 1989 g. po P/O ‘Tadzhikatlās’, MMP Tad. SSR, TsGART f. 355, op. 16, d. 48, ll. 134–135; for 1990, see f. 355, op. 16, d. 175, l. 135; Raschet otchislenii v biudzhēt ot fakticheskoi raschetnoi pribyli po p/o Tadzhikatlās za god 1990, Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Tadzhikistan (TsGART) f. 355, op. 16, d. 175, l. 138; also d. 122, l. 1. [q][q]

⁸⁹Isaac Scarborough, ‘Importing Sour Grapes: Economic Order and Economic Justice During the Collapse of the USSR in Tajikistan’, Law and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Tajikistan, Oxford, October 2019.

⁹⁰Cherniaev, Veber, and Medvedev, *V Politbiuro TsK KPSS*, 68.

⁹¹For the interplay between Russian political ambitions and the slow – and then sudden – disintegration of interrepublican ties in 1990 and 1991, see Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

driven by the choices of those whose 'socialist imaginary mirrored the dreamworld of capitalism too faithfully' – politicians like Gorbachev and advisors like Chubais and Aven – all of whom saw market-driven consumption as the inevitable victor of the twentieth century.⁹² It was this implicit surrender that arguably tipped the scales towards the USSR's subsequent collapse.

Svetlana Savranskaya: 'The end of the Cold War as a missed opportunity'

What happened to the USSR in 1991? The country was torn apart by nationalist passions, which were appropriated and co-opted by opportunistic former party secretaries. The socio-economic situation and stalling economic reform provided a fertile setting for popular discontent and the shift of liberal intelligentsia from Gorbachev to the radical democrats. Gorbachev's Western partners were unprepared for the challenge and refused to provide economic aid and credits at the time of acute need.

And yet, the Soviet Union was not doomed to collapse. I came to this view of the dissolution of the Soviet Union through years of studying documents on US-Russian relations and the end of the Cold War. My life was magically intertwined with the end of the Cold War. In June 1987, I stood on the other side of the Berlin Wall when Reagan gave his speech in West Berlin. For me personally, the Cold War ended on 31 May 1988, when I was sitting in the front row of a big auditorium at Moscow State University, about six metres from President Ronald Reagan, who delivered essentially a commencement speech (I was graduating) to MGU students. Having listened to his speech I understood that we shared many of the same values and that this leader was not going to push the button. Just two days later, Reagan declared the Cold War over while walking with Gorbachev inside the Kremlin walls.⁹³ The year 1989 was a formative one in my life, when the world was changing, just as we were trying to analyse the changes as graduate students at a leading Soviet academic institute focusing on international relations – Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO).

In the 1990s, through a set of conferences, and my work at the Gorbachev Foundation, I was fortunate to meet and work with several of Gorbachev's advisers – especially Anatoly Chernyaev, Georgy Shakhnazarov and Karen Brutents. I owe a great intellectual debt to Anatoly Sergeevich Chernyaev, who shared his insights and his documents with me for many years. And, finally, in October 2006, I had the great privilege to present personally our collection of documents to Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev in Reykjavik. All these experiences certainly had a huge impact on my research and my acute sense of missed opportunities at the moment of the unprecedented transformation of the entire international system in 1989–91. In those years I believed deeply that we had just entered a new era of building democracy in the new reformed Soviet Union, a common European home in Europe, and a close partnership with the United States.

The Soviet dissolution was NOT a logical conclusion to the Cold War. These events were not even coterminous. One preceded the other by at least two years. The end of the Cold War was announced by Gorbachev in the UN speech in December 1988 – freedom

⁹²Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworlds and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

⁹³Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to the New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1991* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 199.

of choice and primacy of universal values in international relations – and was implemented in the Eastern European revolutions of 1989 when the USSR did not use force to defend its sphere of influence. The Cold War ended where it started – in Berlin, Germany, and in Eastern Europe – creating a real possibility of building a new Europe ‘whole and free’. The Bush-Gorbachev handshake in Malta, which Chernyaev points to as the symbol of the end of the Cold War, just confirmed what had already happened. German chancellor Helmut Kohl appreciated the Soviet role in the revolutions of 1989. He stated in his letter to Bush on 28 November 1989 that for the reform changes in Eastern Europe

we have General Secretary Gorbachev’s policies to thank. His *perestroika* loosed, made easier, or accelerated these reforms. He pushed governments unwilling to make reforms towards openness and towards acceptance of the people’s wishes; and he accepted developments that in some instances far surpassed the Soviet Union’s own standards.⁹⁴

