Introduction

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The four articles in this special issue look at some of the major internal and external factors that helped precipitate the breakup of the Soviet Union. These articles should be read in conjunction with the four that appeared in our first special issue on the collapse of the USSR, published in Volume 5, No. 1 (Winter 2003). Our final special issue on this topic, to be published in Volume 6, No. 3 (Summer 2004), will deal with domestic political and economic trends that destabilized the Soviet regime and contributed to the demise of the Soviet state.

The Social Context

The first article in the current issue, by Walter Connor, discusses the social context of the dramatic events in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. In the 1960s a number of Western scholars, influenced by the burgeoning literature on “modernization,” argued that long-term changes in Soviet society—increased literacy and education levels, industrialization, increased urbanization, greater occupational differentiation, generational change, the advent of modern communications, and other such trends—were mitigating the Soviet regime’s ability to exercise tight political and economic control.1 Al-

though few (if any) of these analysts believed that the Soviet Union would cease to be a Communist state, many assumed that the USSR would gradually “converge” with Western societies. This school of thought was challenged by other scholars, notably Kenneth Jowitt, who asserted that the leaders of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) would be able to preserve Leninist rule by co-opting or integrating new social groups into the system.2

These contending views of how the Soviet regime would cope with long-term social change were never fully reconciled, but the topic was revived in the mid- to late 1980s by Jerry Hough, who averred that changes associated with modernization and economic development in the Soviet Union had generated strong pressures “from below” for democratization—pressures that Gorbachev was seeking to use to his advantage:

During Gorbachev’s lifetime, the Soviet people became vastly more sophisticated, urban, and educated. . . . Even before becoming general secretary, Gorbachev apparently understood the implications of these enormous demographic changes. . . . Gorbachev had good reason to believe that the Soviet Union was ripe for dramatic political change. Historically, when a country achieves a high level of urbanization and education, the democratic pressure against dictatorship becomes irresistible. . . . Gorbachev understood that the transformation of Soviet society [in the decades after World War II] had increased the risk of radical popular rebellion. . . . As a country urbanizes and education becomes more widespread, the threat of popular revolt becomes greater.3

Hough’s analysis was grounded in the traditional themes of the modernization school, but it also tallied well with contemporaneous Western literature that highlighted the role of key social groups (especially the middle class and new professionals) in pushing for democratization in southern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia.4


4. For a cogent overview of the study of democratization as of the early 1980s, see Samuel P. Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 99, No. 2 (Summer
Although Hough emphasized “the Russian people's receptivity to radical reform,” he believed that there were limits on how far the Russian public actually would go. Most Russians, he argued, were “shocked by the strength of the national feeling” in the non-Russian republics and were more concerned about the cohesiveness of the Soviet Union than about the prospects for further reform:

The vast majority of Russians—even highly educated Russians, including the intelligentsia—are very leery of the possibility that a multiparty democracy would lead to the establishment of separatist parties in union and autonomous republics that would gain majority support. . . . [Russians] fear that democracy for themselves would mean the breakup of the union. A Boris Yeltsin who is forced to concede that his program means the possibility of independence for the Baltic republics faces a virtually impossible task in winning the populist mandate [in Russia].

Hough claimed that the adverse “effect of the multinational character of the Soviet Union on the Russian attitude toward full democracy” was what had given rise to “the longstanding perception among the Soviet intelligentsia that the Russian people are basically conservative.” In Hough’s view, Gorbachev did not share the intelligentsia’s “mistaken perception,” but he did sense that many Russians were worried about the impact of democratization on the survival of the state. Hough maintained that the Soviet leader was seeking to exploit the Russian public’s fears by orchestrating “conditions of controlled chaos” that would enable him “to maintain his control” while implementing drastic changes. “Gorbachev’s basic decision,” Hough wrote, “was to let un-


7. Ibid., p. 35.
rest in the republics—especially the smaller ones—go to an extreme.”9 Far from regarding the ethnic ferment as undesirable, Gorbachev actually welcomed it and “deliberately [sought] to create an exaggerated sense of crisis” that would heighten “the subjective feeling among Moscow intellectuals that the nationality problem [was] dangerous.”10 This strategy, according to Hough, reflected Gorbachev’s “very sound” understanding of the conflicting impulses within Russian society: On the one hand, most Russians were eager for “more freedom and greater integration into the West”; on the other hand, they were, in Hough’s assessment, “still several decades away from accepting the breakup of the country.”11

Connor’s article demonstrates that social trends in the USSR—especially in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the largest and most important of the fifteen Soviet republics—were more complicated than Hough implied. Although Hough was right in predicting that some important social groups in the RSFSR (and in other republics) would be strongly supportive of political and economic liberalization, he was wrong in arguing that the Russian public had a fundamental commitment to the preservation of the Soviet Union in its post–1945 borders. When Soviet troops cracked down in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991, large crowds of Russians voiced their opposition and signed petitions of solidarity with the Baltic nations at the unofficial Lithuanian and Latvian “embassies” in Moscow.12 More than 150,000 Russians took part in a protest demonstration in Moscow on 20 January 1991 to denounce the violent clampdown in the Baltics, a turnout that dismayed the Soviet leadership.13 In June 1991, Russians voted decisively for Boris Yeltsin in the Russian presidential election, even though he had spoken strongly in favor of independence for the Baltic republics. When the Baltic states, Moldova, and Georgia gained independence shortly after the rebuff of the August 1991 coup in Moscow, the Russian public barely seemed to notice. Nor were there any mass protests in Russia in December 1991 when Yeltsin joined with his Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts in signing the Belovezhskaya Pushcha agreements that brought a formal end to the Soviet Union.

10. Ibid., p. 662; and Hough, “Gorbachev’s Politics,” p. 39.
Hough had claimed in late 1989 that "the absence of significant demonstrations by the students in Moscow and Leningrad”—at a time of growing unrest in many of the non-Russian republics—was attributable to Russians’ “fear of a breakup of the union.” A much more plausible explanation for the lack of student protests in Moscow is that a “civil society” had not yet emerged in Russia. Soviet society had gradually taken on a new complexion after the death of Josif Stalin in 1953, and it is clear that many Russians by the 1980s did want greater freedom and contact with the West. Nonetheless, the demographic changes that occurred from the mid–1950s through the mid–1980s did not produce a genuine civil society, either in Russia or in most of the other republics. The barriers to collective action in Russia thus remained formidable.

Although some Western analysts in the late 1980s argued that a civil society had taken root in the RSFSR, subsequent events did not bear this out. During the early Gorbachev years, environmental concerns were the only notable catalyst of social mobilization in Russia and most other republics. The fact that environmental issues played this role is not at all surprising. In the pre-Gorbachev era the only “unofficial” movement that was tolerated in Soviet Russia was a diffuse coalition led by conservationists, scientists, writers, and other intellectuals who sought to prevent further environmental damage, especially the ongoing pollution of Lake Baikal. From the regime’s stand-


point, the prominent role of this ad-hoc environmental movement in the “save Baikal” campaign in the 1960s and 1970s was relatively innocuous, but the precedent it set was important in a country that had been subjected to environmental depredation throughout the Soviet era. The perceived “safety” of at least some environmental issues as a topic of public debate ensured that long-standing concerns about the effects of pollution and radioactive contamination, voiced by Russian nationalists in the RSFSR as well as by “popular fronts” (newly formed nationalist groups) in many of the non-Russian republics, would become a rallying point during the initial phase of perestroika.

Aside from that one factor, however, there was surprisingly little impetus for social mobilization in Russia (and in most of the other republics) during the early period under Gorbachev. Russians wanted greater freedom and integration with the West, but they were not inclined to organize in support of their demands. Although independent associations had begun to emerge in Russia by 1988, these were not tantamount to sustained grassroots mobilization. Even after Gorbachev introduced a far more radical agenda of liberalization and democratization in July 1988 and permitted much freer discussion of Soviet history and of long-standing social problems in the Soviet Union, these measures did not initially give rise to any broad social movement in Russia. Not until 1989—with the elections in March for the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies (resulting in a grassroots victory for Boris Yeltsin, who had been ousted in October 1987 and had to overcome the Soviet regime’s efforts to thwart his election to the Congress), the subsequent formation of the Moscow Union of Voters, and the eruption of large-scale coal miners’ strikes in July in the Kuznetski Basin (Kuzbass) and other regions—was there any appreciable manifestation of organized popular ferment in the RSFSR.17 Even then, the signals “from below” in Russia were hardly overwhelming.

17. For a large number of sources on the Soviet coal miners’ strikes of 1989, see footnote 154 in Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 224–225. Shortly after the miners’ strikes ended, Hough wrote that “very little has happened in the last year that was not the [desired] consequence of [Gorbachev’s] conscious policy.” Although Hough conceded that “the coal...
Although organized opposition to the regime increased in 1990 and early 1991, the number of active participants still represented only a minuscule percentage of the total populace. Moreover, even if the rate of participation had been higher, the bitter fragmentation among the various groups would have prevented the emergence of anything like the mass Solidarność movement that arose in Poland in 1980. Indeed, the opposition in Russia was so riven by internal discord that participation began dropping off significantly in the spring and summer of 1991. The relative lack of social mobilization in Russia was never more strikingly evident than in August 1991 when hardline officials and military commanders launched a coup d’état in Moscow. Contrary to the popular myth that vast throngs of Russians triumphed over the coup plotters, no more than 40,000–60,000 demonstrators gathered in the capital to oppose the coup—a paltry turnout in a city of roughly 10 million. (By contrast, in Prague, a city of only about 1.2 million, more than a million demonstrators took to the streets in November 1989 to face down the Communist regime during the “Velvet Revolution.”)

