The collapse of the Soviet Union, 1990–1991

ALEX PRAVDA

Just as the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution defined the start of the 'short' twentieth century, so the ending of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR marked its completion. The two stories should not be conflated. The demise of the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly the result of domestic factors: in the liberal climate of perestroika, ethnic nationalist movements flourished and provided effective vehicles for republican elites who were looking to gain power at the expense of a Kremlin weakened by mounting economic troubles and deepening political divisions. In this predominantly domestic process, international factors associated with the ending of the Cold War played a significant if secondary role. This chapter will consider how they helped to accentuate two outstanding features of the process of collapse: its speed and its remarkably peaceful course.

The domestic story

Before examining how external factors came into play, let us consider briefly the domestic course and dynamics of the story they affected. The Soviet collapse involved two intertwined processes: the transformation of the Communist regime and the disintegration of the highly centralised Union. Regime change came from the top: the Kremlin drove a project of radical liberalisation (perestroika, or restructuring) which by 1990 had transcended the Communist system of rule. The union was undermined from below: nationalist publics and elites pressed for greater autonomy from the centre. In the first act of the drama of collapse, in 1989–90, the pressure in the main was for sovereignty and came from smaller union republics in the Baltic region and the Caucasus. In the second act, which ran from late 1990 through the end of 1991, the larger republics – Ukraine and, crucially, Russia – declared sovereignty (see Map 3). Russian leadership gave enormous impetus to the republican cause and progressively undermined the centre’s capacity to withstand the growing centrifugal tide. With the elected Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin, championing the causes of both republican nationalism and radical political change, the fight to reduce Moscow’s hold over the republics merged with the struggle for power at the centre. Economic crisis and political polarisation made it increasingly difficult for Mikhail Gorbachev to steer a centrist reform course. After the failed hard-line coup of August 1991, the Soviet leader found himself unable to salvage the reformed regime or to get agreement on a looser union. Yeltsin and the radical agenda won the day: in November the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was banned, and in December the USSR was superseded by the Commonwealth of Independent States.1

There is no simple explanation for the Soviet collapse; 'essentialist' interpretations, which highlight the self-destructive nature of totalitarianism and the inevitability of imperial disintegration, fail to capture the complexity of the process.2 To be sure, structural features of the system mattered a great deal. The multinational federalism of the USSR made it easier in terms of both

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1 For the detailed chronology of republican declarations, see Edward W. Walker, Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 64, 83, 140.
constitutions and organisation to press for greater republican autonomy. The intertwined structures of Communist Party and state meant that moves to relax rigid centralism in the former destabilised the latter in ways the leadership failed to anticipate. But contingent factors were vitally important. It is unlikely that the process that ended in collapse would have started without the drive of an exceptional leader, Gorbachev, determined to reinvigorate the system through radical reform. And it would not have gone so fast and so far without the mobilising skills of local nationalists and the eagerness of opportunistic republican elites to jump on to the nationalist bandwagon, and without the miscalculations of the Kremlin in dealing with both.

The policy of glasnost (or openness) started the nationalist ball rolling in 1987–88. Kremlin reformers encouraged popular debate and agitation for change – even where this assumed nationalist forms – to help create a groundswell of support for perestroika. The new liberal climate encouraged ethnic groups to air long-standing grievances, whether against other groups, as in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, or against Moscow, as in the case of the Crimean Tatars’ campaign for the right to return to their homeland. From mid-1988, ethnic protests became more frequent, larger, and better organised; 1989 saw the rise for the right to return to their homeland. From mid-1988, ethnic protests became more frequent, larger, and better organised; 1989 saw the rise of protest in both republics.

The prominence in this upsurge of nationalism of the Baltic and Caucasian republics reflected the particular resilience in these regions of ethnic identity and national ambition. Both existed, if at lower levels of intensity, throughout the USSR. Their survival was due in part to the duality of a nationality policy that had long tried to create an overarching Soviet identity while providing an institutional and cultural framework for multinationalism, in the hope of avoiding any nationalist backlash. As long as the whole Soviet political system remained under tight control, as it did until perestroika, this dual strategy worked relatively well to contain serious centrifugal nationalism. Against this background, it is understandable that in the early years of perestroika Gorbachev did not regard nationality policy as an urgent problem. The trouble was that, as nationalist protest escalated, the Soviet leader continued to underestimate the strength of popular feeling involved. He tended to attribute the protests to economic discontent, inept local officials, and the agitation of a handful of opportunistic secessionists.

The power play of local elites played a crucial role in the rapid rise of organised protest. Moscow failed to understand the extent to which opportunistic local elites helped mobilise nationalist discontent in order to strengthen their positions at home as well as enhance their role at union level. Nowhere did this drive for power matter more than in the emergence of the Russian Republic as the main challenger to federal authority. In an astute move, Yeltsin, who had broken openly with Gorbachev by mid-1990, became the champion of nationalist struggle throughout the country. Once the Russian heartland of the union threw its weight behind the campaign for greater republican powers – the Russian parliament declared sovereignty in June 1990 – the balance of the contest between centre and republics began to shift decisively in favour of the latter.