The end of the Cold War was a logical outcome of Gorbachev’s new thinking, and one of the main goals of *perestroika*. The end of the Cold War had nothing to do with Reagan’s military build-up. In fact, as the longest-serving Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, explained, it only strengthened Soviet hard-liners. US presidents Ronald Reagan and later George H. W. Bush welcomed the Soviet reform and became Gorbachev’s partners in arms control and resolution of regional conflicts. We tried to explain how this unprecedented strategic partnership developed in our book *The Last Superpower Summits*.⁹⁵

The break-up of the Soviet Union was an unintended and unexpected outcome of *perestroika*, which Gorbachev tried passionately to prevent. We know from the declassified CIA documents that even this agency did not predict (at least until the late spring of 1991) the outcome that already a year later many started seeing as overdetermined. It was highly contingent on singular political events like the August coup and human agency: the collusion of Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich with guidance from their ‘ideas man’, Gennady Burbulis. The Soviet dissolution was due exclusively to domestic factors – political ambitions, nationalism and economy, and had nothing to do with outside pressures. Newly declassified transcripts of sessions of the Security Council and the State Council, the executive bodies that replaced the Politburo during the last year of the USSR, testify to this convincingly. These documents are available in the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI). Equally, thousands of pages of memos and internal discussions stored in the Gorbachev Foundation archive help one to see these factors in play – and especially the role of political ambitions: the leaders of the republics masked their power ambitions by the language of nationalism and democratic populism.

The key dynamic of the last four months of 1991 was Yeltsin’s effort to get rid of the centre and Gorbachev by destroying any chance of signing the new Union treaty, which would have given a chance for the republics to remain voluntarily in a new modernised but united political and economic space. Reading accounts of the Burbulis memorandum

⁹⁴Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 614.

⁹⁵Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, *The Last Superpower Summits: Reagan, Gorbachev and Bush. Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

and actually personally seeing him in action with Kravchuk and Shushkevich, recounting their roles years later, gave me a real insight into how it happened in 1991. Two important books that give a great account of how this political struggle for power, together with nationalism, brought down the Soviet Union are Serhii Plokhy's *The Last Empire: The Last Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) and Vladislav Zubok's *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (London: Yale University Press, 2021).

In thinking about whether the Soviet Union was doomed, one might want to consider a counterfactual. What if Gorbachev got a commitment of real financial support from the West for his economic reform? What if he came back from the G7 meeting in London in July 1991 with a declaration that the West would provide a solid package of credits and a promise that the USSR could join international financial institutions without preconditions? This would have boosted his standing at home, raised morale and improved the attractiveness of the new union treaty for the republics – at a crucial moment in the reforms. Then perhaps we would have had no August coup and the new Union treaty would have been signed by eight or nine republics. The result could have been a new democratic and much less centralised Union. Some of the reformers with whom I spoke suggested that this scenario could have worked if the decision on Western aid was made at the G7 in the summer of 1990, but that it was already too late in July 1991. Gorbachev himself put it this way: 'at the most difficult, make-or-break moment of our reforms, we were entitled to hope that our partners will take a step in our direction'.⁹⁶ Not entitled to financial aid, but to hope that partners would help.

This leads us to two questions. Would the world be a better place had Gorbachev succeeded in reforming the Soviet Union? And how about the strategic wisdom of the collective West?

A democratic, no longer Soviet, maybe even confederate Union of sovereign republics, deeply integrated into European economic and security structures, according to Chernyaev, 'would mean the emergence of such a civilisational core that would have been an undeniable treasure for the entire global community, for all-mankind, humanist progress'.⁹⁷ It would have preserved the economic ties between the republics, preventing deep disruption and human suffering in the early 1990s. A democratic voluntary Union could have continued the tradition of the first partially free elections (but the most free and honest elections in Russia ever since) and open parliamentary debate. Such a Union would have favoured the political chances of liberal reforms, could have restrained Russian and other nationalisms, and could have even stopped the sliding towards hard-line authoritarianism in such countries as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It might have secured a greater commitment to human rights and basic freedoms. Internationally, the success of *perestroika* would have meant that the US-Soviet partnership would continue and the world would not enter the unipolar moment accompanied by US hubris. The world could have been a gentler and quieter place.