Steven Fish, in a study of grassroots movements in Russia in 1985–1991, attaches considerable weight to the “motley conglomeration of autonomous societal organizations [that] spearhead[ed] a popular movement for democracy,” but even Fish concedes that the deep rifts within this “movement” (to the extent that it existed as a unified entity) severely attenuated its effectiveness. In a retrospective analysis of the Gorbachev era published in 1997, Hough is largely justified in arguing that “seldom has there been a revolution or process of democratization accompanied by so little direct pressure from society.”

Connor’s article helps us understand the role that Soviet Russian society played during the Gorbachev era—a role that entailed strong support for democratization, on the one hand, but a low degree of mobilization, on the other. The article shows that the increasing complexity of Soviet society in the wake of Stalin’s death had led, by the 1970s, to a gulf between the expectations of well-educated young people and the opportunities available to them. This problem was compounded in the late 1970s by the slowdown of Soviet economic growth and the embarrassing spectacle of an increasingly ill and infirm leader, Leonid Brezhnev, who presided over the CPSU. The confluence

strikes were probably unintended,” he implied that Gorbachev may even have orchestrated the strikes as part of his long-term “plan.” See Hough, “Gorbachev’s Politics,” p. 34; emphasis added.

18. Social mobilization in Czechoslovakia had come to a halt after 1968, but when the “moment of truth” arrived in November 1989 on the heels of momentous changes elsewhere in Eastern Europe, a civil society suddenly coalesced. As the barriers to collective action rapidly faded, the number of participants in the demonstrations rose precipitously, reaching a “tipping point” for the Velvet Revolution.

19. Fish, Democracy from Scratch, p. 51.

20. Hough, Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, p. 11.
of these circumstances engendered cynicism and detracted from social morale, especially among those under thirty. Cynicism and declining morale were not tantamount to social revolt, but they did erode the public’s willingness to “accept” the Soviet order. Soviet society remained generally stable in spite of these problems, but Connor explains this by emphasizing two factors: (1) the use or threat of repression; and (2) the modest but steady improvements in living standards after Stalin’s death. He notes that both of these elements were severely disrupted by Gorbachev’s policies, which brought a fundamental easing of repression and a sharp deterioration of economic performance from mid–1990 on.

The discontent that ensued did not necessarily mean that events would spin out of control, but it did create a more volatile situation than had existed earlier. The potential for instability was augmented by two other hallmarks of the Gorbachev era: the growing salience of information technology, and the much greater exposure of Soviet society to the West. Connor shows how advances in technology—radio, television, telephones, computers, and so forth—affect Soviet society from the time of Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s through the advent of Gorbachev in the mid–1980s. Technology can be an instrument of social control (as in George Orwell’s 1984) as well as a means of social diffusion. During the Brezhnev era, a coterie of leading scientists in the Soviet Union (the latter-day Taylorists) advocated mass computerization precisely because they believed it would be an effective means of top-down control and would facilitate “rational” economic planning.21 For various reasons, however, computerization did not make much headway in the Soviet Union and was concentrated disproportionately in the military sector. The impact on Soviet society of other technological developments, including short-wave radios and international phone service, was much greater but still limited. For the most part, Soviet leaders were able to contain the social and political effects of technological advance, even though in some cases they found that a modicum of control had to be sacrificed. Had it not been for the broad political liberalization that Gorbachev introduced, the decre-

ment of control would have been of minor significance and would not have posed any risk for the Soviet regime. But with the inception of far-reaching political reforms, Soviet citizens could make much greater use of technology to operate outside state control and to circumvent the official media.

Information technology also facilitated the enormous growth of contacts with the outside world in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the Stalin era, Soviet society had been almost completely isolated from the West (aside from the unavoidable contacts that occurred during World War II). Exposure to the West increased somewhat under Khrushchev and expanded still further during the Brezhnev era, with at least a small impact on the regime’s efforts to maintain tight control. Although East-West cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges affected only a relatively narrow band of the Soviet population, the exchanges gradually “softened” Communist rule—if only minutely—by exposing up-and-coming Soviet elites to the outside world. The Soviet media routinely glossed over the wealth and freedoms of the West, but these traits were hard to miss for Soviet citizens who witnessed them firsthand. Exposure to the outside world waned during the surge of U.S.-Soviet tensions in the early 1980s, but when Gorbachev came to power he was determined to end Soviet isolation. From 1985 on, East-West contacts increased exponentially. More important than the official exchanges and high-level visits were the unprecedented opportunities for ordinary Soviet citizens to travel to the West. In a society that until recently had been kept apart from capitalist countries, the huge proliferation of links with the outside world came as a jolt to many people, who suddenly realized that everything they had been told about their own living conditions compared to the West was false.

The illusions that had long prevailed within Soviet society were shattered not only by the surge of contacts with Western countries but also by the elec-


24. An assessment of East-West cultural exchanges in the pre-Gorbachev era can be found in Yale Richmond, U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958–1986: Who Wins? (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), as well as in Richmond’s subsequent study, Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), which also covers the Gorbachev era and provides a net assessment of Cold War-era exchanges. Under Stalin, Soviet society was so tightly controlled and divorced from the West that exchanges had little salutary effect and were intended almost solely for propaganda purposes. Even then, however, some exchanges did cause at least a modicum of ferment. See V. I. Fokin, Mezhdunarodnyi kul’turnyi obmen i SSSR v 20–30-e gody (St. Petersburg: S.-Petersburgskogo Universiteta, 1999).
trifying impact of glasnost in the Soviet media. Having been assured for decades that the Soviet Union was the “vanguard of world progress,” many Soviet citizens were dismayed to find that their country actually lagged far behind the “civilized” countries. They also were taken aback by the flood of revelations about Soviet history. Although most people had been aware of unsavory events in the Soviet Union’s past, they had not fully grasped the dimensions of the Stalinist crimes. Equally unnerving was the sudden outpouring of information about social problems in the Soviet Union—including alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, declining health indices, homelessness, spiritual malaise, crime, poverty, and the disaffection of young people—and about natural disasters and accidents. The stream of disclosures about the Soviet past and about the deficiencies of Soviet society did not spark mass unrest, but it did have the cumulative impact of delegitimizing the Soviet regime in the eyes of many Russians.

This development, combined with the economic hardships that waxed acute by 1990, mitigated the Russian public’s commitment not only to the Soviet regime, but also to the USSR itself. The rebuff of the hardline coup attempt in August 1991 merely accentuated the society’s indifference to the survival of the Soviet state. As noted earlier, no mass protests—or even minor protests—occurred in Russia when the Baltic states, Moldova, and Georgia gained independence in the immediate aftermath of the failed coup. Nor were there any protests when Russians suddenly learned in December 1991 that the Soviet Union was going to be dissolved at the end of the year. On the contrary, Russian society reacted to the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords with evident relief. Gorbachev had desperately wanted to preserve the Soviet Union, but his effort to do so was greatly complicated by the public mood in Russia during the final few months of 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed inconceivable before Gorbachev came to power, but one of the consequences of his policies—obviously an unintended consequence—was the growing public perception in Russia that the demise of the Soviet state was inevitable and therefore not worth resisting. Although Russians were not inclined to revolt en masse against Soviet rule, the important thing by the end
of 1991 was that all the major social groups in Russia no longer had a stake in the future existence of the USSR.

**Ethnic and Nationalist Pressures**

The muted response of the Russian public to the dissolution of the Soviet Union also is highlighted in the second article in this issue, by Astrid Tuminez. Her article focuses on the ethnic dimension of the Soviet collapse, a topic that has been discussed and debated at great length by scholars both inside and outside the former USSR. Tuminez begins by considering whether the Soviet Union should be regarded as an “empire,” a term that until the 1980s was rarely applied to the USSR. The reason that very few analysts used the term is not that the Soviet Union bore scant resemblance to large, contiguous empires from the past (the Soviet state did in fact share many of the features of earlier empires), but that the term itself acquired a pejorative sense in the twentieth century, especially after World War II. In the nine-

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teenth century the great powers in Europe unabashedly sought colonial empires and adopted imperialist policies, but the connotation of “empire” and “imperialist” changed drastically in the following century, in part because of the rhetorical changes introduced by Vladimir Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders, who claimed to be pursuing an “anti-imperialist” line. The leftward political shift in Europe at the end of World War II led to a further discrediting of the term “empire.” By and large, European states no longer wanted to be seen as “imperialist.” Although most of them initially were wary of decolonization (and even tried to resist it, as in Indochina and Algeria), they ultimately were willing to grant independence to dozens of former colonies after the war. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the negative connotation of the term “empire” proved useful to radical left-wing critics of American foreign policy, who denounced the war in Vietnam as an “imperialist” venture and accused the United States of seeking to build a global empire. These accusations ebbed after the U.S. involvement in Vietnam ended, but the stigma associated with the term “empire” persisted.

