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Do We Have A Winner?

Disentangling the Competing Explanations for the End of the Soviet System

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November 2011

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Do We Have a Winner?

Disentangling the Competing Explanations for the End of the Soviet System

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Several years ago, I was struck by how prevalent an oil-based explanation for the end of the Soviet Union had become among scholars, at least in conversation. As analysts began to think of Russia as a rentier state, it seemed that several of them also began to see the low oil prices of the 1980s as the major cause of the fall of the USSR.² It was strange to me, given how small a role oil had played in most studies of the operation or breakdown of the Soviet Union,³ that it should have become such an accepted part of general discussions.

My disquiet about experts' emphasis on oil was compounded by my existing sense that educated laypeople frequently explained the end of the Soviet Union in triumphalist terms, emphasizing the old system's "unreformability." Their explanations held that the former head of state, Mikhail Gorbachev, had essentially no choice but to launch his reforms—whether because of lost oil revenues, intimidation by American defense spending, or a realization that the Soviet model was a dead end. Furthermore, they argued that

¹ A draft of this paper was prepared for a workshop of the Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, June 12–15, 2011.

² Two important examples were Gaddy & Ickes (2005), who were focused on oil rents in contemporary examples, and Kotkin (2001, 2008), who also noted several other factors in the fall.

³ There are obvious exceptions, including Gustafson (1989) and Dienes & Shabad (1979), but oil is not emphasized in the totalitarian model, the modernization model, the bureaucratic politics model, or any of the other major approaches in Sovietology, which, in turn, underpinned the leading scholarly explanations for the fall of the Soviet Union.

any significant reform of a major part of the system was bound to cause the collapse of the rest of it.

In order to confront both the oil explanation and the triumphalist interpretation, I began to survey the scholarly literature to see where the in fact, stood.⁴ Interestingly, this enormous literature included many but convincing, explanations. There were several first-rate studies by scholars and only a few that seemed motivated more by post-Cold War triumphalism than by evidence and reason. At the same time, the studies did not provide a single, obvious narrative. This raised more To what extent are these varied but not obviously incorrect explanations end of the USSR compatible? When they contradict each other, which is correct? When they are reconcilable, how should they be combined? Can we do any better than simply saying, “All of these things mattered?”

How we understand the past affects how we interpret the present. In the case of the USSR and Russia, believing that the old system “collapsed,” that it was “unreformable,” and that Gorbachev had no choice but to try to change it leaves people ready to believe that complete marketization was the only sensible post-Soviet policy and that political will was the key to success. This, in turn, facilitates a belief that Russians did not follow through on the reformist agenda because they were somehow ill-suited to the demands of a market economy

This paper therefore seeks both to challenge the conventional wisdom among educated laypeople and to bring together a multifaceted expert literature by systematically evaluating existing explanations.⁵ This involves clarifying what is being explained (i.e., disaggregating or unpacking the dependent variables); ruling out some explanations as incorrect or misleading; and transparently combining others. In doing so, the paper provides a foundation for a better understanding of the Soviet

⁴ Note that this is a review of Western, English-language scholarship on the subject. I make no claim to have reviewed Russian or other post-Soviet literature.

⁵ Other useful surveys also exist, including Cohen (2010, Chapter 5). This review will not replace those.

and post-Soviet experiences and begins to consider the implications of the Soviet case for other examples of state breakdown and vice versa.

On the Impetus for Change: Reform Was Not Inevitable

One of the most striking differences between expert and lay understandings concerns the question of where the reforms came from. Many non-specialists believe that Gorbachev had no choice but to try to significantly change the Soviet system. Often, as mentioned above, this argument involves some sort of Western or American triumphalism. Most frequent is the contention that former president Ronald Reagan's commitment to renewed defense spending, especially on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), forced Gorbachev to realize the futility of continued competition with the West. There is, however, virtually no support for this argument in scholarly literature. Snippets have appeared in interviews or Western memoirs, but systematic evidence does not exist.

Another version of the "inevitability argument," sometimes connected to triumphalism, concerns economic performance. The Soviet economy was in such desperate straits by the mid-1980s, the argument runs, that Gorbachev (or whoever the Soviet leader might have been) had to launch significant reforms. The slide and then collapse in world oil prices in the early 1980s may have made the economic situation particularly acute. Some have even argued that Reagan was the one who convinced the Saudis to open the production spigots in 1984 in order to undermine the Soviets. (This is not a paper on internal Saudi politics, but it is worth pointing out that Reagan did not have to do much "convincing" since the Saudis clearly understood they were being abused by their cartel partners and came to see an increase in production as the only way to punish them.) In any case, even with the decline in oil revenues, the Soviet economy at the time was generally providing for its citizens, and the country's leader could have pursued any number of stopgap solutions. More broadly, we need to remember that different leaders have responded to economic difficulties differently, including the three who immediately preceded Gorbachev.