Yeltsin’s adoption of the nationalist cause fused the struggle between Moscow and the republics with the fight over power at the centre. Political polarisation in Moscow and the increasingly fierce contest over the direction of change dominated and distinguished the second act of the drama of collapse. Gorbachev’s efforts to hold a centrist line of reform came under ever more intense fire from both radicals and traditionalists. Yeltsin, his authority boosted by his election as Russian president in June 1991, led a coalition of nationalists and radical democrats which pressed the Kremlin to transform the regime and the federation. At the same time, Gorbachev found himself under growing pressure from conservative forces to retreat on both fronts. Beleaguered politically, the Soviet leader also found himself plagued by mounting economic problems.

Gorbachev responded to the growing economic and political crisis by veering first in a conservative direction, in the winter of 1990–91, and then back towards the radical reform course that remained close to his heart. On the republican front, a half-hearted attempt to take a tough line was followed by moves to deal

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4 Mark Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 29–36, 64–66, 186–90, 296–99. From early 1988, the Armenian majority in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region within Azerbaijan, pressed for unity with Armenia; their campaign sparked violent ethnic conflict and fuelled nationalist protest in both republics.

5 Anatoly Chernyayev, My Six Years with Gorbachev (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000), ix, 107, 187–88, 394.
with the challenge by negotiating a looser federation through a new union treaty. The impending treaty sounded the final alarm for those conservatives who had long felt that the country was heading for disaster. In August 1991, hard-liners in the party, the military, and the Soviet security and intelligence agency, the KGB, mounted a coup to displace Gorbachev and use force to establish control over radical democrats and nationalists alike. The poorly organised coup collapsed in the face of determined resistance led by Yeltsin, who rallied radical democrat and nationalist forces and considerable popular support in Moscow. In the event, the putschists managed to strengthen the very forces they had intended to defeat, and in the process hastened the collapse of what remained of Communist Party and federal power.

In the final scene of the drama in the months following the putsch, Gorbachev accepted the independence of the Baltic states, yet still attempted, against overwhelming odds, to salvage some form of confederation. With the prize of becoming presidents of independent states almost within their grasp, republican leaders were unwilling to accept any compromise. Yeltsin and his allies in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan dealt Gorbachev and the USSR a fatal blow in December 1991 by establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Problems of external pressure and economic performance were connected with the process of collapse, though less centrally and directly than they appear from accounts that credit American containment especially as pursued by President Ronald Reagan, with a crucial role in bringing an end both to the Cold War and to the Soviet Union. To be sure, the arms race squeezed resources available for consumer production. And complaints about Moscow’s management of the economy formed part of nationalist platforms; but, typically, they served as adjuncts to the emotional and political case for independence. The sharp deterioration in the economic state of the country in 1990–91 certainly reduced the capacity of the centre to cope with political challenges at the periphery and in Moscow itself. The economic crisis was, however, connected less with international pressure than with the failings of the command economy and the flawed attempts at its reform.

It could be argued that external material pressures, military and economic, had an impact on the domestic scene by way of the strains they imposed on Moscow’s imperial rule in Eastern Europe and beyond. But the growing costs of empire were a cause for concern rather than a major reason for the radical liberal turn in Moscow’s stance towards the region that came with Gorbachev’s accession. It was in Moscow’s Third World ventures that

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23. Protesters from the provinces near Red Square, Moscow, 1990. As the economic crisis intensified, the number of protests increased.
This opening up to the West had three kinds of effect on the process of Soviet collapse. First, the reduction of controls over channels of communication and contact gave nationalist activists freer access to diaspora groups, other non-governmental organisations, and foreign governments. Their political support and material aid encouraged nationalists to press their demands; the case they made for non-violent methods helped to make nationalist protest action remarkably peaceful.

Secondly, the greater openness of the Soviet leadership to Western counterparts gave foreign statesmen a chance to reinforce Gorbachev's predisposition to respond to nationalist challenges with political rather than coercive means. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev was prepared to discuss domestic problems with Westerners; and, as turmoil deepened, he paid more attention to their counsel of caution. The third and last way in which greater openness affected the process of collapse was through its impact on the polarisation of domestic politics which dominated the second act of the drama. Outrage at the concessions in arms agreements and the losses in Eastern Europe helped spur the conservative opposition to mount the August 1991 coup, the failure of which hastened the demise of the union it was designed to save.

If Gorbachev's foreign-policy revolution opened up domestic developments to influences from the 'far abroad' of the West, it was through the 'near abroad' of Eastern Europe that external factors arguably had their most extensive impact on the process of collapse. What happened in Eastern Europe had special significance for those within the USSR who saw Moscow exercising imperial rule over their republics. And the thick institutional connections linking East European party, state, and non-governmental networks with their Soviet counterparts ensured that developments were quickly transmitted in both directions. Awareness of the dangers of contagion had traditionally prompted the Kremlin to try and restrict contacts with Eastern Europe at times of turmoil in the outer empire. Under Gorbachev, tradition was turned on its head: the Kremlin hoped that Hungarian and Polish reformers might show what perestroika strategies could achieve and was happy to see glasnost spread the reformist message.