In the late 1980s, nationalist groups in the non-Russian republics of the USSR increasingly referred to the Soviet Union as an “empire.” Their use of an anti-imperialist discourse was intended to legitimize their own claims to independence and to discredit the Soviet state. By the time the Soviet Union ended, the term also had gained favor among Russians, who argued that Russia, too, had been exploited by the Communist regime. In the scholarly world as well, characterizations of the Soviet Union as an “empire” suddenly became commonplace. To the extent that “empires in the modern world,” as Ian Lustick has pointed out, “are expected to break apart,” this new fashion was perfectly understandable. Before December 1991 some scholars had still been leery of describing the Soviet Union as an “empire,” lest they imply that the state would definitely come unraveled, but those concerns became obsolete once the USSR was formally dissolved.

32. As late as 1991 David Laitin wrote that the term “empire”—which was the title of a book he was reviewing—“obscures far more than it reveals. . . .” [T]he problem with calling the Soviet Union an
Tuminez finds that the concept of empire is a useful one for understanding the Soviet Union, but even those who are uncomfortable with the term can agree that comparisons with large, contiguous empires from the past can shed useful light on the Soviet case—specifically on the question of whether and how such entities can be held together. The common assumption, as Lustick noted, is that empires always break apart, but the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Tsarist Russian cases suggest that contiguous multiethnic empires can in fact be preserved for a long while. The Ottoman and Habsburg empires held together for centuries, even after they began to grow feeble. Ultimately it took a major war to put an end to them. The Romanov empire likewise remained in place for more than three hundred years—from 1613 to 1917—until the upheavals of World War I led to the overthrow of the Tsar and gave the Bolsheviks an opportunity to seize power. (The new Bolshevik regime temporarily relinquished chunks of territory along the western rim of the former empire, but Stalin eventually regained almost all of it, plus some lands that the Tsars had not occupied.)

These earlier empires were kept together by a number of factors that blended coercion and inducements (in varying proportions over time), but the most crucial factor was the demonstrated willingness of the rulers to use force to subdue anyone who would endanger their authority. By the same token, empire today is that by analogy with Austria-Hungary, it allows one to assume its ultimate decomposition. I do not wish to presuppose the collapse of the Soviet Union. I want to analyze those factors that can enhance the integrity of the Union.” See David D. Laitin, “Review Article: The National Uprisings in the Soviet Union,” World Politics, Vol. 44, No. 1 (October 1991), pp. 139–177; quoted from 140–141.


34. This bears on one of the main points in Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems,” Annual Review of Political Science, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 323–343. Kalyvas rightly stresses the importance of distinguishing between the decay and the breakdown of Communist systems.
ken, the consolidation of the enlarged Soviet state after World War II was made possible by Stalin’s readiness to employ unstinting violence to crush armed separatist movements in the newly acquired regions of western Ukraine, western Belarus, and the Baltic states. The Soviet government’s use of unbridled force against Ukrainian and Baltic insurgents in the 1940s and early 1950s deterred further armed rebellions against Soviet rule. Until the late 1980s no one in the Soviet Union (or the West) had reason to doubt that the Soviet regime would act as forcefully as necessary to preserve the integrity of the Soviet state. The importance of this perception was underscored—in a different context—by Reinhard Bendix’s classic study of monarchical systems in Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Japan. Bendix averred that the monarchs’ hold on power ultimately was dependent on the widespread belief that “those who rule are able, and will not hesitate, to use force if that is needed to assert their will.” Soviet leaders from Stalin through Konstantin Chernenko (Gorbachev’s immediate predecessor) amply fulfilled this criterion, but the growing—and well-founded—sense in the late 1980s and early 1990s that Gorbachev would not resort to violence on a consistent basis and in sufficient measure proved to be the undoing of the USSR.

35. Countless declassified materials about the Soviet campaigns against underground nationalist movements in these republics are available in the archives of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine (the central archives in Kyiv and the regional archive in Lviv). In Moscow the bulk of documents about this topic in the Presidential Archive and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (in Fond R–9478, “Glavnoe upravlenie po bor’be s banditizmom MVD SSSR, 1938–1950 gg.”) are still classified, but many important items have been released since 1992. Photocopies of many thousands of pages of relevant documentation are available at the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, Harvard University.

36. The likelihood that ethnic groups in the USSR would be deterred from challenging Soviet authority, or would be harshly suppressed if they did challenge it, was stressed in Alexander J. Motyl, Will the Non-Russians Rebel? State, Ethnicity, and Stability in the USSR (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).


38. Mark Beissinger acknowledges in Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State that “the failure of the Soviet regime to defend itself through severe force was partially a matter of Gorbachev’s personal commitment to nonviolence” and the way “Gorbachev altered the long-standing regime of repression characteristic of the Brezhnev era” (pp. 328). But Beissinger claims that “this lack of commitment to the use of severe violence as a tool for reimposing order” was characteristic of almost all high-level officials in the late 1980s and early 1990s: “[i]t was not only Gorbachev but the vast majority of his conservative critics as well who eschewed a Tiananmen-style crackdown” (pp. 328–329). This argument is problematic. It is certainly true that Gorbachev altered the parameters for the use of repression and that this in turn changed the expectations of officials and activists about the prospect of a harsh crackdown. But it is also true that those parameters could have been altered again. No doubt, Abraham Lincoln did not want to use force against the South when he was elected president of the United States in November 1860, but when he was faced with the secession of South Carolina and other Confederate states, he went to war to undo it. If high-level Soviet officials like Valentin Varennikov and Vladimir Kryuchkov had been authorized by Gorbachev to use any means necessary to counter dire threats to the survival of the USSR, they undoubtedly would have been willing to adopt draconian measures—measures that most officials ordinarily would not have countenanced. But unless the top leader—Gorbachev—went along with that option (no matter how
Comparisons with Other Communist Ethnofederal European States

Comparisons are useful not only with earlier empires, but also with two multi-ethnic European states that no longer exist—Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. These two states, like the Soviet Union, were created at the end of World War I and were dissolved in the early 1990s. Both of them were under Communist rule for several decades (though the Communist regimes there, unlike in the Soviet Union, did not come to power until the 1940s). Most analysts who have sought to ascertain similarities and differences between these cases have emphasized what they see as the inherent fragility of ethnofederalism in Communist states.39 In their view, the ethnic identity of nationalities in the Soviet Union was greatly strengthened over time by the Bolsheviks' decision to set up a federation that was “national in form but socialist in content.” According to this argument, the establishment of ethnically based republics, and the inclusion of ethnic background as the “fifth point” in passports (which had to be carried at all times), created an immutable ethnic identity for every citizen and fostered a sense of national community among the members of the titular ethnic group in each non-Russian republic.40


Scholars who attribute the breakup of the Soviet Union to the “subversive” nature of ethnofederal institutions have touched on an important part of the story, but their analyses also have important shortcomings. Their characterizations are too sweeping, and the dynamic they posit for the Soviet Union—whether valid or not—does not seem especially relevant to either Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia. Czechoslovakia during most of its existence was not a federalized state even in cosmetic terms. Not until late 1968 were federal state institutions set up, and these never acquired any meaningful role during the Communist era. Control of most functions remained centralized in Prague, and the proposal advanced by reformers in the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC) during the 1968 Prague Spring to federalize the KSC was derailed by the Soviet invasion. The notion that ethnofederal institutions were instrumental in the formation and strengthening of national identity is clearly inapplicable to Slovak nationalism. Despite the lack of such institutions in pre–World War II Czechoslovakia, Slovak national identity (which had been very weak when Czechoslovakia was formed in 1918) emerged and grew with remarkable celerity in the 1920s and 1930s. Slovak nationalist sentiment was never stronger than during the six years of a nominally independent Slovak state from 1939 to 1945—a period that was remembered with great pride by many Slovaks long after they had been forced back into a unified Czechoslovak state at the end of the war. Slovak nationalism was cer-
tainly stronger at that point than it was when the Czechoslovak Communist regime collapsed in late 1989. Even though ethnofederal institutions had been nominally in place in Czechoslovakia for two decades by 1989, the Slovaks did not push immediately for an independent state when the opportunity arose after the Velvet Revolution. Instead, they initially sought to work out an accommodation with the Czechs—an accommodation that ultimately proved elusive. Contrary to the “subversive institutions” thesis, the Czechoslovak state did not split apart when it was under, or emerging from, Communist rule. The breakup of Czechoslovakia was precipitated by the political maneuvering of democratically elected leaders in Prague and Bratislava in 1990–1992, not by Communist-era institutions.44 The processes of ethnic-identity formation and state dissolution in Czechoslovakia were thus fundamentally different from those in the Soviet Union.

In Yugoslavia, too, policies and institutions diverged markedly from the practices in the Soviet Union. Long before ethnofederal institutions and Communist rule existed in Yugoslavia, ethnic identities had emerged and intensified, as was demonstrated by the murderous conflicts during World War II. The fervor of national identities actually seemed to diminish, not increase, during much of the Communist era.45 Yugoslav citizens did not have to list their ethnicity on their passports, and when they were given the option of putting “Yugoslav” as their ethnic background on census questionnaires and other official documents, a large (and growing) number did choose it. The federal system that Josip Broz Tito established soon after he took power at the end of World War II was heavily centralized for many years (like the Soviet system), but in the 1960s the Yugoslav League of Communists was federalized, and in 1974 Tito consented to a decentralized state structure that gave extensive latitude to the country’s six republics and two autonomous republics—far more latitude than the Soviet republics ever en-

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joyed. In other respects as well, the arrangements that Tito bequeathed to his successors when he died in 1980 were markedly different from the much more centralized system in the Soviet Union. Even if one wants to focus solely on structure at the expense of agency—and to leave out what Daniel Bell once described as “the variabilities of accident, folly, and simple human cantankerousness”—the structural differences among these three cases provide ample grounds for skepticism about the deterministic accounts that have appeared.