This last point suggests another argument about the inevitability of Gorbachev's reforms: that they were driven by generational change. This is an argument with some scholarly support, but it should not be over-emphasized. Gorbachev was indeed a member of a generation that came of age in very different circumstances from the ones before it, but there were members of that generation who did not share his vision. Gorbachev was born in 1931. If Boris Yeltsin (1931), Arkady Volsky (1932), Leonid Kravchuk (1934), Boris Pugo (1937), or Viktor Chernomyrdin (1938) had taken his place, it is far from clear that they would have pursued the same path. Perhaps the Soviet Union would have met a similar fate, but the point here is that even a generational shift did not guarantee that reforms similar to Gorbachev's would have been pursued.

The fundamental critique of all of these arguments, however, is that Gorbachev's reformism, and Soviet reformism in general, did not emerge out of nowhere in 1985. It is well documented that long before Reagan launched SDI or oil revenues fell or Soviet external debt became significant, Gorbachev believed that Soviet economic performance could and should be enhanced, that the Party and society needed to be reinvigorated, that better relations with the West were both possible and desirable,⁶ and that violence was not a preferred tool of governance. He was committed to these positions before ascending to the top position in the USSR; he was not forced onto this path by circumstances in the 1980s. By the same token, while he was not alone in his beliefs—there were enough like him that he could try to surround himself with intellectuals with similar ideas—if he or someone like him had not become General Secretary in 1985, a different set of reform policies would likely have been tried.

Because arguments that Gorbachev's reforms were inevitable are so prevalent among non-experts but so thoroughly rejected among experts,

⁶ For a small sampling of scholarship on the content and sources of Gorbachev's outlook, see English (2000), Kotkin (2001, 2008), and Kramer (2004 (*JCWS*, 5:4)).

we need to be clear on this point. Gorbachev had choices, and he made the ones he did because of his own worldview, which was formed long before he became General Secretary. His tactical decisions while in office—some of which had significant implications—were in response to immediate pressures (or his perceptions of them), but his commitment to his version of reformism was not. Overwhelming evidence, including the historical logic of what came first, points in this direction.

Explaining Everything At Once: The Soviet System as a House of Cards

If there is little expert support for the common perception that Gorbachev had to follow the reform path he did, there is considerably more for the argument that *once significant reform was undertaken*, much of what followed was inevitable. That is, the only reforms that met Gorbachev's criteria—improve economic performance, revitalize the Party and society, minimize state violence—would bring down the rest of the system “like a house of cards” (Young 1992, 63–64). Two different versions of this argument posit different triggers for the collapse: one points to economic deterioration and the other to the Party's abandonment of control over ideology and communication (i.e., *glasnost*). While there is some merit in these explanations, their failure to explain (or, often, to identify) the decay of each part of the system weakens the arguments.

One widely promulgated explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union holds that poor economic performance, which grew especially bad in 1990 and 1991, undermined the stability of the political system, eventually allowing the Soviet people to throw off their increasingly inept oppressors.⁷ Certainly, no one should underestimate the macroeconomic imbalances in the late Soviet economy or their effects on daily life in the USSR. The reforms of *perestroika*

⁷ Recent versions of this argument appear in Gaidar (2007) and Gaddy & Ickes (2005), both of which emphasize the role of declining oil revenues in undermining the economy. Earlier versions include Aslund (1995) and Lipton & Sachs (1990), who used the argument as evidence that successor governments should pursue rapid marketization.

weakened state controls over the emission of money in the Soviet system in four important ways:⁸

1. Cooperatives allowed enterprises to raise wages, which increased the circulation of cash.
2. “Pocket banks” funneled money from the Central Bank to their affiliated enterprises, effectively offering negative real interest rates.
3. The state itself continued to lend money without restraint. The Law on State Enterprise explicitly stated that a firm that ran short of money and could not obtain loans elsewhere would receive either cash or loan guarantees from its supervising agency. Meanwhile, the direct production subsidy to agriculture stood at about eleven percent of GDP by the end of the 1980s, and the subsidies to the agro-industrial complex as a whole in 1989 and 1990 were higher than the total budget deficit in those years (Brooks 1990, 35; Liefert 1993, 31). Those lending practices led both to exploding budget deficits and to the fourth major cause of over-active monetary emission.
4. Debt forgiveness—in both 1989 and 1990, for example, the state wrote off approximately 70 billion rubles of bad loans in agriculture alone, essentially printing money (Brooks 1990, 34; Wegren 1992, 12).

All of those forces put enormous upward pressure on prices, most of which the state refused to free. Instead, it periodically promised to raise them in the future, which led to panic buying and hoarding.