The demonstration effects of radical reform in neighbouring socialist states helped to nourish nationalist movements within the union, while the flow of information and advice from Eastern Europe helped inform their strategies.10

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10 Mark Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)', Journal of Cold War Studies, 5, 4 (Fall 2003), 204-05.
More importantly, activists pressing for greater republican independence of Moscow followed with great interest the Kremlin’s response to developments in Eastern Europe as some indicator of its likely reaction to challenges at home. The fact that Moscow refrained from interfering in Poland and Hungary, even in 1989 when reforms went well beyond the perestroika agenda, gave nationalist leaders hope that Gorbachev’s commitment to universal freedom of choice and the avoidance of force might constrain coercive action even within the USSR.

The Baltic struggle for independence

In any assessment of how East European influences and Western responses figured in the development of nationalist movements in the Soviet Union, the Baltic states occupy a special place. The Caucasus produced more violently disruptive nationalist protest. Strong ethnic nationalism in Azerbaijan and Georgia generated particularly forceful drives for independence which Moscow found difficult to contain. Both republics declared sovereignty in the autumn of 1989, and a year later the Georgians voted into power a radical nationalist and anti-Communist government. It was in the western republics, however, that the changes associated with the ending of the Cold War had their greatest impact on nationalist movements.

Of the western republics, the Baltic states stand out in terms of their susceptibility to external influence. They were, together with Moldova and the western regions of Ukraine, the most ‘East European’ of the union republics, in terms of historical and cultural affinity. And they retained a quasi-East European international status insofar as Western governments never formally recognised their incorporation into the USSR.

The most extensive impact of Eastern Europe on nationalist protest in the western republics came through demonstration effects. Activists in the Baltic region and Ukraine looked with admiration at the spectacular progress of radical popular movements in the outer empire and used their successes to mobilise support for the nationalist cause. The impact of demonstration effects was reinforced by the diffusion of strategies and tactics from the ‘outer’ to the ‘inner’ empire: the revolutionary developments in Eastern

Europe helped shape the ‘repertoires of contention’ of nationalist movements in the western Soviet republics.12

Most actively engaged in direct diffusion activities were members of Solidarity, both before and after coming to power in Poland. In its trades union guise, Solidarity helped to inspire the organisation of independent labour unions by miners in the summer of 1989 which saw the radicalization of popular protest throughout western Ukraine. In the western regions of Galicia and Transcarpathia, Catholicism reinforced identity with the Poles and fed the groundswell of national feeling. More direct support for nationalist mobilization came from visits of Solidarity leaders who, much to the Kremlin’s consternation, toured nationalist ‘hot spots’ and made contacts with ‘anti-Soviet groups’.13

In Lithuania, smaller and more susceptible to external influence, Poland had a considerable impact. Sajudis, the organisation that set the tone for nationalist politics in Lithuania, actively sought contact with Solidarity. According to intelligence from the Soviet embassy in Warsaw, Solidarity officials used the meetings to promote their model as the most effective means of struggle and aspired to become the ‘co-ordinating centre’ of a new region-wide anti-Communist alliance. The actual advice Solidarity leaders offered was apparently sensible rather than militant, cautioning against haste or euphoria about self-liberation, and making the case for a cautious approach.14 A concern to encourage caution and moderation also coloured the Polish government’s public stance on Lithuanian developments. As the new post-Communist governments of Eastern Europe gained in confidence, their encouragement of Baltic and Ukrainian efforts to claim sovereignty became more open, yet remained tempered by recommendations to proceed prudently along the path to independence.15

Kramer, ‘The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part II)’, Journal of Cold War Studies, 6, 4 (Fall 2004), 69–73, and Brown, Seven Years, ch. 8.

11 Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization, 194–95.


14 ‘Informatsiia posol’stva v Rcspublike Pol’sha v Mezhdunarodnyi otdel TsK KPSS, “O kontaktdkh “Solidarnosti” s “nezavisymi” politicheskimi dvizheniyami vostochno-euro­peiskikh stran”,’ 15 February 1990, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, fonda 89, reel 1,990, opus 8, file 63.

15 Nahaylo, The Ukrainian Resurgence, 306, 324.
A similar combination of strategic encouragement and tactical restraint emerges when one considers the pattern of influences from émigré organisations, publics, and governments in Western Europe and the United States. Émigré organisations were the strongest source of support for a radical nationalist agenda. Members of the Lithuanian diaspora were especially active in encouraging compatriots to set their sights firmly on nothing short of independence. Non-governmental organisations in the United States and Western Europe were also a source of support and publicity for the nationalist cause. For over a year after the Lithuanian declaration of independence, weekly demonstrations of solidarity held in Sweden provided a platform for Baltic nationalists to convey their message to a wider Western audience. The general growth in foreign coverage helped the nationalist campaign in three ways. First, the end of jamming of Western broadcasts meant it was easier for news of the Baltic struggle to reach the region and penetrate other republics, so adding to the mobilising effects of domestic glasnost. Secondly, foreign coverage had a re-assuring effect for nationalist leaders who saw it as a kind of security cushion against a military crackdown. And, lastly, the overwhelmingly positive nature of Western media comment increased domestic pressure on Western governments to support Baltic demands.

