Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union

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The Soviet Union lasted as long as it did because it disciplined (often through terror) most, rewarded many, and attracted a strategically loyal few for at least fifty of [its] seventy-four years.

Ken Jowitt, 1997

The rise and fall of empires has been a repeated refrain in world history. Hardy creatures though they might be—often lasting hundreds of years—empires have disintegrated after internal and external pressures have grown too severe. These pressures might include the defection from the center by elites in the periphery, the consolidation of ethnic identities and the rise of nationalism among constituent units of the empire, military deterioration in the center, internal revolution, and conquest and division by external forces. The past two centuries witnessed the weakening and dismantling of numerous empires: the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian, Italian, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian. Much of the literature analyzing these deceased political organisms highlights nationalism as one of the main internal causes of their demise. This nationalism usually entails ethnic consolidation and mass mobilization among populations concentrated on a particular territory or territories. The mobilized groups attempt to escape central rule, secede from the imperial state, and create new, independent political entities. Such was the case, for example, with Serbian, Czech, Greek, Romanian, and Bulgarian nationalist movements in the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires; with Indian nationalism in the British empire; with Croatian, Slovenian, and Albanian nationalist groups in Yugoslavia; and with Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian nationalist movements in the Soviet Union.2


2. Some of the literature that highlights nationalism as a factor in the breakup of empires includes
If the conjuncture of nationalism and imperial breakup has been evident numerous times over the past two centuries in different parts of the world, can we readily assume a causal linkage between nationalist outbreaks and imperial demise? In the most recent instance of imperial disintegration—that of the Soviet Union—did nationalism and ethnic pressures play a central, causal role? How much weight should we give to nationalism and ethnic pressures as explanatory variables in the dissolution of the USSR?

This article suggests that nationalism and ethnic pressures were facilitating and precipitating variables in the breakup of the Soviet Union, rather than the primary cause. A qualified exception was the separatist nationalism among the Russian elites, a factor that had a fatal impact on the Soviet state. Russian nationalism, however, was qualitatively different from other separatist nationalisms in the USSR. It was concentrated among elites and did not lead to direct mass separatist mobilization. Moreover, it overlapped with, and was largely a consequence of, the power rivalry and personal animosity between Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev. By late 1990 Yeltsin was intent on displacing Gorbachev as the top leader in Moscow, but he did not fully grasp the implications of his maneuvers for the cohesion of the Soviet federal state. Ukrainian separatist nationalism increased in the latter half of 1991 and was crucial in sealing the formal demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991, but it did not exert irresistible pressure on the Soviet state during most of Gorbachev’s rule. It was a facilitating and precipitating, rather than primary, cause of Soviet disintegration.
The Soviet Union throughout its history suffered from deeply entrenched problems in what was traditionally called the “nationalities” sphere. In particular, the fateful decision to set up a federal structure along ethno-territorial lines and to maintain strong linguistic and cultural distinctions among many of the constituent units, created an inherent weakness in the state. When the Soviet Union broke apart, it did so precisely along the lines that divided its former union republics. Until the late 1980s this inherent structural weakness was of little importance, but the political and ideological liberalization under Gorbachev allowed nationalism and ethnic pressures to reach a level of intensity unprecedented since the federated union was formed in 1922.

Even so, it is important to emphasize that nationalist and ethnic factors were not sufficient to cause the Soviet state to fall apart. These factors, in isolation, would not have created an immediate, inexorable force for disintegration. Although nationalist fissures seriously challenged the cohesion of the Soviet Union, other variables ultimately made the Soviet state untenable. These other factors included Gorbachev’s failure to create and implement a renewed compact between center and periphery early in the period of perestroika, his aversion to using decisive force to quell nationalist demands, and his inability to stave off the challenge from Yeltsin.

The article is divided into four main sections. The first section defines key terms used throughout the article—nation, nationalism, ethnic pressures, and empire—and explains why the multiethnic Soviet state can be regarded as an empire. The second section describes developments in the Soviet nationalities sphere prior to Gorbachev, highlighting the compact between center and periphery that helped maintain stability in the Soviet Union for many decades. This section also emphasizes two factors that undermined Soviet cohesion over time:

1. the Bolshevik policy of creating and reinforcing ethnic and nationalist identities, if only inadvertently. This policy undercut official claims about proletarian unity and the irresistible triumph of a supranational Soviet identity.
2. Soviet policies of unequal treatment and repression of various nationalities. These policies contravened the official notion that all nationalities were “equal” and would “blossom” under Communist rule.

The first factor led to the structural vulnerability of the Soviet state, and the second produced grievances against the center that fueled separatist nationalism under the vastly more open regime of Gorbachev. After briefly discussing
these factors, the second section gives an overview of the most salient ethnic and nationalist disturbances before Gorbachev’s rule and assesses their cumulative impact on the integrity of the Soviet state.