Even in the case of the Soviet Union, the notion of “subversive institutions” is too one-dimensional in its depiction of the rise of ethnic assertiveness. Although the federal structure of the USSR may have institutionalized ethnicity in some regions and thereby reinforced (or even created) ethnic identities among certain segments of the population, this did not automatically lead to separatism when the opportunities for ethnic-related political action suddenly increased in the late 1980s. The federal structure arguably had its greatest impact on ethnic identity formation in Central Asia (where national identities were non-existent before the Soviet era), but no secessionist movements emerged in the region. On the contrary, sentiment in favor of preserving the Soviet Union was much stronger in Central Asia than anywhere else, including Russia.

In other republics of the USSR the impact of institutions on ethnicity was at least partly offset by policies adopted in the late 1950s to assimilate ethnic minorities. The assimilationist measures made greater headway than is often realized, even though they were in place for only a short period of time (less than thirty years). The extent of assimilation varied among republics and regions, as well as among the minority groups (for example, those who lived outside their titular homelands or lacked a titular homeland were partic-
ularly vulnerable to assimilation, as were those who lived in large urban areas), but the results of the 1959, 1979, and 1989 censuses, as well as other demographic evidence presented by Barbara Anderson and Brian Silver, suggest that assimilation in many areas was indeed occurring.\textsuperscript{52} Whether measured by the increasing number of non-Russians who re-identified themselves as “Russian,” the expanding number who regarded Russian as their “native language,” the declining number who knew their titular language, the growing rate of intermarriage, or some other commonly used indicator, a gradual trend toward assimilation was certainly evident from the late 1950s through the mid–1980s. Indeed, despite the impact of ethnofederal institutions and passport policies, there is abundant evidence that many members of non-Russian ethnic groups belonged to those groups in name only. They did not regard their ethnic identity as important and shared few if any of the group’s cultural and linguistic characteristics. They also were far more likely to marry outside their group.\textsuperscript{53} During the Soviet period, the children from mixed marriages overwhelmingly identified themselves as Russian. This two-generation assimilation process was beginning to have a significant demographic impact by the mid–1980s—at the very moment that Gorbachev reversed it. Had the Soviet Union remained under the direction of Brezhnevite leaders, the trend toward assimilation would likely have continued.

Although Soviet policies vis-à-vis nationalities certainly were contradictory—some were conducive to the deepening of ethnic identity, whereas others encouraged assimilation—the overall balance may ultimately have favored assimilation. The notion that Soviet policies and institutions uniformly led to an immense strengthening of ethnic identity in the pre-Gorbachev era, and that this in turn was bound to spawn separatist movements once the “structure of political opportunities” expanded in the late 1980s, is too simplistic.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{54} The notion of a political opportunity structure, used by Bunce and other proponents of the ethnofederal institutionalist thesis, comes from the sociological and political science literature on protest movements and rebellion. See, for example, Sidney Tarrow, “Aiming at a Moving Target”: Social Science and the Recent Rebellions in Eastern Europe,” \textit{PS: Political Science & Politics}, Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 1991), pp. 12–20. Tarrow writes that “mass outbreaks of collective action are best understood
Comparisons with Existing Multiethnic States

In addition to comparing the Soviet Union with empires and states that no longer exist, it is essential to draw comparisons with large, multiethnic countries that are still around. One obvious example is India, a country with a huge, ethnically diverse, and rapidly growing population (projected to be even larger than China’s by the year 2020), an ethnofederal political structure, nationalist political parties, egregious disparities of wealth, widespread poverty, long-standing insurgencies (especially in Kashmir and Punjab), periodic instances of extreme ethnic and religious intolerance and violence, and a vast number of languages. Despite all these fissiparous elements, India has remained intact and reasonably democratic since gaining independence in 1947. Even the authoritarian policies introduced by Indira Gandhi in 1975 did not outlast her rule.

Another country that is well worth comparing with the Soviet Union is Indonesia, which became independent in 1949. Indonesia, unlike India, was under authoritarian rule from the late 1950s through the late 1990s (with “Guided Democracy” under Sukarno and the “New Order” under Suharto) and is therefore more directly analogous to the Communist system in the Soviet Union. Indonesia shares many of the features that are often cited as having contributed to (or “caused”) the breakup of the Soviet Union: a vast population (the world’s fourth largest); an immense and sprawling territory consisting of ethnically concentrated regions; a highly centralized government (until 2001, when a policy of decentralization was implemented); a multitude of languages (more than 330); a multitude of distinct ethnic groups with strong ethnic identities; and localized separatist insurgencies. Under international pressure, Indonesia agreed in 1999 to end its occupation of East Timor (a territory it invaded in 1975 and annexed the following year), but that in no way adumbrated the dissolution of Indonesia itself. On the contrary, despite the onerous impact of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and the continued separatist fighting in Aceh and Irian Jaya, Indonesia has remained intact and has begun moving toward a more democratic system in the wake of Suharto’s resignation in 1998.

One other obvious candidate for comparison with the Soviet Union is the post-Soviet Russian Federation. Anyone who wants to understand the disinte-
gration of the Soviet Union must explain why the collapse did not continue in Russia. Although the percentage of Russians in the Russian Federation is much higher than in the Soviet Union (81 percent versus 52 percent), Russia is an ethnically heterogeneous country with an ethnofederal configuration left over from the Communist era. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, many Western scholars predicted that Russia, too, was likely to break apart. Those predictions largely disappeared after Yeltsin secured passage of a new constitution in December 1993 and launched a brutal campaign in Chechnya a year later, but it is still interesting to consider why Russia has been able to stay intact in the face of great political and economic upheavals. Many explanations have been offered of this phenomenon, but the factors that seem most important are fivefold: (1) the high percentage of Russians in many of the ethnofederal regions; (2) the historical, geographic, economic, and demographic circumstances that militate against attempts at secession; (3) Yeltsin’s success in forging compacts with potentially troublesome regions (all except Chechnya); (4) the Russian government’s demonstrated willingness to use force on a massive scale to put down separatist challenges; and (5) the lack of a dominant component in the Russian Federation that could seek to


57. Of the eighty-nine entities that make up the Russian Federation, thirty-two are ethnonational territories (twenty-one republics, one autonomous oblast, and ten autonomous regions) and fifty-seven are geographic-administrative units. Only in Chuvashiya, Tuva, and the North Caucasus republics do the titular nationalities constitute a majority. Russians account for a majority of the population in the Buryat, Karelian, Komi, Mordovian, Sakha, and Udmurt republics and for a plurality in Bashkortostan and Mari El. Large minorities of Russians and Russified Ukrainians live in the Tatar, Kalmyk, and Kabardino-Balkar republics. Overall, Russians account for 42 percent of the population in the ethnonational republics. See Chauncy D. Harris, “A Geographic Analysis of Non-Russian Minorities in Russia and Its Ethnic Homelands,” *Post-Soviet Geography*, Vol. 34, No. 9 (November 1993), pp. 543–597.

58. Of the eighty-nine entities in Russia, only two (Tatarstan and Tuva) have any history as independent states, and that was in the distant past. Of the approximately 19 percent of Russian Federation citizens who are not ethnic Russians, roughly half live in titular regions well inside the country’s boundaries, surrounded by other regions and lacking any access to the sea. Most of the other non-Russians are from diaspora groups, particularly Ukrainians, Volga Germans, Kazakhs, Armenians, and Belarusians, and are scattered across the country. Although a few ethnonational regions (notably Tatarstan and Sakha) have rich deposits of natural resources, most of the regions in Russia still depend heavily on transfers from the central government.

59. Although the Russian army’s performance during the first war in Chechnya was decidedly lackluster, the sheer brutality and destructiveness of the campaign served as a lesson to other regional governments and populations of the potential costs of attempts at secession. The army’s more impressive showing during the initial phase of the second Chechen war reinforced that lesson, and the protracted stalemate that ensued did nothing to diminish it. No other regional government or regional population would want to end up in the appalling situation that now prevails in Chechnya.
eclipse the central government in the way that Yeltsin gained ascendance over the Soviet regime from his base in Russia in 1991.

It is common nowadays to argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable—whether because of a state structure and nationality policies that bred ethnic separatism, the imperial nature of Soviet Communist rule, the puissance of ethnonationalist movements, the inability of Marxist-Leninist regimes to reform themselves, the inherent rigidity of closed one-party systems, or some other factor—but the survival of India, Indonesia, post-Soviet Russia, and numerous other multiethnic states (some democratic, some authoritarian) suggests, all the more, that claims of inevitability are too facile. Relatively small alterations in circumstances, events, or policy choices in the Soviet Union might have led to a different outcome.