The bold strategies adopted by nationalist leaders owed a good deal to optimism about getting Western government support, especially from Washington. Sajūdis cherished the hope that, if they managed to win political power and declare independence, they would receive US recognition. To their disappointment, the Americans made clear that recognition did not follow automatically from political declarations, but hinged on demonstrated control over state territory.

This position formed part of a generally cautious Western response to the rapidly emerging nationalist tide. There was a basic duality in the stance of the West. Governments sympathised with calls for greater republican autonomy within a more genuinely federal structure. At the same time, they had a concern, which weighed more heavily and urgently, to minimise the kind of instability that might undermine Gorbachev and put in jeopardy his liberal and co-operative foreign policies. Western leaders were anxious to discourage the Lithuanians announced a hundred-day moratorium on action to grow political power and declare independence, they would receive US recognition. To their disappointment, the Americans made clear that recognition did not follow automatically from political declarations, but hinged on demonstrated control over state territory.

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Baltic and Ukrainian nationalist leaders from taking precipitate action lest it trigger a forceful response from Moscow. These fears lay behind the circumspect tone of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech in Kiev in June 1990 and the still more careful stance President George H. W. Bush took on Ukraine's pursuit of independence when speaking there a year later. What impact did the Western line of cautious encouragement have on nationalist policies? The degree to which Western advice affected their strategies was limited, though under certain conditions it proved far from insignificant. Two episodes from the Lithuanian story are particularly telling. The first involved the timing of the declaration of independence in March 1990. Consulted by nationalist leaders, American officials advised caution and at the very least postponement of the declaration; their advice was ignored. What seems to explain the lack of influence in this case is the weak engagement on the American side and an excess of mistrustful defiance on the part of nationalist leaders.

In the event, the Lithuanians proceeded with their declaration, which triggered increased pressure from Moscow in the form of a partial economic blockade. This was the setting for the second episode, in which the West intervened far more effectively to help reduce tensions. Washington, Paris, and Bonn pressed Vilnius temporarily to suspend the declaration in order to open the way to a negotiated resolution to the confrontation. Soon afterwards, the Lithuanians announced a hundred-day moratorium on action to implement the declaration of independence; and Moscow lifted the blockade.

Bilateral talks about talks got underway in October 1990. The explanation for the impact of external influence in this episode is the greater readiness in the West to become involved combined with the increased sway in Vilnius of more moderate politicians, such as Kazimiera Prunskienė, who were ready to listen to outside advice. By helping to moderate the Lithuanian stance, the

20 Confidence was reportedly buoyed by assurances from émigré sources that, if push came to shove, Washington would back Vilnius; see Anatol Lieven, The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 235.
The West was able to contribute to a temporary reduction in tension between Vilnius and Moscow.

The West and Soviet policy in the Baltic region

The cautious approach taken by Western leaders probably increased their capacity to exercise some influence on Baltic developments through engagement with the Kremlin. While Gorbachev remained very uneasy about outside intervention in Baltic affairs and thought the Americans needed careful watching, he apparently did not think that they were out to destabilise the situation. Still, Western influence on the Kremlin remained limited. On the general stance taken by Moscow towards nationalist challenges, the West's contribution was minimal. Arguments made by foreign leaders for a more liberal attitude to the rising tide of nationalism, in line with the principles of 'new thinking', fell on deaf ears. Suggestions that the Baltic republics were exceptional and might be given the freedom to decide on their own status were greeted with stony silence or outrage.

Behind Gorbachev's response lay a general wariness which persisted in this area to a greater extent than the remarkable growth in overall levels of trust in other arenas might have led one to expect. At the Malta summit, which for many marked the end of the Cold War, the Soviet leader reminded that the Americans failed to appreciate the sensitivity of the situation: this was an 'extraordinarily delicate' area where any outside encouragement of separatist trends could ruin the entire perestroika project. If any republic were allowed to secede, Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze warned in May 1990, civil war could follow; territorial integrity was of greater importance than good relations with Washington. But it was clearly in the Kremlin's interests to avoid having to make a choice between the two. Keeping the West on board was vital to the successful neutralization of nationalist problems in the wake of the East European collapse. While warning Washington about the dangers of poking around in the 'ant-hill' of the multinational union, Soviet leaders were not averse on occasion to asking for Western help to temper the nationalist movements. The possible usefulness of Western involvement opened up an avenue for the exercise of a modicum of influence.

The other way in which the West managed to exert some influence was through a combination of leverage and reassurance. In the spring and early summer of 1990, Washington tried to pressure Gorbachev to lift economic sanctions by linking a return to dialogue with the Balts with an agreement on trade which Moscow badly wanted. When this proved unsuccessful, a more effective, softer approach was taken, with loose linkages cushioned by assurances from both American and West European leaders about their commitment to perestroika, something which a domestically beleaguered Gorbachev set increasing store.

The use of force

Such assurances also accompanied the tougher line taken by Western leaders on the issue at the core of their concerns: the use of force. Moscow's sparing use of coercion, and the low general incidence of violence, was perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Soviet collapse. In examining external influences on the Kremlin's attitude towards the use of force, we should distinguish between the considerable conditioning influence of developments in the East European arena on the one hand, and, on the other, the limited yet significant impact of direct efforts by Western leaders to buttress the case against coercion.