Looking back at those years with the benefit of declassified documents, the lack of strategic wisdom of the Bush administration and the collective West is striking. The much-lamented 'pause' of 1989, which Chernyaev called 'the lost year', Brent Scowcroft's 'strategic' vision expressed in his memo to Bush (March 1989) titled 'Getting Ahead of

⁹⁶See Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective', *Democratizatsiya* 29, no. 3 (2021) 211–238.

⁹⁷*Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Sobranie, 2011), 253.

Gorbachev', and the [failed] programme of modernisation of short-range nuclear weapons in Europe – were all evidence that initially the Bush administration did not believe that the Cold War was ending and took a really long time responding to Gorbachev's appeals and proposals.⁹⁸ Even in Malta in December 1989, the emphasis on Cuba and Central America instead of arms control and global issues strikes one as a lack of imagination and limits of pragmatic (so-called 'prudent') thinking. China, even After Tiananmen Incident, retained the status of Most Favoured Nation (MFN), which was denied to the democratising Soviet Union, even after its legislative reforms abolished all restrictions on emigration and human rights.

Martin Gilman provided some insightful analysis into Western financial support for the Soviet/Russian reform and concluded that

in view of what was at stake, it is almost unconscionable how little the rest of the world was ready to provide in support of the country's heavy post-Soviet transition For the West, in retrospect, such a stance vis-à-vis a massively nuclear-armed country with a disintegrating political and social structure looks reckless.⁹⁹

Gradually, through the negotiations on German reunification, Bush came to understand Gorbachev's seriousness and his real value as a partner. That realisation made the US administration favour the preservation of the reformed USSR over supporting separatism – what Bush termed 'suicidal nationalisms' in his speech in Kiev in 1991. The belated discovery of Gorbachev as a valuable partner in the Persian Gulf conflict and the realisation of the danger of the dissolution of a nuclear superpower led Bush to put forward the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives in September 1991. Arguably, these agreements could have been concluded much earlier if not for the pause in 1989.

Fortunately, more strategic wisdom was shown by the US Congress in late 1991. Led by senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, Congress approved a multi-year programme of US financial support for the new Russia for nuclear and chemical disarmament and bringing nuclear weapons from Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus to Russia for verified dismantling and destruction.

Gorbachev has some harsh words about the US political establishment. In his latest reflections on *perestroika* he warns against hubris and triumphalism that are dangerous and immoral. He points to US claims of 'winning the Cold War' as the root cause that 'undermined the foundations of new international politics' and set the world on the wrong track.¹⁰⁰ And at the same time, one might argue that the way the Soviet Union was broken up and the resulting dependency of the new Yeltsin administration on the United States created the conditions that encouraged US hubris and triumphalism.

The Clinton administration, which arrived in January 1993, was deeply committed to Russian reform and had the best intentions. In February 1993, Strobe Talbott saw 'Russia and the former Soviet Union' as 'the single biggest and most dangerous political mess on the face of the earth', but also as 'the greatest political miracle of our era and one of the

⁹⁸See Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 201; and Brent Scowcroft Memorandum to Bush, 1 March 1989 in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton eds., *Gorbachev and Bush, The Last Superpower Summits: Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2020), 22.

⁹⁹Martin Gilman, *No Precedent, No Plan: Inside Russia's 1998 Default* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁰Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective'.

greatest in human history’.¹⁰¹ But the Clinton administration could not reconcile two priorities – the proclaimed partnership and support for the Russian reforms and the expansion of NATO, which eventually undermined the emerging partnership.