The Leeway for Ethnic Unrest and Defiance

The notion that ethnic pressures were bound to become unmanageable in the Soviet Union is especially problematic in light of new evidence from the former Soviet archives. Although much of the relevant documentation is still inaccessible, enough material has emerged to show that mass ethnic disturbances occurred with surprising frequency throughout the Soviet era. By responding promptly and consistently with resolute force, the authorities were able to suppress these disturbances without any long-term impact on the

60. The Harvard Project on Cold War Studies has been collecting and cataloging many thousands of pages of declassified documents on ethnic protests and unrest in the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1991. These materials come not only from the Russian archives but from repositories in Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. Some other important declassified documents have been published in recent years; see, for example, “О массовых беспорядках с 1957 года,” a highly classified memorandum compiled by Soviet KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov at Gorbachev’s request in 1987, published in Istochnik (Moscow), No. 6 (1995), pp. 146–153. Unfortunately, the events and data listed by Chebrikov are far from complete, especially for the Brezhnev years. The journal Istochnik also has featured valuable documentation pertaining to the ethnic and political turmoil in Soviet Georgia in March 1956 and the workers’ rebellion in the southern Russian city Novocherkassk in June 1962. For a recent monograph covering ethnic as well as other mass disturbances in the years after Stalin’s death, based on extensive documentation from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and other repositories in Moscow, see V. A. Kozlov, Massovye besporyadki v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve (1953-nachalo 1980-kh gg.) (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1999). Kozlov is the deputy director of GARF and therefore (in a practice all too typical of the Russian archives) has enjoyed privileged access to the collections at GARF as well as documents at the Russian Presidential Archive, which has never been opened to ordinary researchers. Kozlov presents a wealth of important information and many shrewd insights, but his book, though often fascinating, is marred by a number of weaknesses. He provides no systematic discussion of his sources (notably Fond 8131 at GARF, consisting of materials gathered by the Soviet Main Procurator’s department for oversight of investigations by the State Security apparatus—a fond that is only partly accessible to researchers less privileged than Kozlov), and he often displays a pronounced aversion to ordinary Soviet citizens who dared to challenge Soviet authority by engaging in “mass disturbances” (a term Kozlov uses too imprecisely). Moreover, despite the title of the book, Kozlov focuses almost exclusively on the Khrushchev era, devoting only one very brief chapter (amounting to less than 2 percent of the total book) to mass unrest during the Brezhnev years.
country’s stability. In the absence of Gorbachev’s decision to proceed with far-reaching political liberalization, it is inconceivable that fissiparous ethnic tensions would have emerged on the scale they did in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Soviet Union had coped with mass ethnic violence before, and it could have done so again.\textsuperscript{61}

Ethnic unrest during the Gorbachev era could have been quelled at any number of points through the consistent application of force. The first large-scale collective protests after 1985 occurred in Kazakhstan in late 1986, when thousands of Kazakh students and workers staged violent demonstrations condemning Gorbachev’s decision to replace the long time Kazakh Communist Party first secretary, Dinmukhamed Kunaev, with an ethnic Russian, Gennadii Kolbin.\textsuperscript{62} Clashes between the demonstrators and security forces resulted in hundreds of injuries and three deaths, and the police arrested more than 2,000 people (though the large majority were quickly released) and expelled nearly three hundred students from the university (though most of them were soon permitted to return). But instead of completing a full-scale crackdown and imposing martial law, Gorbachev wavered and indirectly legitimized the protesters’ actions by hastily bringing in a native Kazakh to serve alongside Kolbin as the “second secretary.” This concession set a precedent that was bound to embolden activists elsewhere who were thinking of challenging the central authorities.

Gorbachev’s unwillingness to resort to mass repression became far more evident in July 1987 when a group of 120 Crimean Tatar activists, who had been trying unsuccessfully to meet with the Soviet leader, held an impromptu demonstration in Red Square to demand that Crimean Tatars be allowed to

\textsuperscript{61} On pp. 54–55 of Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State, Mark Beissinger implies that ethnic conflicts in the Soviet Union were intensifying in the 1970s and early 1980s compared to previous decades, but elsewhere in the book (e.g., on pp. 71–73) he correctly notes that in fact ethnic conflicts during the Brezhnev era were less numerous than during the Khrushchev years. Repression, when consistently used, was a powerful means of deterring—or, if necessary, quelling—ethnic unrest.

return to their traditional homeland, from which they had been deported en masse by Stalin during World War II. In the past, protests by even a few Crimean Tatars had been immediately and harshly broken up, preventing any spread or repetition of the unrest. But Gorbachev, far from ordering the demonstration to be crushed, sent high-level emissaries to negotiate with the activists, and he set up a Politburo commission to review their demands. After the negotiations dragged on for two weeks without results, hundreds of Crimean Tatars staged another demonstration in Red Square, demanding to see Gorbachev and to be given the right to return to Crimea. When the new protest began on 23 July, the Soviet Politburo met to consider forceful "measures to suppress the Crimean Tatars' demonstration," but Gorbachev decided against a crackdown, hoping that the protests would peter out within a day or two. After a week went by and the Crimean Tatars were still ensconced in Red Square—an unprecedented show of defiance in the heart of Soviet power—the police finally moved in and expelled the demonstrators from Moscow. Even so, many of the activists continued to organize large protests outside the capital to press their demands. Under Brezhnev the prospect of severe repression against Crimean Tatars had been a formidable deterrent and had essentially eliminated the Tatars' hopes of ever being able to return to Crimea. Gorbachev's reluctance to dislodge the protesters in July 1987, and his offers of major concessions, revived the Crimean Tatar movement and transformed it into a conspicuous example of resistance—an example that other Soviet ethnic groups could seek to emulate.

The growing evidence of Gorbachev's inconsistency in the use of force soon spurred a number of other serious challenges and clashes. In late 1987 and early 1988 activists in Armenia organized a mass petition drive calling for the return of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), a region within neighboring Azerbaijan populated mainly by ethnic Armenians. The petition, signed by hundreds of thousands of Armenians, was the initial stage of what evolved into a full-scale armed conflict between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet republics. Newly released documents make clear that

63. Reshat Dzhemilev, Kраткий анализ событий происшедших в Москве в июне-июле 1987 г., связанных с борьбой крымских татар за возвращение на родину своих предков в Крым и восстановление их государственности (Simferopol: n.p., 1997). Further information about the Crimean Tatar movement during the Gorbachev era, along with many valuable documents, can be found in M. I. Guboglo and S. M. Chervonnaya, Krymskotatarskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie, 4 vols. (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniyu mezhnatsional'nykh otношений, Institut etnologii i antropologii, 1992–1997), esp. Vol. 1 ("Istoriya, problemy, perspektivy") and Vol. 2 ("Dokumenty, materialy, khronika").


65. For background on this dispute, see Erik Melander, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited: Was the War Inevitable?" Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 48–75.
Gorbachev had no intention of transferring Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia (such a step, he warned at a Politburo meeting in June 1988, would "provoke genocide"), but he was unwilling to take a decisive stance against the Armenian protesters.66 The Soviet authorities did send security forces to the region in February 1988 after Azeris in Sumgait (a town near the Azerbaijani capital, Baku) carried out grisly attacks against ethnic Armenians; but the troops were given no clear-cut mission. If Soviet leaders had clamped down harshly on the Armenian activists when the petition drive and demonstrations began, they undoubtedly could have forestalled the subsequent violence. Some members of the Soviet Politburo, notably the head of the state security (KGB) organs, Viktor Chebrikov, did advocate a vigorous crackdown from the very start, but Gorbachev and other officials wanted to rely mainly on "political means" and to eschew the sustained use of force for as long as possible.67 At a Politburo meeting in early March 1988 Gorbachev acknowledged that "it is impossible to remain indifferent when you see what is going on there [in Sumgait]." He said he could "understand the concerns of Comrade Chebrikov and others," but he insisted that the use of large-scale violence would be unacceptable: "Yes, the soldiers we sent to Sumgait were unarmed. But what would we have gained if they had been armed with sub-machine guns? What would have happened then in view of these atrocities?"68 At Gorbachev’s behest the Politburo decided to rely on the Soviet parliament to indicate that Nagorno-Karabakh would have to remain part of Azerbaijan—an action that conveyed no clear message and failed to stem the unrest.

When enmity between the Azeris and Armenians deepened and violence escalated in the summer of 1988, it appeared that Gorbachev would have to take a more forceful stance. Both parties to the dispute expected that an all-out crackdown was imminent, but no such crackdown occurred. As a result, activists in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh soon stepped up their efforts to reclaim the NKAO, sparking reprisals by Azeris. Although troops from the Soviet Internal Affairs Ministry were again deployed to the region, they were not authorized to clamp down as ruthlessly as necessary to put an end to the conflict. Despite numerous outbreaks of gruesome interethnic clashes, Gorbachev continued to hesitate, allowing the situation to spin out of control. Order returned for a brief while after an earthquake devastated Armenia in December 1988, giving Gorbachev an opportunity to move against

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68. Ibid.
some of the leaders of the Nagorno-Karabakh movement. But in the spring of 1989 he released all of them, and the conflict with Azerbaijan flared up again. By the time Soviet troops were sent to confront Azerbaijani nationalists in January 1990 and Armenian nationalists in the spring of 1991, the situation had deteriorated too far to be defused other than through the use of unrelenting violence—an option that Gorbachev and many of those around him were disinclined to pursue.