A powerful formative influence on the Gorbachev team's attitude to force was their highly critical assessment of the historical record of Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev rejected force as an instrument of policy and adhered to this position in all his East European dealings. And, significantly, he saw the principled renunciation of coercion in foreign policy as strengthening the case against its use to deal with problems within the Soviet Union. Consistency and international reputation were factors that

23 See M. Gorbachev's comments to W. Jaruzelski in Moscow, 13 April 1990, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation.
25 Malta summit, 3 December 1989, M. Gorbachev meeting with G. Bush; and plenary session, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation.
26 Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, 379.
also helped consolidate Gorbachev's own position on this issue. There seems little doubt that he was personally convinced that force was morally objectionable and offered no solutions to political problems. He accepted its use only where, as in Baku in January 1990, there were no other ways of preventing bloodshed.37

If Gorbachev was in fact more firmly opposed to the use of force than many Western leaders assumed, there were still some grounds for concern. While averse to the use of force, Gorbachev seemed at times willing to contemplate various forms of coercive intimidation to prevent nationalists in the Baltic region and elsewhere pursuing what he saw as their unacceptable goal of secession. This kind of thinking exposed Gorbachev to the dangers of a slippery slope that could easily lead to sanctioning the use of force.38 The Soviet leadership teetered on the edge of such a slope in March 1990, when plans were approved for a forcible take-over in Vilnius. Western warnings against considering force, however much they irritated Gorbachev, echoed misgivings among his own advisers who worried that any slide towards the use of coercion could undermine perestroika.39

In the event, military muscles were flexed throughout the Baltic region, and Lithuania found itself under a partial economic blockade rather than under the coercive emergency rule for which the hard-liners had pressed. With Gorbachev's political 'turn to the Right' in the autumn of 1990, disquiet grew once again about force being used to halt the onward march of Baltic nationalism. The attempt to do so came with the military crackdown in Vilnius in January 1991. The evidence suggests that the Soviet leader had no direct hand in the decision, but failed to take sufficient steps to prevent those who had long advocated a forceful solution from proceeding with their plans.40

What bearing did relations with the West have on the Vilnius events and their aftermath? In the period leading up to January, American warnings apparently made little impact on a Soviet leader who assumed that his unprecedented support for US policy in the Gulf would assure continued co-operation, even under difficult domestic circumstances.41 The strength of Western reaction to the January events, and clear signals that further crackdowns could seriously undermine co-operation and jeopardise economic aid, probably strengthened Gorbachev's determination to guard against any recurrence of attempts by hard-liners to leverage him into a policy of coercion.42 The Soviet leader finally dissociated himself from what had happened in Vilnius, and there were no subsequent attempts to use force on such a scale to stem the rising tide of nationalist separatism.

The second act: the KGB and military reaction

Frustrated by what they saw as Gorbachev's pusillanimity and his shift back to a course of liberalising reform, hard-liners in the party, the KGB, and the military began to use more drastic methods to pressure the Soviet leader. From the spring of 1991, Communist officials, including some from inner Kremlin circles, became even more troubled by Gorbachev's moves to negotiate with the republics a treaty along genuinely federal lines. The desire to prevent the signature of the union treaty determined the timing of the August 1991 coup by which the putschists sought to reverse the tide of liberalisation and devolution.37

Developments associated with the ending of the Cold War figured importantly in the events leading to the coup. The fall of the Berlin Wall and its aftermath turned what had begun as a trickle of public sniping at Gorbachev's foreign policy into a torrent of criticism from conservatives within the party, the KGB, and, especially, the military. The Gorbachev team came under repeated fire for having 'lost' Eastern Europe and undermining Soviet security.43


32 Gorbachev later acknowledged that he gave in to pressure and approved the temporary deployment of military patrols in Moscow in March 1991; see Gorbachev and Mlynář, Conversations, 130.

33 Chernyayev, My Six Years, 264–65.

34 Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 280–83; Senn, Gorbachev's Failure, 128; and Chernyayev, My Six Years, 317–32.

35 Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 280–83; Senn, Gorbachev's Failure, 128; and Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, 450–52.

36 Chernyayev, My Six Years, 327–29, and Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, 68–73.


The widespread anger and disaffection that international developments generated in conservative circles, and especially within the security establishment, flowed from a triple sense of loss. First, many found it difficult to abandon the traditional beliefs and assumptions that had underpinned Soviet security thinking. Accustomed to being guardians of the Soviet fortress, military and KGB officers found it hard to come to terms with a Kremlin politicians, notably Shevardnadze, had run roughshod over the military in swallowing new doctrine on mutual security and on 'reasonable sufficiency'. KGB leaders were troubled by talk of universal human values and the new commitment to a Helsinki-plus line on human rights and freedom of information, all moves that exposed the country to what they saw as growing Western subversion.