Scholars need to be cautious, however, when drawing conclusions from the late Soviet Union’s miserable macroeconomic condition. Leaping from an observation about poor economic performance to an argument that the government had to collapse is questionable at best. Countless regimes—including the Bolshevik government after the 1917 Revolutions, the Soviet Union during the Second World War, and Russia in the 1990s—

⁸ The next two paragraphs draw from Barnes (2006).

have survived crushing economic downturns, including hyperinflation. To blame economic problems for the collapse of the Soviet system is to conflate the causes of economic decline over those of political fragmentation.

The Soviet regime was explicit about its sources of legitimacy. It claimed the right to rule because its leaders knew the path to a better future for the bulk of its society (members of the bourgeoisie and their supporters would naturally disagree, but their complaints were not worth listening to). It seems reasonable to expect, therefore, that if enough people discovered that the Party was actually failing on its own terms and that commitment to the official ideology was hollow, even among many members of the elite, the system might be severely shaken.⁹

A number of studies analyze how this could happen. Martin Malia (Z, 1990) contends that *glasnost* allowed citizens to see the Party's claims for the lies they were, which eventually led to systemic collapse. Rasma Karklins (1994) argues that the Party's monopoly over ideology and communication was the chief pillar of the system, and when it was eliminated by *glasnost*, the "logic ... of system coherence" was undermined. Alexei Yurchak (2003) writes of a tipping point, when enough citizens (especially youth) realized their compatriots were just going through the motions, a mass realization that eroded support for the system from bottom to top.¹⁰

In most cases, of course, this argument comes out of a totalitarian view of the Soviet system. That approach argued that the system was built on the pillars of an official ideology, a mass party (usually led by one person), terror as a system of rule, a monopoly of communication, a planned economy, and a

⁹ There are some explanations of ideological failure or exhaustion that I do not include in this section. They explain the decline of the ideology but do not necessarily intend to explain the breakdown of the Soviet system as a whole, so it is unsurprising that they make less effort to show the links to other parts of the system (e.g., Janos 1991; Jowitt 1992; Hanson 1997).

¹⁰ For similar arguments in the Eastern European contexts, see Kuran (1991); DiPalma (1991); and Schöpflin (1990). I am not able to consider the end of East European communist parties' political monopoly or the Soviet Union's loss of its East European satellites in detail here, but they are undoubtedly important parts of the decline of the Soviet system. For studies that do examine them, see Koslowski & Kratowchil (1994); Bunce (1999); and Kramer (*JCWS*, 2004, 5:4; *JCWS*, 2004, 6:4; *JCWS*, 2005, 7:1).

monopoly over the use of force.¹¹ While it certainly seems important that the leadership eventually abandoned its *raison d'être*, it is important to recognize that other “pillars” of the system had been reformed earlier without causing collapse. Most notably, while the system remained repressive, the regime did not rely on terror as a system of rule after the death of Stalin. Likewise, the party was rarely subordinated to a single ruler after Stalin, and certainly not after Nikita Khrushchev. And in the previous section we cast doubt on the argument that economic reform caused a collapse.¹²

The form that the breakdown took is also hard to explain using the argument of mass (and elite) disillusionment, at least without help. Parts of the Soviet system, for example, particularly the government’s monopoly over the use of force, did *not* break down, at least until the very end. The reasons why the regime change should have been non-violent, or why the Union should have splintered along every Union-republic boundary and no others, are also not clear from this perspective.

Again, these studies contain important information and provide useful insights regarding possible causal factors. They lead us to new questions, however, about the links between the different parts of the system. In particular, it seems prudent to at least *look* at the different components of the system and ask how each one came apart. It is best not to *assume* that a decline in the economy or in ideological commitment meant the end of the whole system. The next section of the paper highlights four different dependent variables that appear in the

¹¹ This list is recognizable from Friedrich & Brzezinski (1956). Some analyses give a more central role to ideology and the control over public expression and communication (e.g., Arendt 1951; Kornai 1992; and a number of East European authors).

¹² We might also ask why an organization such as the Catholic Church does not fall apart when such horrible incidents as sexual abuse by priests are revealed. One way for such an organization to survive is to purge or ignore its sinners and insist that the *mission* nonetheless remains correct. A deeper comparison might be interesting, particularly since scholars and practitioners have compared Bolshevism to a religion (see, among others, Kotkin (1995); Crossman, ed. (1950)).

literature, while subsequent sections review explanations for those outcomes.