In other cases as well—the Baltic states, Moldova, and the Ferghana Valley—Gorbachev was unwilling to use violent repression consistently and on a scale necessary to quell protests and deter further unrest. His reluctance to crack down did not stem from a lack of awareness of the burgeoning instability in the country, but from a conviction that "political solutions" were the only viable way to cope with the situation. At a CPSU Politburo meeting in mid-October 1988, he assured his colleagues that non-violent measures would suffice:

Looking around the country, we find many problems not only in Armenia and not only in the NKAO. Processes are also under way in the Baltic republics, in Kirgiziya and Kazakhstan, in Moldova and Ukraine. Important questions are arising everywhere. . . . But we should not oversimplify this. These processes are natural in conditions of democracy and glasnost. . . . I have to say that the information in the Central Committee is one-sided and unconstructive. Often they simply want to scare us. They think that the Politburo consists of blind fools. Some are already crying “To arms!” And on the basis of disinformation they believe that everything, so to speak, is collapsing. There is no ground for panic or for taking up arms. Such sentiments do not correspond to reality.69

Even on the rare occasions when the Soviet regime did use substantial force in response to ethnic challenges, the lack of consistency proved debilitating.70 After widespread controversy ensued about a deadly crackdown in Georgia in April 1989, Gorbachev disavowed all responsibility for it and condemned the bloodshed. In the process he effectively deprived himself of the full latitude he needed to use force in the future, and he antagonized local army commanders, who felt they had been unfairly blamed for an ill-conceived mission. Gorbachev’s repudiation of the violence also changed the expectations of potential protesters about the likelihood of encountering repression, giving them greater confidence that defiance would go unpunished. The deterrent effect of the crackdown was thus dissipated. Although Gorbachev ordered a

70. In addition to Tuminez’s article, see the articles in the first special issue on "The Collapse of the Soviet Union," Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2003).
large-scale military intervention in Azerbaijan in January 1990 (and did not subsequently disavow it), he was unwilling after that to use repression consistently enough to hold the country together. A crackdown in the Baltic republics in early 1991 was much more limited and halfhearted than many of his advisers had wanted.

Gorbachev’s disinclination to use force with ruthless consistency was a monumental change for a country that had lived under repressive tyranny for seven decades, but it was not necessarily compatible with his desire to preserve the Soviet Union. In *Anatomy of Revolution*, Crane Brinton remarked that when an authoritarian regime began to liberalize and was then faced with a surge of opposition, a diffident response was likely to prove disastrous. According to Brinton, if the authorities were “more than half ashamed to use force, and therefore used it badly, so that on the whole those on whom force was inflicted were stimulated rather than repressed,” the whole regime might be destabilized. In a number of Soviet republics the limited use of force ended up causing a backlash, spurring more people to support and take part in the main nationalist movements. By contrast, in the one case when overwhelming force was used—in Azerbaijan in January 1990—it proved highly effective. The inconsistency of the use of force elsewhere tended to embolden the opposition and to undercut the regime’s own “internal consensus” about the prospects for restoring order.

The Challenges from Russia and Ukraine

Gorbachev’s unwillingness to rely consistently on violence to keep the Soviet Union from unraveling might not have been a fatal problem if the challenges to central authority had been limited to outlying areas such as the Baltic states, Moldova, and the Caucasus republics. The loss (de facto or otherwise) of those republics would not have been tantamount to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Far more serious, however, were the challenges posed by Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, Yeltsin exploited the union-republic configuration of the USSR to try to eclipse the Soviet regime and establish Russia as the center of authority. In the context of the far-reaching liberalization introduced by Gorbachev, the federal structure of the Soviet Union proved inimical to the Soviet regime insofar as it enabled the preponderant “ethnic” ac-

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tor (Russia) to wage a battle against the central government. In the pre-Gorbachev era no such challenge would have been possible, but in 1990–1991 the situation was remarkably fluid, and Russia’s bid for ascendance posed a mortal danger to the Soviet regime. The greatly disproportionate size and importance of Russia in the Soviet state prevented Gorbachev from easily fencing off this challenge. If the union-republics had been of roughly equal size and strength, Gorbachev might have been able to play them off against one another. But the dominance of Russia in the Soviet federation enabled Yeltsin to confront the Soviet government directly.

The danger that Russia posed, however, was to the Soviet regime, not to the Soviet state per se. The ascendance of Russia need not have meant the dissolution of the USSR. Yeltsin was willing to support independence for the Baltic republics and perhaps Georgia and Moldova, but, by all indications, he was hoping to preserve the rest of the union, especially the link with Ukraine and Belarus. The disintegration of the Soviet Union ultimately was driven mainly by Ukraine’s bid for independence in the aftermath of the aborted August 1991 coup. Yeltsin initially did not realize how much the coup had changed the prevailing sentiment in Ukraine, and he sought to work out new arrangements for a Slavic union (plus Central Asia). But when a popular referendum in Ukraine on 1 December 1991 resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence, Yeltsin had to change course and abandon further attempts to preserve the union. The result was the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords.

In that sense, Ukraine was the most important “ethnic” contributor to the breakup of the Soviet Union—an outcome that was tinged with irony. During most of the Gorbachev era, proponents of separatism in Ukraine had made little headway, especially in the central and eastern provinces of the republic. Aside from unrest among coal miners in the Donets’k Basin and Chervonohrad, Ukraine had seemed a veritable island of stability in a sea of turmoil. When the Soviet government held a countrywide referendum in March 1991, nearly three-quarters of voters in Ukraine cast ballots in favor of “preserving the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation.” But in the wake of the failed coup, the “political opportunity structure” in Ukraine expanded so much that the drive for independence became unstoppable. The collapse of central authority after the August 1991 crisis ensured that even a leader who was far more resolute than Gorbachev would not have been able to rely on force to keep Ukraine in the fold.

The External Context: The Role of the West

The third article in this issue, by Celeste Wallander, shifts the focus to the external environment of the Soviet collapse. Her article deals with one of the most controversial aspects of the Gorbachev era—namely, the role of the West. Western countries influenced the Soviet Union in numerous ways, both directly and indirectly, and it is not always easy to tell whether a particular form of influence played a role in the events of 1985–1991. Wallander provides a broad look at Western policy vis-à-vis the USSR, including the question that has often (perhaps too often) been of greatest interest to Western analysts and policymakers: Did deliberate pressure from the West force the Soviet Union to carry out sweeping changes and, eventually, to collapse? Observers in both Russia and the West have provided radically different answers to this question. In the West some analysts, including Peter Schweizer in his book *Victory*, have argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the direct result of pressure exerted by the Reagan administration as it pursued a comprehensive strategy to undermine Soviet rule. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Raymond Garthoff’s book *The Great Transition*, which argues that Western pressure, far from contributing to the Soviet collapse, actually prolonged both the Cold War and the existence of the Soviet regime.

A similar dichotomy is evident in Russia, where a number of former hardline officials and military officers, including Vladimir Kryuchkov and Valentin Varennikov (both of whom were centrally involved in the August 1991 coup attempt), insist that the United States subverted and destroyed the Soviet Union. Kryuchkov and Varennikov have accused Gorbachev of treason, and Kryuchkov has alleged that one of Gorbachev’s top aides, Aleksandr Yakovlev, was secretly working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1980s and early 1990s. By contrast, some other former Soviet officials, notably Gorbachev himself, have strongly denied that Western pressure played any role in Moscow’s decisions to seek far-reaching arms-control treaties, to curb military spending, and to scale back Soviet foreign policy.

commitments. When Gorbachev was still in office, he repeatedly condemned “allegations by conservative forces [in the USSR] that perestroika was imposed on us by the West.”78 In the years since 1991 he has continued to argue that Western pressure did not spur his domestic program or his “new thinking” in foreign policy.79 Gorbachev concurs with Garthoff’s assertion that the Reagan administration’s pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative—a program announced with great fanfare in March 1983 to develop technologies for defense against long-range ballistic missiles—merely delayed, rather than expedited, reforms in the Soviet Union.

The juxtaposition of these highly contradictory views is useful in establishing some of the parameters of the debate, but the issue is more complex than this clash of views implies. It is certainly true, as Schweizer indicates, that the Reagan administration made a concerted effort to apply pressure on the Soviet Union,80 but it is also true that similar efforts were made in earlier decades, notably by the administration of Harry S. Truman. Documents released from the U.S. archives show that the Truman administration pursued an aggressive campaign of rollback vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc—a campaign more ambitious and more dangerous than the steps taken in the 1980s by the Reagan administration.81 (Ironically, one of the strongest proponents of the rollback program was the director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, George F. Kennan, the so-called architect of containment. It turns out that, during the crucial early years of the Cold War, Kennan believed that aggressive covert warfare against the Soviet Union was essential.82) The earlier

80. It is worth noting that the Reagan administration’s strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union was not quite as focused as Schweizer implies. For example, in mid–1981 the administration lifted the grain embargo that had been imposed by Jimmy Carter against the Soviet Union in early 1980 to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Reagan administration justified its action by arguing that the embargo was not having any effect on the Soviet Union and was merely hurting American farmers. Whatever the impact on U.S. agriculture may have been, the administration’s claims about the effect on the Soviet Union were clearly erroneous. Documents from the former Soviet archives reveal that Soviet leaders were deeply angered by the grain embargo (and by other economic sanctions imposed by the Carter administration) and were anxious to have it lifted. See, for example, “Zasedanie Politburo Ts KPSS 10 dekabrya 1981 goda: K voprosu o položenii v Pols’ke,” 10 December 1981 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 66, D. 6, L. 1–11.
82. See, for example, “Policy Planning Staff Memorandum: The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” 4 May 1948, in U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 273,
rollback policies did not lead to the breakup of the USSR, even though the Soviet state in the aftermath of World War II not only was weaker (because of the extensive damage and loss of life caused by the war) than it was in the mid–1980s, but also was confronted by full-scale armed insurgencies in western Ukraine, the Baltic states, and western Belarus. The lack of results under previous U.S. administrations should make us wary of assuming that U.S. policy was decisive in the 1980s in undermining the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration's wide-ranging efforts to exert pressure on the Soviet Union were important, but monocausal explanations of the collapse do not take us very far.