Finally, there is one major missed opportunity that has almost been forgotten 30 years after the Soviet break-up. Gorbachev’s vision of a common European home, which arguably was one of the main reasons behind the Soviet restraint in Eastern Europe in 1989, imagined a totally different Europe with common security structures, full economic integration and a strong environmental regime. In early 1990 it sounded like his vision was shared by the US leadership. In April, Bush told Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze: ‘I want to contribute to stability and to the creation of a Europe, whole and free or, as you call it, a common European home. An idea that is very close to our own’.¹⁰² But already in mid-May 1990, Baker told Gorbachev in Moscow, ‘it’s nice to talk about pan-European security structures, the role of the CSCE. It is a wonderful dream, but just a dream’, while NATO existed and thus was a reality as well as the key to US presence in Europe.¹⁰³ This dream, as well as the dream of Russian democracy, did not materialise and we all are left impoverished as a result.

M. E. Sarotte: ‘From the Soviet collapse to the Kosovo crisis: the role of mistaken assumptions’

How did the collapse of the Soviet Union change international relations? This query serves as an excellent framing device, because it provides a useful way to take stock of the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. To answer this question most fully, however, it is necessary first to take a step back and ask, *did* the collapse of the Soviet Union change international relations?

When that unexpected dissolution happened in 1991, initially it seemed blindingly obvious that both the disintegration of Moscow’s empire, and the largely peaceful way in which it happened, had indeed changed international relations irrevocably. The oft-cited description provided by Frank Fukuyama was, of course, that an end-of-history-level event had taken place.¹⁰⁴ Certainly it changed many aspects of the international system, such as the number of states in Europe and their orientation towards democratic governance.

Within the decade, however, it became undeniable that the changes to relations between the United States and Russia were not so irrevocable after all – or, perhaps, that changes had never occurred in the first place; instead, both Western and Russian leaders had only convinced themselves that they had arisen. The event that highlighted this problem most clearly was the Kosovo crisis of 1999. The following text will discuss this phenomenon by, first, briefly summarising the hopes of the 1991 moment for lasting

¹⁰¹Talbot memorandum to Christopher, February 1993. On file at the National Security Archive, F-2017-13804 State Department FOIA.

¹⁰²George H.W. Memorandum of conversation between President Bush and Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, April 6, 1990, Bush Presidential Library Texas, USA.

¹⁰³Gorbachev-Baker memcon, May 18, 1990, in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton eds., *Gorbachev and Bush, The Last Superpower Summits: Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2020).

¹⁰⁴Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

change to international relations; second, by looking at the realities exposed by the 1999 crisis; third and finally, by circling back to 1991 to see what viewing the Soviet collapse retrospectively through the lens of Kosovo can tell us.

A caveat about space constraints is necessary, however. There were, of course, many events between 1991 and 1999 that caused tensions between Russia and the West. The framing of this article does not mean to imply in any way that Kosovo was the only point of conflict. Russian president Boris Yeltsin's decision in 1993–4 to shed the blood of his opponents both in Moscow and in Chechnya, for example, alarmed Western leaders. Even though many refrained from wholesale criticism of Yeltsin in public, behind the scenes they expressed their concern to one another; they had believed such behaviour had belonged to Moscow's past, not its future.¹⁰⁵ And, US president Bill Clinton's decision in 1997, together with his NATO allies, to offer membership in NATO to Central and Eastern European countries caused resentment in Moscow. Lastly, given the brevity of this piece, the focus will be on a subset of international relations, specifically the US–Russian relationship.

The domestic causes of Soviet collapse in 1991 have already been discussed in detail in the other contributions to this volume and, more extensively, in Vladislav Zubok's new book *Collapse*. They included both large-scale, societal ones, such as conflicts between nationalities within the USSR, and small-scale, petty ones, such as the bitter enmity between Gorbachev and Yeltsin.¹⁰⁶ But foreign policy initially felt a profound impact as well.

By the start of 1992, a triumphant Yeltsin, after vanquishing both Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, could join the US president, George H. W. Bush, in declaring that the decades-long Cold War was finally over.¹⁰⁷ The Russian received an invitation to Camp David, and at one point even discussed a joint US–Russian mission to Mars in 2019, to mark the 50th anniversary of the manned moon landing – all the more extraordinary for the fact that the landing had, of course, been a US success.¹⁰⁸

Bush and Yeltsin also presided over the start of a remarkable period of cooperation in nuclear non-proliferation, which continued under Clinton.¹⁰⁹ As a result of that collaboration, Russia emerged as the only nuclear successor state to the Soviet Union. In short, in 1991 it seemed that a better, cooperative future of relations between Moscow and Washington would now unfold.