Disaggregating the Dependent Variable

One of the reasons for continued uncertainty about the causes of the end of the Soviet system is that “the end” is too big an outcome to explain all at once. There were several facets of the Soviet system, and they were at least conceptually separate. I am not interested in arguing about how many of them needed to change, and by how much, for it to count as “real reform.” I am, however, interested in separating them analytically so we can think about how their breakdowns were or were not related.¹³

Solnick (1996) identifies multiple hierarchies that broke down in the Soviet case: those in the command economy, those in the federal system, and those in the Party. Bunce (1993) clearly delineates five pieces of the Soviet system—the political monopoly of the Communist Party, command economy, the Union, the external empire, and the world communist movement—and later (1999) seeks to explain them. Outside the realm of Sovietology, the comparative politics literature has long distinguished among different parts of a political and economic system with such terms as regime type, economic system, state capacity, and territorial integrity. Furthermore, that literature provides several examples in which some of those pieces broke down, but others did not. Regime change does not always imply a collapse of governance. Economic reform does not always imply territorial disintegration. And so on.

In this paper, I separate regime type, state capacity, and territorial integrity (with state capacity separated into the economic arena and other constituent parts). The regime type of the Soviet Union is best described as a communist-party dictatorship. This avoids complicating the description with certain methods of control (e.g., terror) or economic system (e.g., command

¹³ “Disaggregating the dependent variable,” for our purposes, means allowing for the analysis of the decay of each part of the system separately. The totalitarian school, of course, listed several separate pieces of the system, but it argued that they were inextricably linked and therefore destined to collapse if one part was significantly reformed. For a non-totalitarian scholar who lists several pieces of the system but does not analyze their breakdowns separately, see Cohen (2004).

economy). This approach also fits with how we tend to describe regimes in other countries. It allows us to recognize that the regimes in China and Vietnam retain their type, despite the fact that their economies have been transformed radically in the last three decades. And it avoids the contortions that were needed to explain how the system was still totalitarian even after terror was shelved or when media controls were relaxed.¹⁴

State capacity has been a focus of comparative politics, including post-communist politics, for the past twenty years. Despite the fact that the CPSU and the Soviet state were closely linked, it may be useful to separate them in order to ask whether the former could have been undermined while the latter remained intact. Furthermore, it is important to note that state capacity in one area, such as monitoring the economy, may be stronger or weaker than in other areas, such as the ability to punish crimes or defend borders.

Finally, another aspect of the system that is sometimes referred to as “the state” is the Union itself, the nominal federation of 15 Union republics that made up the USSR. To separate this issue from questions of economic monitoring and social governance, we will refer to it as “territorial integrity” in this paper. As will be discussed later, there is no obvious reason why a breakdown in, for example, governance capacity should lead the USSR to break up along every Union-republic line and no others. This is therefore another aspect of the Soviet system that should be looked at separately.

¹⁴ Note, then, that a shift toward a system with elected legislatures with real power is part of a *regime change*, in that it undermines the Communist Party’s political monopoly. Although this can be, and is, described as “strengthening the state at the expense of the Party” or something along those lines, it is *not* increasing the state’s capacity to govern, which is what most scholars mean by “strengthening the state” today.

The End of the CPSU Political Monopoly (Regime Change)

Believing that the moribund Party, and the conservatives whose political base lay there, was the main obstacle to change, Gorbachev continually sought to revitalize it by increasing society's influence over it and by decreasing its governing responsibilities. In 1988, he weakened the Party apparatus by reforming the Central Committee Secretariat, shrinking the number of committees and reducing their power. Soon thereafter, he began elections to lower-level Party offices, allowed elections to state policy-making organs (legislatures), and facilitated the Party's abandonment of its constitutionally guaranteed "leading role" in society. In addition, *glasnost* ensured the Party would come under fire for its many failings and even for problems in society over which it had little control, despite Gorbachev's efforts to keep some areas off limits for public criticism.

In light of these developments, the literature on Soviet regime change is largely agreed: Gorbachev's political reforms caused it.¹⁵ In fact, this is almost true by definition. Gorbachev may have expected the population to offer near-universal support for a revitalized CPSU (which would have left the Party with a political monopoly), but it is hard to imagine that happening in an open political system. Once democratization was introduced, the CPSU was not going to be a monopoly party, barring a reversal of the reforms. In fact, by the last year or so, Gorbachev appeared to be hoping that it would reform into multiple parties, including a significant one that pursued essentially social democracy.¹⁶ Such a transformation may or may not have been possible, but it would have represented regime change in any case.

If the loss of the CPSU's political monopoly was the result of Gorbachev's reforms, the specific path that process took was driven by elite conflicts, following a pattern seen in other breakdowns of authoritarian regimes.¹⁷ First, a

¹⁵ For studies focused on this process, see Bova (1991); Connor (2004); Young (1992); Gill (1994); and White (1994). For those with broader scope that nonetheless emphasize the decline of the CPSU's political monopoly, see Kramer (1988/89); Bunce (1999); and Kotkin (2001, 2008).