Secondly, security professionals felt they had lost out to political amateurs in the making of policy. Many on the General Staff resented the way in which politicians, notably Shevardnadze, had run roughshod over the military in revising security doctrine and negotiating asymmetrical arms agreements. The KGB, to a far greater extent than the military, had ambitions to be a participant in the making of policy. Many on the General Staff resented the way in which the KGB, chief Vladimir Kriuchkov had become frustrated by the way in which the liberal approach, promoted by radical reformers such as Gorbachev's close colleague, Aleksandr Iakovlev, was taking domestic and foreign policy in directions that conflicted with KGB interests. As a major author of the 'new thinking' and the principal proponent of glasnost, Iakovlev was seen as having encouraged trends that had led to disasters in both the outer and the inner empire - the loss of Eastern Europe and the loss of control over the union republics. The 'capitulation' over East Germany was a turning point for Kriuchkov; he became increasingly critical of Gorbachev and tried to pressure him into taking a tougher stance on republican nationalism. Here we have an instance of how resentment about loss of influence over the foreign policy process, together with hostility to its substance, fuelled determination to press for a tougher stance against domestic nationalist protest.

The third and final source of disaffection was resentment of the material losses associated with Gorbachev's mishandling of foreign and security matters. There was unease in the military about the withdrawal from Eastern Europe, on the grounds that it weakened defences. And there was outrage at the precipitate and chaotic nature of the withdrawal and the lack of proper provision made for returning troops. Grievances over Eastern Europe heightened military leaders' sensitivity to the disruption caused by the loss of central control over the republics and prompted many of them to refuse to allow their men to serve in other parts of the union.

Leading hard-liners tried to capitalise on these widespread concerns about the damage being done to national security at home and abroad. In June 1991, Kriuchkov described the country as being 'on the edge of catastrophe' and in danger of becoming a second-rank power, vulnerable to a predatory West. The depth and extent of discontent within the security establishment helped encourage the putchists to think they could enlist sufficient numbers of the traditionally non-praetorian Soviet military to support drastic measures against the Gorbachev leadership. In this sense, international developments had an indirect hand in the making of the August coup. But they also contributed to its undoing. The putchists overestimated the degree to which patriotic clarion calls would rally the military behind a coup, in the event, there were enough officers who supported perestroika, or saw in Yeltsin the best hope for the restoration of order. To shift the balance of forces against the hard-liners the effect of the coup was to accelerate precisely those developments it had meant to avert: its failure opened the way for the victory of the radicals and for the final collapse of the USSR.

Kriuchkov, interview with Aleksandr Prokhanov, Zavtra (Tomorrow), No. 14, April 1994; Kriuchkov, Lichnoe delo, II, 24-25.
46 Kriuchkov, Lichnoe delo, II, 387-92; and Knight, 'The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union', 77; 78.
ALEX PRAVDA

26. The August 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev failed, and Boris Yeltsin, the Russian president, was the hero of the hour. Here Yeltsin is defying the coup-makers from atop a tank in front of the parliament building.

Western benevolence without benefaction

In the atmosphere of growing crisis that marked the second act of the Soviet collapse, there was a qualitative shift in the nature of Western engagement. Developments in the USSR became the focus of ever greater attention and activity in the capitals of the G7 major industrial powers. At the Moscow end, there was growing interest in dialogue and co-operation not only on international questions, but also on matters bearing directly on the domestic scene.

The most intensive dialogue and engagement developed around problems besetting the Soviet economy. From 1989, industrial production began to fall, shortages increased, rationing became widespread, and there was large-scale labour unrest in Russia and Ukraine. In the course of 1990, the economic crisis deepened and assumed growing importance in the struggle between Moscow and the republics: in October 1990, the Russian parliament laid claim to assets on its territory.

With the economic crisis making him ever more vulnerable to political attacks from conservatives and radicals, Gorbachev turned for help to his newfound Western friends. Bonn agreed to a package of around DM 15 billion as part of the overall settlement on unification, though relatively little of this was available to tackle urgent economic needs. Moscow had long relied on substantial agricultural imports from the West, but no longer had sufficient energy export revenues with which to pay for these. Gorbachev had to contend with falling world prices and declining domestic production. In the unfavourable international economic climate, Western banks became more risk-averse and reduced lending to Moscow. It was to the Americans, as leaders of the G7, that Gorbachev turned for substantial help to relieve the symptoms of the economic crisis; he asked for support in the order of $15-$20 billion.

Bush firmly adhered to the policy that no large sums could be extended to the Soviet Union unless Moscow introduced serious market reform. Conditionality of this kind was unhelpful to Gorbachev, who was trying to steer a centrist economic and political course. In the fragile political situation, the risks of radical reform bringing more social disruption seemed excessive, especially to a leader who had fundamental doubts about moving rapidly to a liberal market economy. A nervous Gorbachev shifted uneasily between radical and conservative positions – the result was a series of hybrid reform plans that caused confusion at home and dismay among potential foreign donors. Western leaders might have made a more helpful contribution had they pressured the Kremlin to phase in a less ambitious market reform programme, along the lines advocated by some West German bankers.