The new order shaping post-Soviet relations between the US and Russia, as it emerged in 1991, initially appeared to have three defining characteristics. First, while there would still be disputes between the US and Russia – such as over the regrettable decision by the Bush administration to take a hard line on Moscow's payment of past debts, even as Yeltsin was trying to nurture its fragile new democracy through its infancy – there was an expectation that the highest priority would be protecting newfound cooperation in addressing those problems. Second, violence would no longer be used to change borders;

¹⁰⁵For more on concerns about this issue, see M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021).

¹⁰⁶Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021).

¹⁰⁷Joel Brinkley, 'Bush and Yeltsin Declare Formal End to Cold War', *New York Times*, February 2, 1992.

¹⁰⁸On the idea of a Mars mission, see Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), George H. W. Bush–Boris Yeltsin, first expanded meeting, June 16, 1992, 2:30–4:10pm, Electronic Briefing Book (EBB)-447, The National Security Archive (NSA). George Washington University, Washington DC, USA

¹⁰⁹On post-Cold War nuclear cooperation between the US and Russia, Sarotte, *Not One Inch*.

instead, negotiated solutions would be employed. Third and finally, the chance that Washington and Moscow would use force against each other should become a thing of the past. The significance of the Kosovo crisis in 1999 (in terms of relations between the US and Russia) was that it was the moment when it became undeniable that all of three of these assumptions were highly dubious. To show why, it is useful, first, to recap events, then to discuss their significance.

The conflict arose from aggressive moves by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, resulting in (among other consequences) hundreds of thousands of Kosovars becoming refugees, fleeing across Europe.¹¹⁰ In response to heart-breaking images of those refugees, Clinton administration foreign policy experts began strategising ways to stop Serbian security forces. The president thought that Milošević was acting aggressively because he believed NATO would stop him only with the approval of a United Nations Security Council (UNSCR) resolution – and that Russia, as a fellow Slavic country, would block any such resolution.¹¹¹

The question of a resolution was indeed a difficult one for Yeltsin. If Russia vetoed any UNSCR enabling a potential Western intervention in Kosovo, it would alienate the Western countries whose financial help it desperately needed. But if Moscow let a resolution go ahead by abstaining, then Yeltsin would look weak at home to nationalists who were winning support in the polls. He could also be accused of selling out to his fellow Slavs.

Clinton independently concluded that it would be better to spare Yeltsin from having to go on the record at all, and that the United States and NATO could go ahead without a resolution. This decision set an important precedent: willingness to intervene abroad, either within NATO or by itself, without securing UN approval. Clinton tried instead, via personal diplomacy with Yeltsin, to convince the Russian of the rightness of a potential Western intervention, telling him in October 1998 by phone that Milošević's forces were committing intolerable crimes and that the West was running out of diplomatic options.

In reply, Yeltsin (according to Clinton's top Russia advisor, Strobe Talbott) 'ranted for twelve minutes, pausing neither for interpretation into English nor for Clinton's reply'. He condemned Washington's 'aggressive talk' of 'irreversible use of force by NATO in Yugoslavia'.¹¹² When Clinton refused to yield, Yeltsin hung up on him. And on top of this breakdown in the Bill and Boris 'bromance', the failure of the Kosovo talks organised by the US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, together with her British and French colleagues Robin Cook and Hubert Védrine, further increased the likelihood of violent conflict. They had produced a set of cease-fire accords, but it was clear by March 1999 that Milošević would almost certainly not accept them.

Clinton, after consultation with his secretaries of defence and state and European leaders such as British prime minister Tony Blair and French president Jacques Chirac, decided on an open-ended NATO air campaign against Milošević. The news horrified

¹¹⁰For background on the Kosovo crisis, see the NATO summary in 'NATO's Role in Relation to the Conflict in Kosovo', 15 July 1999, <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm#B> accessed 27 September 2021.