¹⁶ See White (1994, 646), Cohen (2010).

¹⁷ See, e.g., O'Donnell & Schmitter (1986). On the Soviet case, see Bova (1991); Young (1992); White (1994); and Kotkin (2001, 2008).

coalition seeking to reform the system reaches power. The reformers undermine the power base of the conservatives who had long dominated system.¹⁸ Over time, however, a loose collection of “radicals,” united only their sense that the reformers’ policies have not “gone far enough,” make more and more demands. Initially, the reformers (now called are able to balance the two other groups against each other, but as they control over the radicals, the conservatives may choose to make one last stand. The result is either a successful crackdown or the defeat of the conservatives, often leading to a change of regime type.

Noticing that regime breakdown in the Soviet Union so closely followed a pattern found in other cases lends further support to the argument that neither poor economic performance nor even economic reform brought down the regime. Comparative studies point out that economic declines can help bring reformers to power, and economic reforms can undermine the power bases of political incumbents, but they also show that many regimes can survive economic underperformance and that one-party dictatorships are possible even without fully state-owned economies. The driving force in the Soviet case was Gorbachev’s *misdiagnosis* of the problem of economic reform. He believed conservatives were blocking progress, which reinforced his belief that he needed to eliminate the Party’s political monopoly. In fact, the failures of Soviet economic reform lay in the forces the reforms unleashed, not the ones that were stifled. The next section examines this phenomenon in the context of the state’s capacity to govern.

Changes in Governance Capacity

Regime type is analytically separate from state capacity. Expecting a loss of CPSU monopoly to be linked to a loss of state governing capacity makes some sense, since the two organizations intentionally overlapped in important ways,

¹⁸ In cases where the reformers fail to undermine the conservatives, the reforms and regime change are halted.

but we should be wary of simply conflating the two processes, both because the experience of comparative politics tells us they are not the same thing and because one of the tendencies over time in the Soviet Union was for state organizations to gain independence from their Party minders.¹⁹ Along the same lines, we should recognize that it is possible for a state to lose its ability to govern in some areas but not in others.

It is certainly true that, during the final years of its existence, the Soviet state lost a great deal of control over its economy. Decrying the over-bureaucratization of the system, as had Lenin and Khrushchev before him, Gorbachev argued that enterprise managers and individual citizens should be given greater freedom in their economic activities. Over the next several years, the state's planning authority was reduced; enterprises were given increased rights of possession, use, and distribution of their assets; and individuals and legal entities were allowed to establish private businesses.²⁰ In that context, strategies for peeling assets away from the state proliferated, including embezzlement, arbitrage, transfer pricing, unregulated and unmonitored loans, and individual deals for pseudo-privatization of enterprises, networks, and eventually entire ministries.²¹

There are several characteristics of this granting and taking of authority that are relevant to our discussion. First, the loss of state authority was not caused by the decline in Party authority. The devolution of economic control could have happened without ending the CPSU political monopoly, and, in fact, it began just that way. The Law on Independent Labor Activity, the Law on the State Enterprise, and a decree reducing the state's planning authority in agriculture were all passed before 1988, which was the year of the first major steps toward undermining the CPSU's "leading role." Certainly the declines of the state and Party hierarchies happened in parallel, but the strongest link between the two was simply Gorbachev's intent to reform *both*.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Whitfield (1993).

²⁰ Barnes (2006).

²¹ See, among others, Kotz & Weir (1997); Solnick (1998); Johnson (2000); and Barnes (2006).

Second, contrary to persistent myths, while the reforms did not spark an economic turnaround and instead facilitated the breakdown of state authority, this was not because of some logical impossibility or the half-hearted nature of the reforms. They did not represent some impossible hybrid between state and private economic activity. There are many examples of state-private hybrids around the world, from Mexico and Brazil, to France and Germany, to Egypt and Turkey, to, perhaps most importantly, China and Vietnam.²² Likewise, the reforms were not timid half-measures, nor were they blocked by conservative attitudes or actors. Gorbachev is often criticized for failing to abandon his commitment to socialism and therefore not pursuing economic reforms sufficiently radical to overcome his country's economic malaise. In reality, while Gorbachev and his supporters couched their advocacy of reforms in the *language* of Soviet socialism, the property laws and decrees of that period represented a radical break with traditional Soviet positions on ownership. While, as noted above, his preference for raising prices administratively, rather than freeing them, contributed to macroeconomic instability and popular backlash against the regime, the Russian experience with liberalizing prices in 1992 was not much more successful.²³

Instead, the economic reforms continued to undermine the Party and state's administrative hierarchies because of Gorbachev's response to their disappointing results and because of how the reforms played out in practice. When he was frustrated with the limited improvement of economic performance in 1985–1987, Gorbachev's inclination was to

²² Although a number of studies have tried to compare the Chinese and Soviet experiences regarding economic reform (e.g., Huang (1994); Johnson (1994); Solnick (1996); Sun (1999); and Kotkin (2001, 2008)), it may be worth returning to that subject, perhaps adding Vietnam as a case. The strong similarities between the economic reforms—including the widespread corruption they produced—and the complete divergence in political and economic outcomes still awaits a definitive explanation, which would in turn help us understand the Soviet experience better.