Gorbachev saw much of the talk about the need for market reform as reflecting American insensitivity and lack of real willingness to help. The G7 leaders, including the more sympathetic West Europeans, were decidedly unimpressed by the Soviet anti-crisis programme presented at the July 1991

48 Hanson, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy, 228-31.
50 Revenues from oil fell by around a third between 1984 and 1987; see Egor Gaidar, Gileb imperii: uroki dlia sovremennoi Rossi [Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia] (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2006), 227; for production and prices, see 190-96, 344-35, 281-88.
51 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 276.
Disappointed by the failure of his personal relations with Western leaders to yield returns, Gorbachev tried to make a more pragmatic case for major aid. As he told Bush in July 1991, if the United States was prepared to spend $100 billion on regional problems (the Gulf), why was it not ready to expend similar sums to help sustain perestroika, which had yielded enormous foreign-policy dividends, including unprecedented Soviet support in the Middle East? But such appeals fell on deaf ears. Not even the relatively modest $30 billion package suggested by American and Soviet specialists — comparable to the scale of Western aid commitments to Eastern Europe — found political favour.

Frustrated by the West's unwillingness to reward foreign-policy favours, Gorbachev set increasing store by the basic common interest that bound them together: the need to avoid the disintegration of the USSR. His concern to retain Western support helped to reinforce a determination, even after the August putsch, to salvage some form of union. He hoped that his commitment to keeping the country together would secure Western support in his struggle against Yeltsin and those who wanted to break up the USSR. He became increasingly anxious about the West shifting its support to his political arch-rival. At the same time, Gorbachev tried to use the Western card to strengthen his hand at home, arguing to the end that the disintegration of the union would be unacceptable to the international community.

Could the West have used its resources, material and political, more effectively to have exercised greater influence on the second act of the Soviet collapse? It is unlikely that even very large sums would have diverted the drama from its ultimate course. Still, substantial aid made available in early 1991 might have given Gorbachev some political respite and could conceivably have altered the way in which the drama played out.

If we consider the broad canvas of how the international dimension of the perestroika project figured in its domestic development, we see a mixed picture. In one sense, Gorbachev's initial plan worked: a liberal and concessionary foreign policy did create the kind of benign international environment that made it easier to undertake radical and risky domestic reform. Bringing an end to Cold War confrontation and dismantling the traditional Soviet 'fortress' removed some of the obstacles to building the 'temple' of the modern socialist system which Gorbachev envisaged. But another dynamic came into play which the authors of perestroika failed to anticipate. The unintended consequences in Eastern Europe of the liberal turn in foreign policy helped to catalyse centrifugal pressures within the USSR; and these in turn reduced the Kremlin's capacity to manage the perestroika process. At the same time, East European as well as Western politicians exercised a calming influence on the struggle between the centre and the republics, by impressing on both sides the need to proceed cautiously and avoid the use of force. Taken together, these different international effects helped to make the Soviet collapse both a remarkably rapid and peaceful process.

66 For Gorbachev's use of this term, see Grachev, Final Days, 64.

57 Chernyav, My Six Years, 366–57; and Yevgeny Primakov, Russian Crossroads: Toward the New Millennium (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 79–82.
59 Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 303–04; Gorbachev, Poniat' perestroiku, 346–51.
60 Grachev, Final Days, 20, 74–75, 107; Gorbachev, Memoirs, 666–68.
The Gorbachev revolution and the end of the Cold War

There are now many useful memoirs by leading Soviet political actors concerning the final decades of the USSR and the perestroika period in particular. Mikhail Gorbachev’s memoirs are clearly important. They appeared in Russian in two volumes, Zhizn’ i reformy [Life and Reforms] (Novosti, Moscow, 1995), with a considerably abbreviated volume of Memoirs published in English the following year (New York: Doubleday and London: Transworld). Revealing insights into the evolution of Gorbachev’s thinking are to be found in the book based on his recorded discussions with his old friend, Zdenek Mlynar, The United States and Numinous Independence, c. 1975–1989, [301], (June 2003), 83–91.

Vladimir Shubin, AND: A View from Moscow–Cape Town: Mayibuye Books, (1999), is a major contribution by an activist scholar, who draws on Russian and South African archives. For Soviet policy, see also the relevant articles in Maxim Matusevich (ed.), Anti- Colonial Movements in Southern Africa (Delhi: Vista, 2006). Older studies include Daniel Papp, The Soviet Union and Southern Africa, in Robert H. Donaldson (ed.), Russia in Africa, Penn State University Press, 1997). More useful on the ending of the Cold War are, however, the memoirs of Dobrynin’s successor as head of the International Department, Karen Brutents, Bez skidok na obstoiatel’stva: politicheskie vosponimaniia [Without Reference to Circumstances: Political Memoirs] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1999) and two volumes by the prime minister in the Yelisin years), has published a volume of memoirs and reflections in English: The Price of Freedom: Gorbachev’s Reformulation through His Alie’s Eyes (Moscow: Rossika Zevs, 1999). It deserves to be translated into English, but has not been.