¹¹¹William J. Clinton Library (CL), Little Rock, Arkansas, USA Memorandum of Telephone Conversation (Telcon), Bill Clinton–Helmut Kohl, August 7, 1998, 2015-0776-M, Clinton Presidential Library (CL); see also interview with Madeleine Albright, August 30, 2006, William Clinton Presidential Historical Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia.

¹¹²Telcon, Clinton–Yeltsin, October 5, 1998, State Dept. Cable (SDC) 1998-State-189900, October 14, 1998. On Yeltsin hanging up on Clinton, see Strobe Talbott, *Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 300.

Yeltsin and his advisors. Not only would NATO bypass the UN Security Council in order to bomb a country with historic ties to Russia, but it would also do so for reasons unrelated to either Article 5 or aggression against another state. Coming at the same time as the implementation of NATO enlargement to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999, the Kosovo decision deeply angered Yeltsin (and large segments of the Russian population as well). In his view, it violated the first assumption about the post-Soviet era described earlier: that Washington would prioritise cooperation with Moscow over other foreign policy goals.

As expected, Milošević refused to sign the cease-fire accords. Air strikes began on 24 March 1999. This seemed to Moscow to be a violation of the second assumption as well, namely that violence would no longer be used across international borders in Europe. And on top of this conceptual problem, the timing was terrible for Yeltsin. He was, at the time, repeatedly going in and out of the hospital for recurring illnesses, even as he was fighting against political opponents accusing him of corruption. Soon parliamentarians in the State Duma of Russia would even seek to impeach him. Trying to reason with the overwhelmed Yeltsin, Clinton told the Russian in March 1999 that Milošević had ‘stonewalled’ and ‘continued to move his forces into Kosovo’, leaving the United States with ‘no choice’. Despite knowing that Yeltsin opposed the use of force in the Balkans, Clinton expressed his determined to do whatever I can to keep our disagreement on this from ruining everything else we have done and can do in the coming years’.¹¹³

Yeltsin replied bitterly, ‘I’m afraid we shall not succeed in that’. He reminded Clinton ‘how difficult it was for me to try and turn the heads of our people, the heads of the politicians towards the West, towards the United States’. He had succeeded in that venture at great effort, and it was a tragedy ‘now to lose all that’ because of the NATO intervention. Yeltsin allowed that ‘of course, we are going to talk to each other, you and me. But there will not be such great drive and such friendship that we had before. That will not be there again’. For the future, he saw only ‘a very difficult, difficult road of contacts, if they prove to be possible’ at all.¹¹⁴ Among other moves, he would soon suspend Russian contact with the so-called Permanent Joint NATO-Russia Council, a recently instituted forum for dialogue between Russia and the Atlantic Alliance. Meanwhile, airstrikes against Serbia continued through April and May and into June 1999.

In Russia, opinion polls registered a 93% disapproval rate for NATO’s actions. One particularly evocative reaction came from the former leader of economic reforms at the start of Yeltsin’s tenure, Yegor Gaidar, who had lived in Yugoslavia as a young man. He was out of the Yeltsin government by 1999, but rushed to Belgrade nonetheless to report his dismay from there to his fellow Russians. He also contacted Talbott with a lament: ‘If only you knew what a disaster this war is for those of us in Russia who want for our country what you want’.¹¹⁵

Yeltsin got Clinton to agree that US and Russian representatives should meet in a third country to find some kind of solution. Those negotiators, working with the Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari – whose country was about to assume the EU presidency,

¹¹³Memcon, Clinton–Yeltsin, 2015-0782-M, CL, document dated March 24, 1998, but from context must be from 1999.

¹¹⁴Memcon, Clinton–Yeltsin, 2015-0782-M, CL, document dated March 24, 1998, but from context must be from 1999.