²³ Furthermore, in 1990, the plan adopted by the more “radical” Yeltsin government did not free prices, either.

push for greater devolution of Party and state authority, arguing that conservatives were blocking reforms. Several accounts—including the ones that ones that apparently stick most firmly in the minds of non-experts—follow Gorbachev’s explanation for the economy’s anemic response. They argue that Party and state loyalists tried to strangle the new private sector, not allowing it to work its magic. In practice, managers, ministers, and others used the new freedoms for what William Baumol has called “destructive entrepreneurship”—activities that benefit only those who engage in them, rather than the economy as a whole. The new freedoms were very real, and the presumed representatives of the old system turned them to their advantage, which meant that success for an economic actor lay not in adhering to increasingly unclear planning directives, but in bribery, protection, theft, or some combination thereof. The result was an accelerating loss of both wealth and power for the state.²⁴

The third aspect to note regarding this decline of state capacity, however, is that it did not cause the breakup of the Soviet Union. Again, comparative politics offers examples—such as Mexico and other large states after Import-Substituting Industrialization (ISI)—of radical reduction of state control over the economy and ensuing political turmoil, but maintenance of state control over territory. Russia, too, shows that misappropriation of assets on a grand scale is not enough to cause territorial disintegration, even if it significantly weakens the state in some areas. That is, if countless acts of individual expropriation actually caused the disintegration of the USSR, they should have either ended with the Soviet Union or brought down the Russian Federation, as well. Instead, while Russia remained intact, most of the pathologies from the late Soviet period regarding the state’s control over its own assets continued or worsened in the post-Soviet era.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the decline of state control over the economy did not represent a collapse of state capacity in all areas.

²⁴ This is articulated most clearly and least judgmentally in Solnick (1998). See also Johnson (2000) and Barnes (2006). For slightly different interpretations, see Kagarlitsky (1992) and Kotz & Weir (1997), among others.

Cases like Somalia and Afghanistan remind us of what real state collapse looks like. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the traditional hierarchies of state control—the police, KGB, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and military—did not break down until the very end.²⁵ In fact, even if those hierarchies had dissolved in the late Soviet era, there is no obvious reason to expect the territorial breakdown that occurred in the USSR at the end of 1991. More likely, in fact, based on experience elsewhere in the world, there would have been a civil war and perhaps a handful of new countries that combined with several former Union republics. The key factors in the breakup of the Soviet Union, therefore, were those with federal implications, the subject of the next section of this paper.

The End of the Union

While the dissolution of the USSR into 15 independent countries is sometimes included under the heading of “state collapse,” this is quite different from the decline in state administrative capacity in other areas and so should be considered separately. Even failed states—which the Soviet Union in 1991 was not—do not typically separate cleanly or peacefully into their constituent parts.

Why, then, did the Union break up? Very broadly speaking, the literature falls into two groups, with the first emphasizing national identity and the second emphasizing institutions. There are several detailed studies that examine Soviet nationalities policy and how it actually encouraged the development of national consciousness in many groups.²⁶ Bolshevik policy came to view nationalities as objectively existing entities that needed to be dealt with. Socialist ideology might have seen them as undesirable and disappearing, but for now they existed and, in any case, the best way to convert the masses was to

²⁵ See, for example, Meyer (1991–92); Lepingwell (1992); Taylor (2003); and Knight (2003), as well as Bunce (1999) and Kotkin (2001, 2008).

²⁶ See, for example, Pipes (1954); Suny (1993); Slezkine (1994); d'Encausse (1995); and Hirsch (2005). McAuley (1992) does not focus on the formation of these identities, but she argues that the language of nationalism emerged as the most obvious way to discuss grievances after the language of Marxism was discredited.

communicate with them on their own terms. Generally, then, the policy became to recognize the existence of nationalities, grant “homelands” where practical, offer books and instruction in the national language, foster education of the folk traditions, use quotas for promotion, and so on. Although the application of the policy varied widely in practice—unsurprising given that the recognition and cultivation of the various groups was carried out with the long-term goal of moving beyond those identities—it was reinforcing (or creating) national ideas.