The same applies to the fullest memoirs and reflections of Aleksandr Iakovlev, published just two years before his death and appropriately entitled “Twilight”: Smerki (Moscow: Materiik, 2003). A close colleague of Gorbachev, and former Poliburo member who still works at the Gorbachev Foundation, Vadim Medvedev, has produced several informative books which are not as well known as they deserve to be (none of them has been translated): V komande Gorbacheva: vsglad iznutri [In Gorbachev’s Team: An Inside Look] (Moscow: Bylina, 1994). Rasp red: kak on nazival v “mire svoe sistemy socializma” [The Collapse: How It Became Inevitable in the “World Socialist System”] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994) and Prozrenie, mif ili predatel’st’ [k vosproy ob ideologii perestroiki: Recovery, Myth or Treachery: On the Ideology of Perestroika] (Moscow: Evraysia, 1998). Evgenii Primakov, who was influential in foreign-policy thinking during perestroika (and, successively head of foreign intelligence, minister of foreign affairs, and prime minister in the Yeltsin years), has published a volume of memoirs and reflections in English: Russian Crossroads: Toward the New Millennium (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). More useful on the ending of the Cold War are, however, the memoirs of Gorbachev’s interpreter at all his major summit meetings, Pavel Palazchenko, My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997). Anotoli Dobrynin, who spent almost a quarter of a century as Soviet ambassador to Washington before becoming head of the International Department of the Central Committee during perestroika, published informative memoirs: In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962–1986 (New York: Times Books, 1995). Dobrynin is fairly critical of Gorbachev and, still more, of Shevardnadze. Also critical is Egor Ligachev in his lively volume, Inside Gorbachev’s Kremlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995). Other critical accounts of perestroika and of its foreign policy by insiders are the memoirs of Dobrynin’s successor as head of the International Department, Valentin Falin, Bez skidok na obstoilat’stvo: politicheskie vosponimaniia [Without Reference to Circumstances: Political Memoirs] (Moscow: Respublika, 1999), and two volumes by the first deputy head of that department during perestroika, Karen Brutsens, Tridaat’ let na Staroi ploshchadi [Thirty Years on Staraia Ploshchad] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1999) and Nesbyvshiesia: neravnodushnye zametki o perestroike [That Which Did Not Happen: Subjective Notes on Perestroika] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2003). Critical perspectives on arms control and military affairs can be found in a collaborative volume of reflections, Glazami marshala i diplomatov: vsglad na vnechesti politiku SSSR do i pole 1989 [Through the Eyes of a Marshal and a Diplomat: A Critical View of the USSR’S Foreign Policy before and after 1985] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1992) by the chief of the general staff, Sergei Akhромеev and his close colleague, Georgii Kornienko,
who served as first deputy foreign minister under Andrei Gromyko and until early 1986 when he became deputy to Dobrynin in the International Department. A rather poisonous account of Gorbachev is published by his former chief of staff who joined the putsch against him in August 1991, Valerii Boldin. The book first appeared in English in 1994 as Ten Years that Shook the World: The Gorbachev Era as Witnessed by His Chief of Staff (New York: Basic Books) and in a slightly longer version in Russian a year later: Krushchev's P'edestal: shkrshki k portretu M. S. Gorbacheva [The Crumbling of a Pedestal: Sketches of a Portrait of M. S. Gorbachev] (Moscow: Respublika, 1995). There are other Russian works which portray Gorbachev as an outright traitor to the Soviet Union. The author of these to have held the most senior rank is former KGB chairman Vladimir Krutchkov. See, for example, his two volumes of memoirs, Lichne de'lo [Personal File] (Moscow: Olimp, 1996).


Among the issues on which Grachev's book sheds interesting light are the political dimensions of the economic crisis. A judicious analytical account of the development and decline of the economic system can be found in Philip Hanson, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy (London and New York: Longmans, 2003). Russian perspectives on the last stages of the system are provided in Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (eds.), The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insiders' History (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), and, together with much archival data, in Egor Gaidar, Gilb' imperi: uroki dlia sovremenoi Rossii [Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia] (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006).


The ways in which developments in Eastern Europe affected protest and disintegration in the USSR receive meticulously researched and detailed analysis in a three-part series of articles by Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union," part I of which appears in the first of two very useful special editions of the Journal of Cold War Studies, 5, 1 (Winter 2003), 3-16, devoted to the collapse of the Soviet Union; Part II appears in the second special edition, 5, 4 (Fall 2003), 2-42, and Part III in 6, 3 (Summer 2004), 1-3.


Archival sources from the Soviet side now include a substantial number of minutes of major Western libraries, including the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the Hoover Institution,
Intervene; The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy

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above. For an engaging study of Reagan in comparison to other Cold War presidents, see War and the End of the Cold War. The most pertinent to this is (New York: Scribner, 1993), and Caspar Weinberger, American Lift (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), edited by Douglas Blinkley. Melvyn P. Leffler, For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), as well as the memoirs cited above. For an engaging study of Reagan in comparison to other Cold War presidents; see Melvyn P. Leffler, For the Soul of Mankind. The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007).


During the 1980s and 1990s, President Reagan was frequently portrayed as an intellectual lightweight who was not in charge of his own administration. More recent studies, however, depict a more formidable leader whose unconventional ideas were not adequately appreciated at the time. For example, see Richard Reeves, President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), and John Patrick Diggins, Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007).