¹¹⁵Gaidar quoted in Talbott, *Russia Hand*, 307.

giving his view added weight – agreed that NATO would be at the core of a new, joint Kosovo Force (KFOR). Clinton also spoke personally with a frail Yeltsin by phone on 8 June 1999, over the exact timing of a Serbian withdrawal and an end to the bombing. Although the process was fraught, in the following days all of these negotiations seemed to lead to a light at the end of the tunnel. Russia pressured the Serbians to yield, and NATO suspended its air campaign on Thursday, 10 June 1999, opening the way for an international peacekeeping force to begin work in the region.¹¹⁶

But a further development soon called the third assumption into question as well. On 11 June 1999, during one of Talbott's many visits to Moscow, the American learned that Russian forces were unilaterally seizing parts of Kosovo, which was not foreseen in agreements between Washington and Moscow. The chatter among NATO allies was that Russians were trying to secure 'a Russian sector', perhaps along the lines of the old Berlin model. It later became apparent that Moscow's forces were headed for the airport in Pristina, where they soon arrived and installed themselves.¹¹⁷

On the ground in Kosovo, US military commanders began to contemplate something that was supposed to be unthinkable: violently forcing the Russians to surrender their position at Pristina Airport. British military leaders successfully advised against such action, but there was no way to obscure the open conflict with Moscow. Clinton spoke with Yeltsin by phone on both Sunday, 13 June and Monday, 14 June.¹¹⁸ They managed to solve the crisis in the short run, but it was clear they had a much bigger problem on their hands. The final assumption, that the risk of direct violence between Americans (and their NATO allies) and Russia had disappeared, was now shown to be untenable as well.

Western relations with Moscow had survived the Pristina Airport crisis, but only just; the wounds inflicted were serious and left Russia bitter at seeing its weakness internationally exposed. Despite the patching up of differences, a profound shift in thinking had taken place in Washington and Moscow. The three assumptions of lasting change after 1991 – that maintenance of US-Russian cooperation would be a higher priority than all other policy goals; that there would be no more changes to, or transgressions over, borders by force; and that Washington and Moscow would never again face the question of using force against each other – were now revealed as hollow.

Even though cooperation resumed on the ground, US military and civilian leaders who had been trying to see Russians as partners began to wonder, after Pristina, whether that would be so easy. Meanwhile, Russian leaders felt they had incontrovertible evidence of Washington's on-going desire to use violence against Slavs.

By way of returning from the Kosovo crisis to 1991: it is useful to look through the lens of 1999 to understand better the complicated undercurrents to international relations at the time of the Soviet collapse. Gorbachev, with his 'new thinking', had called for major changes to international order and newly cooperative relations with the West. Despite

¹¹⁶William Drozdiak, 'Russia's Concession Led to Breakthrough', *Washington Post*, June 6, 1999.

¹¹⁷Talbott, *Russia Hand*, 335–44; Robert G. Kaiser and David Hoffman, 'Secret Russian Troop Deployment Thwarted', *Washington Post*, June 25, 1999; SDC 1999-State-120192, June 19, 1999. For more on Putin's time in office, see EBB-731, NSA.

¹¹⁸Telcon, Clinton–Yeltsin, June 13, 1999; Telcon, Clinton–Yeltsin, June 14, 1999, both in 2015-0782-M, CL.

vanquishing Gorbachev in 1991, Yeltsin had also endorsed this vision abroad. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, although there were hardliners in both Moscow and Washington who were always dubious, a sizeable portion of the leadership in both capitals genuinely believed that the nature of relations between the two had in fact changed.

Such belief made the disappointment all the more bitter on both sides when, in the course of the 1990s, problems in the relationship began to reassert themselves. During much of the Cold War and the early 1980s, there had been little assumption that there would be cooperation between Moscow and Washington. During the 1990s, there was the opposite problem: too much expectation on both sides of a shared commonality of interest. The Russian president became disillusioned, along with many other Russians, by a growing feeling that the West was not sufficiently grateful for what he had done and inappropriately still willing to use violence in Europe. For its part, the US government was increasingly alarmed by Yeltsin's use of violence within former Soviet borders and the corruption that undermined his rule and Russian democracy, diverting financial aid meant to help ordinary Russians.

In short, an examination of Kosovo helps us to understand better why, after so much optimism and opportunity in the wake of the Soviet collapse in 1991, the United States and Russia resumed their familiar pattern of conflict. The role of mistaken assumptions made in 1991, and undermined at the latest by 1999, in the resumption of that conflict is an important one and worthy of more study.

Disclosure statement

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