Wallander seeks to find a middle ground between the extreme parameters of the debate. Although she argues that the United States did not cause the Soviet Union to collapse, she maintains that U.S. policy contributed to the outcome in numerous ways. In making that claim, she is cognizant of the pitfalls that arise when assessing one country's influence on another. The difficulty in this particular case is compounded by the inaccessibility of crucial documentation. Although many highly sensitive documents are now available at the Russian State Archive of Recent History and the archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, large gaps in the documentary record remain.83 Hence, it is not always possible to tell whether (and how) particular forms of Western pressure (or positive inducements) affected Gorbachev's rise to power and his subsequent policies.

The problems in tracing Western influence loom large even with issues that are often assumed to have had a major effect. Despite the sharp increases

NSC 10/2. Significant portions of this document are still classified and have been redacted from the version given to researchers.

83. Thousands of highly sensitive documents from the Gorbachev era were declassified for a trial of the Soviet Communist Party before the Russian Constitutional Court in 1992. Many (though not all) of these documents are now stored in Fond 89 of RGANI, the archive that houses the vast collection of materials accumulated by the General Department of the CPSU Central Committee. Although the Fond 89 items were released mainly because the Yeltsin government believed they would prove embarrassing to Gorbachev, the materials provide crucial insights into the post-1985 period. The impact of the documents is balanced to some extent by items released at the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow since the early 1990s. In 1995, after Gorbachev had completed his memoirs, the Foundation opened its own large and well-organized archive to outside researchers. The Foundation's archive contains many exceptionally valuable materials that are not available elsewhere, including the notes taken by Anatoli Chernyaev during Soviet Politburo meetings, informal discussions, and formal conversations with foreign officials. The Gorbachev Foundation also has published two very useful collections of documents—Mikhail Gorbachev, ed., Gody trudnykh reshenii (Moscow: Alfa-Print, 1993); and A. V. Veber et al., eds., Soyuz mozhno bylo sokhranit’—Belaya kniga: Dokumenty i fakty o politike M. S. Gorbacheva po reformirovaniyu i sokhraneniyu mnogonatsional'nogo gosudarstva (Moscow: April–85, 1995)—and has put out a large quantity of declassified materials in its journal, Svobodnaya mysl', and in the memoirs by Gorbachev and other former officials who are now linked with the Foundation. Another extremely useful compendium of recently declassified documents, including some fascinating items from the state security (RGB) archives, was put out by Georgii Urushadze, Vybrannye mesta iz perepis' i vragami: Sem' dnei za kul'turnoi vlasti (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo doma, 1995).
in U.S. military spending in the early 1980s, U.S. military budgets decreased in real terms from fiscal year 1985 on, at the very time that Gorbachev became CPSU General Secretary. Moreover, although Gorbachev eventually came to perceive the “burden” of military spending in the USSR as an obstacle to economic reform, it is not clear that he subscribed to that view when he first came to office. After all, Soviet military spending continued to rise until 1990. In any case, it is questionable whether military spending actually posed as much of an obstacle to economic reform as is often assumed. Because total factor productivity in the Soviet Union was declining in the late 1970s and 1980s, the opportunity costs of high military spending most likely were relatively modest. Reductions in military spending—which did not actually begin until late in the Gorbachev period—might not have gained much in other sectors, especially in the short term. Even if that is the case, however, the key thing is how Gorbachev himself perceived the issue. Whatever his view may have been when he took office, he soon came to believe that reductions in military spending would ease the task of economic reform. But the link between that perception and the earlier rise in U.S. military spending is at best hard to discern.

More important than the aggregate level of U.S. military spending were two specific policies that the United States and its allies pursued in the early 1980s: the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Western Europe and the provision of covert military aid to anti-Communist guerrillas in Afghanistan. If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had not proceeded on schedule with the INF deployments in 1983, the delay would have inflicted grave damage on the alliance and would have invigorated the hardline forces in the Soviet Union that were seeking to undermine NATO. Similarly, if the United States (assisted by Saudi Arabia, China, and Pakistan) had not supported the resistance in Afghanistan and had permitted Soviet troops to establish outright control over the country (as they nearly did on several occasions in the early and mid 1980s), the traumatic Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan would never have occurred.

The combination of the INF deployments and the support for guerrillas in Afghanistan (a policy begun by the Carter administration and then ex-

85. This point is stressed by Gertrude Schroeder in “The Soviet Economy and the Fate of the USSR,” Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 2004), forthcoming.
panded under the “Reagan doctrine” of support for anti-Marxist insurgencies in Angola and Nicaragua as well as Afghanistan) had important implications for Soviet foreign policy and, indirectly, for Soviet domestic affairs. The success of the U.S. policies dealt a blow to hardline officials in Moscow, including several who were still on the Politburo when Gorbachev became CPSU General Secretary. The inability of the hardliners to produce better results undoubtedly gave the new Soviet leader greater leeway to consider “new thinking” in foreign policy, which began in earnest in 1987 and early 1988. The subsequent changes in Soviet foreign policy soon led to a far-reaching improvement of relations with the West—an outcome that Gorbachev could claim as a major achievement. Many officials in the two U.S. administrations that dealt with Gorbachev—the first under Ronald Reagan and the second under George H. W. Bush—initially were skeptical that the new Soviet leader genuinely wanted to reorient Soviet foreign policy. But when Gorbachev began offering dramatic concessions in arms control negotiations and then decided to pull Soviet troops out of Afghanistan and Africa, the ranks of the skeptics diminished. Robert Gates, a high-ranking CIA official under Reagan (and later director of the agency), who was one of the initial skeptics of “new thinking,” recalls in his memoirs that the boldness of Gorbachev’s initiatives in 1987–1988 offered “the final proof that, at least in foreign policy, this was a very different Soviet leader.”

When the administration of George H. W. Bush took office in 1989, senior officials launched a policy review to determine whether the Reagan administration’s basic strategy toward the Soviet Union—a strategy that entailed cooperation with and support for Gorbachev, though with notable caution—should be adjusted. The review dragged on for an inordinately long time, but in the end the existing line of cooperation with Gorbachev was reaffirmed. The fruits of that cooperation were vividly apparent by the end of the year, with the largely peaceful collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. The Cold War was over, and a new era had begun. The fundamental change in U.S.-Soviet relations had three important consequences for internal developments in the Soviet Union.

First, Gorbachev’s personal stake in maintaining the new U.S.-Soviet relationship, and his desire to gain Western financial backing, gave the United

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States an unusual degree of leverage over many of his decisions, including decisions at home that affected the stability of the USSR. Robert Gates, who moved from the CIA to become deputy national security adviser under President Bush, recalls that “behind the scenes, there was constant pressure on Gorbachev from Bush and [Secretary of State James] Baker to avoid the use of force in the Baltics and elsewhere, to end the use of force and of economic sanctions quickly when Gorbachev resorted to such coercion, and to set in motion a process of negotiation to resolve disputes” with the Baltic governments. In August 1990, when the U.S. Congress moved to provide ten million dollars of humanitarian aid to the Lithuanian government, high-ranking Soviet officials privately expressed deep irritation, arguing that “this action is obviously intended to bolster the separatist movement in the Lithuanian republic and to encourage analogous processes in other regions of the USSR.”

Even so, the U.S. overtures about the Baltic states, according to one of Gorbachev’s top aides, Anatolii Chernyaev, had to be “taken into account” by the Soviet leadership. In the past, U.S. influence on domestic affairs in the Soviet Union was negligible, but by the end of the 1980s Gorbachev’s policies toward human rights activists, dissidents, and peaceful nationalist movements were increasingly constrained by his desire to stay on good terms with the West. Although it is unlikely that Gorbachev’s hopes of attaining further improvements in U.S.-Soviet relations ever had an overriding impact on his actions at home or drastically altered his outlook, they undoubtedly induced a degree of caution about the way he dealt with democratic forces in the USSR.

Second, the changes in Soviet policy toward the United States in the late 1980s may have had internal consequences that Gorbachev did not anticipate. In the famous “long telegram” of February 1946, George Kennan argued that the Soviet regime (then ruled by Stalin) deliberately fostered the impression of a grave external threat to justify the maintenance of tyranny at home:

> The Bolsheviks . . . found justification [in Marxism] for their instinctive fear of [the] outside world, for the dictatorship without which they did not know how to rule, for cruelties they did not dare not to inflict, for sacrifices they felt bound to demand. . . . [By] pictur[ing] the outside world as evil, hostile, and menacing, [the Soviet regime] provides justification for that increase of military and police
power in [the] Russian state, for [the] isolation of [the] Russian population from
the outside world, and for that fluid and constant pressure to extend [the] limits
of Russian police power.92

Assuming that Kennan was right, Gorbachev's efforts to deflate the impression of an external threat were bound to have far-reaching implications at home. The Soviet Union's highly publicized campaign in the late-1980s to “do away with the enemy image” (i.e., to allay fears abroad that the Soviet Union posed a danger to other countries) necessarily entailed a sharp reduction of the Soviet government's own threat perceptions. As numerous Western observers pointed out at the time, Gorbachev began steadily downplaying the magnitude of external threats to the USSR.93 This policy was intended mainly to provide a basis for eventual cuts in military spending, but in the process it inadvertently eliminated one of the crucial props of the Soviet regime—the myth of an urgent foreign threat. This is not to say that the end of the Cold War led inevitably to the collapse of the Soviet Union—that outcome was far from inevitable—but it does seem clear that the greatly reduced perception of an external threat made it harder to keep the state from unraveling.