Focusing on national identity, however—whether one believes it is primordial or constructed—leaves some important questions unanswered. For example, why did national republics *within* Union republics not secede? Many of the nationalities policies just mentioned were applied to those internal republics, including fostering local languages, cultural traditions, and media outlets, and several of them pressed for independence but failed to achieve it. Similarly, why did *all* Union republics separate? Some of the identities, particularly in Central Asia, were less well developed than others, but all 15 emerged as new states. Finally, what explains the *order* of the breakup (from West to East, rather than East to West)? The few studies that saw national identity as an important issue during the Soviet period usually expected pressure to come from the less developed regions, rather than the Baltics,²⁷ and none expected that the final dissolution would be led by Russia.²⁸

Several scholars, therefore, examine reforms that, intentionally or unintentionally, transferred authority from the center to the Union republics. Certainly the elections of Union–republic legislatures and presidents fit in this category, especially in the absence of an election for the Soviet presidency. The elections may have fueled national identification in some cases, but it seems more important that they empowered and legitimized Union–republic political leaders in comparison with their Union–level counterparts. This is what Rogers Brubaker refers to when he writes, “The key actors in the drama of

²⁷ Not all, however. See Lapidus (1984), although she generally thought the Union was stable.

²⁸ For elaboration, see Roeder (1991) and Emizet & Hesli (1995).

disintegration ... were the institutionally empowered elites of the national republics.”²⁹

In the economic realm, the reforms that mattered for the the Union were those that devolved economic authority along Union-lines. Decentralization of the planning bureaucracy, for example, had far-reaching consequences for the territorial integrity of the USSR. In March 1986, a decree transferred partial authority for managing the agrarian sector to regional administrations, and a March 1989 decision pushed the system much further in that direction.³⁰ Thus, far from another insignificant administrative reshuffling, this reorganization essentially eliminated the Union government’s role in most of the agro-industrial complex, which in turn allowed regional leaders and farm managers to avoid making their required deliveries to the all-Union food fund. The process was much more explicit and extensive in the agricultural sector than in industry, but it took place in both sectors.

Fiscal control was also turned over to the Union-republican governments in the final years of the Soviet Union.³¹ Self-financing (*khozraschet*), which included allowing Union republics to tax and spend on their own, was touted as a solution to problems of over-burdensome planning and widening budget deficits. In practice, it allowed the Union republics to withhold revenue from the center.

Likewise, control over property, including the governing ministries themselves, was both given to and taken by the Union-republic governments. In Russia, for example, the leadership promised lower taxes and less regulation to those “concerns” and “associations” that acknowledged Russian authority over Soviet authority.³² The government still included nearly 80 ministries and state committees at the time of the August 1991 coup attempt. By the end of August, however, the Russian

²⁹ Brubaker (1994, 61). See also Bunce (1999); Hale (2008).

³⁰ Cook (1990); Litvin (1987); (Chotiner 1992); and (Van Atta 1993), cited in Barnes (2006).

³¹ See Remington (1989); Bahry (1992); Berkowitz & Mitchneck (1992); and Solnick (1996).

³² For more on this tactic, see, for example, Deliagin (1991); and Sluzhakov (1991).

government claimed jurisdiction over the operations of all the Union-level ministries on Russian territory; and what followed was a torrent of metamorphoses of Soviet ministries to quasi-state organizations under Russian jurisdiction.³³

Even these institutional arguments, however, have trouble explaining why the Union broke up along Union-republic lines and not others. There were elections to lower-level governments; tax authority was devolved to lower levels; and property demands were managed at lower levels. None of those units were able to achieve independence.³⁴

One argument that has gained currency but should be examined more closely holds that the Soviet state was federated, while the CPSU was not. Therefore, when the Party lost its political monopoly, the USSR was on a path toward dissolution along federal lines.³⁵ In practice, the state was no more federated than the Party in the Soviet era—it was federated by the reforms and reactions discussed above. Likewise, the Party was undergoing no less of a federating process than the state. Indeed, the first overt, organized political splits in the country appeared in the Party rather than the state, and the most substantial were between the CPSU and its Union-republic branches, which held their elections before the elections to state legislatures. Those branches, in turn, often facilitated nationalist movements on their territories, and where they did not, those movements tended to be anemic (Roeder 1991).

Some of the best explanations for the breakup of the Soviet Union include identity as part of the institution-building process. Hale (2008) emphasizes that ethnicity is a useful marker and therefore a historically reliable rallying point for political movements; he shows how leaders in the Union republics, especially Ukraine, both used it and reacted to it as they tried to improve their position

³³ Burawoy & Krotov (1992); Fortescue (1993); Whitefield (1993); Hough (1997); and Barnes (2006).

³⁴ The stories of Chechnya, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are clearly different and should remind us that secession is rarely simple.