Third, the fundamental improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations vindicated the sentiments of those in the Soviet Union who—either secretly or openly—had become sympathetic to Western democratic values. Over the years, the example provided by the United States and its allies, with their democratic freedoms and prosperity, was a marked contrast to the lack of freedom and low living standards in the Soviet Union. Until the Gorbachev era, very few Soviet citizens could actually travel to the West, but the ones who did get a chance to go there were able to see for themselves that the Soviet media's alarmist depiction of the West was highly distorted. Information that seeped into the Soviet Union via short-wave radio broadcasts and underground publications also provided an alternative viewpoint to the official media. The number of people who actually received this information was relatively small, but they included individuals who came to play key roles under Gorbachev. These were the people who, like Eduard Shevardnadze, concluded that the Soviet Union had to become a “civilized country.” For most of them, there was no sudden epiphany that changed their attitudes toward the West; in-

stead, it was the cumulative realization that democratic values and free markets were a profound source of strength. This point had always been emphasized by leading Soviet dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov, who received moral support from the West and who overtly espoused Western democratic principles. But in the pre-Gorbachev era the dissidents were officially scorned and persecuted, often by force. Not until the situation turned around in the late 1980s, and Western values suddenly won acceptance in the Soviet Union, did the long struggle of the dissidents finally pay off.

These consequences of the new U.S.-Soviet relationship were bound to have at least some influence on Gorbachev as he tried to figure out how to prevent the Soviet Union from descending into chaos. It is interesting to note, however, that Gorbachev was not the only one who felt constrained during the final year of the Soviet regime. In 1990–1991 and particularly after the reunification of Germany in October 1990, the Bush administration felt a major debt of gratitude to Gorbachev for the momentous changes he had overseen. Bush by then had developed a trusting and friendly relationship with Gorbachev (as had Baker with Shevardnadze), and the last thing Bush wanted to do was to undermine the Soviet leader’s position. U.S. officials therefore were generally discreet about their support for democratic and nationalist movements in the Soviet Union. As Gates indicated, most of the pressure occurred behind the scenes. Critics of this approach, in the U.S. media and Congress, argued that the administration was being too timid and was investing too much in Gorbachev, whose hold on power appeared increasingly tenuous. In late July 1991 Bush traveled to Kyiv and gave a speech before the Ukrainian parliament in which he vowed not to “support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism [or] aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred.”

Although the speech was not aimed specifically at Ukraine, where pro-independence sentiment was increasing rapidly by the summer of 1991, it seemed peculiarly inappropriate. The “chicken Kyiv” speech, as it became known, came to symbolize everything that the critics disliked about the Bush administration’s policy toward the Soviet Union.

There is certainly merit in the critics’ complaints, but there is also some merit in Gates’s argument that the administration was confronted by an extremely fluid situation in which missteps could have done great harm:


Historians may criticize the Bush administration for not taking a more aggressive stand in support of the independence movements among the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. Certainly, Baltic-Americans were critical at that time. It is useful to remember, however, that during that period the President was faced with the liberation of Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, a revolution in the Soviet Union, and the danger of an explosion there as a result of either economic crisis or centrifugal forces. The challenge was to promote these changes—and to arrange it in the case of Germany—keep them peaceful, and to try to have them carried out in a way that did not guarantee future conflict. We also fought the Persian Gulf War, in which Soviet political help was important. As in Eastern Europe, perhaps George Bush's greatest contribution was in knowing both what to do as these events took place, and what not to do.96

Coping with the turmoil in the Soviet Union in 1991 would have been a formidable challenge for any U.S. president. Even those who believe that, on balance, the Bush administration was too cautious in its approach can agree that the results provided a degree of vindication for the policy. Bush's firm opposition to the August 1991 coup left no doubt about where the United States stood, and the administration's management of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991—by offering to recognize newly independent states only after they lived up to certain requirements—proved helpful as the leaders of the republics made final preparations for the post-Soviet era. The breakup of the Soviet Union could have ended much worse, and the administration was able to contribute, at least at the margins, to a remarkably peaceful outcome.

The External Context: The Demise of the Soviet Bloc

The final article in this issue—the first segment of my two-part essay on the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the reverberations in the Soviet Union—covers another crucial aspect of the external environment during the final years of the USSR. The article considers why Gorbachev drastically changed Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe and allowed hardline Communist regimes to collapse. Gorbachev's determination to avoid the use of force in Eastern Europe is often taken for granted nowadays, but it is worth remembering what a fundamental break with the past this was. Contrary to the myth that the "Brezhnev Doctrine" ended before Gorbachev came to power, the re-

96. Gates, From the Shadows, p. 531; emphasis in original.
ality is that Soviet leaders from Stalin through Chernenko were deeply committed to the maintenance of a Communist bloc in Eastern Europe. No issue other than the protection of the Soviet state itself was of higher priority in Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev inherited this long-standing commitment, and Western analysts and officials in 1985 certainly did not expect that he would soon abandon it. On the eve of Gorbachev’s emergence as leader of the Soviet Union, Samuel Huntington expressed a view that seemed highly plausible:

The likelihood of democratic development in Eastern Europe is virtually nil. The Soviet presence is a decisive overriding obstacle, no matter how favorable other conditions may be in countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Democratization could occur in these societies only if the Soviet Union were drastically weakened through war, domestic upheaval, or economic collapse (none of which seems likely), or if the Soviet Union came to view Eastern European democratization as not threatening to its interests (which seems equally unlikely).

Western scholars and officials were by no means alone in believing that the Soviet regime would do whatever was necessary to uphold Communist rule in Eastern Europe. Even after Gorbachev began to restructure Soviet foreign policy, hardline East European Communist leaders were convinced that, in extremis, the Soviet Union would come to their aid. The orthodox East German Communist leader, Erich Honecker, refused until the very end to believe that the Soviet Union would permit his regime to collapse. Gorbachev proved him wrong.

The demise of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe—in a swift and peaceful series of events (except in Romania) that seemed almost miraculous—brought an end to the Cold War and gave instant credibility to the radical “new thinking” in Soviet foreign policy. Much less noted was the effect that the collapse of the Soviet bloc had on developments in the Soviet Union itself and on the stability of the Soviet regime. My article seeks to trace how the upheavals in Eastern Europe and their aftermath “spilled over,” both directly and indirectly, into the USSR. Until 1989 it was the Soviet Union that was causing a spillover into Eastern Europe—as Gorbachev’s bold reforms sparked widespread ferment in the region and antagonized the hardline leaders in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania—but after 1989 the spillover went in the opposite direction.

The first part of the article focuses on several dimensions of the direct spillover. The changes in Eastern Europe brought groups and individuals to power who were inclined to support the independence movements in the Baltic states as well as in other Soviet republics, including Ukraine. The changes in Eastern Europe also ensured that support would be forthcoming, both officially and unofficially, for coal miners in the Soviet Union who organized mass strikes in July 1989 and the spring of 1991. The role of Poland, with its Solidarity trade union movement, was especially important in this regard. The downfall of the autocratic regime in Romania headed by Nicolae Ceaușescu led to a new government in Bucharest that sought to promote and exploit pan-Romanian sentiment in Soviet Moldova, where bitter political and ethnic divisions emerged in 1989 and 1990. In addition, the collapse of East European Communism disrupted the long-standing links between the Soviet and East European intelligence and security establishments, a development that caused some Soviet officials (especially in the state security apparatus) to fear that the East European countries would facilitate Western espionage and subversion against the USSR. All these dimensions of the spillover contributed to the growing precariousness of both the Soviet regime and the Soviet state.

The second part of the article, to be published in the next issue of the journal, will explore the indirect spillover from Eastern Europe, the high-level debate that emerged in the Soviet Union about the “loss” of Eastern Europe, and the conclusions we can derive from the linkages between domestic and international changes in the former Soviet bloc. The collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe thoroughly discredited the Marxist-Leninist ideology that had been the bedrock of those regimes, and this in turn cast doubt on the raison d’être of the Soviet Union. The sudden demise of the Soviet bloc also fueled a widespread perception in the USSR that the Soviet regime itself would prove increasingly vulnerable. This perception was well-founded insofar as Gorbachev’s avoidance of the use of force in Eastern Europe raised further questions about the legitimacy of resorting to large-scale repression at home. If violent coercion was deemed unsuitable in Eastern Europe, why should it be any more acceptable against Soviet citizens? These and other indirect consequences of the collapse of East European Communism will be explored in Part 2 of my article.

As is evident from the four articles in this issue, Gorbachev faced severe constraints and pressures during the final few years of the Soviet regime. Scholars who examine the events of that era in retrospect are sometimes wont to forget
how uncertain the outcome seemed while the events were still under way. The destabilizing unrest in many of the non-Russian republics, and the profound changes in the external environment, would have posed daunting challenges for Gorbachev even if the Soviet economy had been improving and the political scene in Moscow had been conducive to compromise. What will become clear in our third special issue on “The Collapse of the Soviet Union” is that the rapid deterioration of the economy and the fierce political infighting in Moscow (both within and outside the CPSU) magnified the impact of all these other internal and external constraints and made it even harder to avoid the breakup of the USSR.