³⁵ Remington (1989); Kotkin (2001, 2008).

vis-à-vis the center. Elsewhere (2005), he shows how a “core ethnic region”—present in the USSR but not Russia—creates incentives for a breakup.³⁶

In the end, the Soviet Union splintered as it did because some of Union-republic leaders decided to dissolve it, others acquiesced, and the leadership decided not to fight for it.³⁷ Their actions would have been impossible without some of the institutional changes discussed here, but did the breakup become inevitable? Gorbachev’s acquiescence was assured after the coup attempt. Likewise, any federation that persisted after the putsch would not have been led by the old Union government, as the Yeltsin administration progressively took over all USSR ministerial functions on Russian territory, and then on November 28, 1991, he issued a decree establishing the outlines of the post-Soviet Russian executive apparatus. The decision to dissolve the Union, however, and not to create a new federation, does not seem to have been the first choice of the signatories of the Minsk Agreement until the very end.³⁸

As a final note on the breakup of the Union, while I have argued in this paper that the CPSU’s political monopoly (i.e., the Soviet regime type) could have been reformed or eliminated without necessarily wrecking Soviet state administrative capacity, and state capacity could have been weakened in some areas without destroying it in others, what actually *did* happen is that the USSR was replaced by 15 independent countries, and reforms of the “Soviet” regime and state were rendered moot. Territorial, regime, and state reform are thus inextricably linked, but perhaps not in the causal fashion that is often assumed or argued. All of the issues from the late Soviet period were still on the table for the successor countries. Regarding regime type, some have become one-party or one-person

³⁶ Beissinger (2002) sees national identity as more of a force in its own right, but he also highlights changes in the country’s institutional structure.

³⁷ As Lapidus (1989) pointed out early on, the strategies of ethnonational elites varied across Union republics.

³⁸ See Bunce (1999); Hale (2008).

dictatorships, while others have become multi-party democracies, and several continue to struggle. Russian leaders are trying to build a dominant-party regime of some kind, but we are still unclear on how to classify it, relying instead on the imprecise name of “hybrid regime.” All of the successor governments faced fundamental questions of economic development and state capacity; Putin’s popularity rests in large part on the public perception that he has handled these issues well.³⁹ Even issues of *raison d’être* or national myth—which one might expect to be less important in regimes that are no longer explicitly ideological—remained important and are still being resolved.⁴⁰ Thus, while it is tempting to believe that Party and state reform led to territorial breakdown, in some ways the key event is the end of the Soviet Union itself, which made questions of reforming the regime and state irrelevant.

Lessons From the Review

This review has not led to as clean an explanation for the breakdown of the Soviet system as one might like, but it has taken important steps forward in the debate. It has rejected a number of explanations, including economic decline, exposure of the system’s faults, or inextricable links among all major parts of the system. These explanations persist in the popular imagination, as well as in some academic studies, and we should be careful not to allow the kernels of truth in each of them to expand and crowd out better explanations.

In addition, by emphasizing the importance of disaggregating the dependent variable—focusing here on regime change, decline in state capacity, and territorial disintegration separately—the paper helps focus our analyses, which can lead both to better explanations and better links between scholarship on the Soviet case and on other cases around the world. Regime type, state capacity, and territorial integrity are separate phenomena in the comparative

³⁹ Whether the perceptions are accurate is another matter, as is the question of how he and Medvedev are actually able to govern.

⁴⁰ On the difficulty of developing a coherent ideology in post-Soviet Russia, see Hanson (2010). Several studies have examined Russia’s search for its national interest in the international arena. Among many others, see Adomeit (1995); Baev (1997); Light (2001); and Hopf (2002).

politics literature, and I have tried to show that this was true for the Soviet Union as well. Gorbachev, like many Sovietologists and students, mis-identified the greatest structural weaknesses of the Soviet system. The particular reforms he chose to pursue, partly because he incorrectly identified the reasons his policies produced unintended results, handed authority directly to the Union-republic level, both inside and outside the Party. That transfer facilitated the dissolution of the USSR, which in turn ended the processes of Soviet regime and state transformation.

I hope this approach can lead to more fruitful comparisons and to insights on more general questions than those asked here. Several of the potential comparisons were mentioned in passing: How were the wrenching reforms of ISI economies similar to and different from the late Soviet reforms? How do the regime changes in the color revolutions or the recent Arab Spring compare to the Soviet process of regime change, and why? Why has Mexican democratization not led to territorial disintegration? And so on. As for broader comparative questions, the Soviet experience as disentangled here should allow us to address the following: What makes governance possible, and what reforms are possible without eviscerating it? Why do states break down, and what makes “impossible” outcomes look “inevitable” so quickly? How does decolonization happen, and with what effect? Again, the potential list is long, and the approach taken in this paper provides a useful basis for comparison.

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