The third section focuses on the intensification of nationalism and ethnic pressures in 1988–1991. It describes the character and impact of separatist nationalism (in the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine); ethnic conflicts (in Nagorno-Karabakh, Moldova, Central Asia, and the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia); and demographic, religious, and linguistic pressures. How did the state respond to these challenges, and to what extent did they erode Soviet cohesion? This section also describes the nature of Russia’s defection from the Soviet fold, a defection that was a key variable in the unraveling of the state. The section concludes by briefly tracing a related phenomenon that contributed to imperial disintegration—namely, the breakdown of the economic linkage between center and periphery.

The fourth section discusses the cumulative effect of ethnic and nationalist pressures in weakening the Soviet state. These pressures were significant, but the article points to a number of other factors that were instrumental in the demise of the Soviet Union: the failure to achieve a viable compact between center and periphery during Gorbachev’s initial years in power, Gorbachev’s general unwillingness to use force decisively and efficiently to quell unrest and other challenges to the Soviet regime, and the deliberate steps taken by Yeltsin and the Russian government.5

Nations, Nationalism, and Empires

Some concepts inevitably provoke scholarly quarrels. Such is the case with nation, nationalism, and empires. There are numerous definitions of nationalism,6 but in this chapter it refers to a political ideology consisting of three ba-

5. There were, of course, other factors that contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union—economic problems, external pressures such as the arms race with the United States, as well as the process of political liberalization and glasnost—but these are not the focus of this chapter. Also, I do not argue that the Soviet Union could have survived indefinitely (though I do not rule out the possibility). Instead, I contend that it did not have to collapse when it did, whether because of nationalist and ethnic pressures or for other reasons. Stronger resolve from the center to maintain the empire, including through the consistent use of force in the late 1980s, 1990, or even as late as early 1991 (during the crackdown in the Baltic republics), could have preserved its life certainly beyond 1991.

6. For example, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm define nationalism as a "political principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent," and Hans Kohn defines it as a "state of mind" in which the individual’s supreme loyalty is to the nation-state. Echoing Kohn, Liah Greenfeld asserts that nationalism is a "particular perspective or a style of thought" based on the idea of the "nation." See Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 1; Eric J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality (New York: Cambridge
sic propositions: 1) that there exists a “nation” with identifiable members; 2) that the nation is distinct or special compared to other national units; and 3) that the nation must exist as an independent political entity. Nationalism becomes most powerful in the political arena when its adherents are mobilized en masse for political action such as the preservation or destruction of a state or the creation of new states. Related to nationalism are ethnic pressures, which include ethnic conflicts; demographic change; and religious or linguistic demands. These pose challenges to the state’s ability to govern its constituent units. Ethnic groups within a state can create ethnic pressures without engaging in nationalism. However, when the pressures culminate in demands for a separate and independent state, the mobilized groups are appropriately called nationalist.

The term nation, as used here, refers to a community of people who share kinship based on culture, race, ancestry, language, ethnicity, religion, or citizenship, and are the self-professed repository of legitimate political authority. This definition reflects the idea that nations are not “real entities [or] . . . substantial, enduring collectivities.” For the purposes of this article, the interesting question is not “what is a nation”, instead, we need to consider how “nationhood [is] institutionalized within and among states” and what “makes the use of [national categories] by or against states more or less resonant or effective.” These questions are particularly relevant to the Soviet Union, where nations were constructed, defined, and redefined over decades.
Nationalism is a highly normative ideology with powerful legitimating effects that can determine the fate of states and their ruling elites.\textsuperscript{11} It is normative because it defines who is “in” and “out” of the nation, and because it advocates particular courses of action for the nation's well-being. It has legitimating effects because it anchors political power in the “nation.” The ruling elites are deemed to be legitimate only if they successfully claim to represent the nation and defend its interests. The integrity of a state may be jeopardized when mobilized groups, claiming to be members of a particular nation, assert that the state does not articulate or defend their interests and that, therefore, they ought to secede and become independent.\textsuperscript{12}

An empire is an organized political community consisting of multiple national-territorial units, with one unit (the “center”) that exercises control over the effective sovereignty of two or more subordinate units (the “periphery”). This definition includes empires with contiguous territories (e.g., the Russian and Ottoman empires) and those with peripheral components situated away from the “center” (e.g., the British and French colonial empires).\textsuperscript{13} A host of formal and functional links between center and periphery are required for the maintenance of central control. If these links are eliminated, the empire will soon break apart.

Control by the center over the effective sovereignty of the periphery (regardless, for example, of codified equal legal status between them) is the defining feature of empires. Three related points deserve emphasis here.

First, the center need not, and often does not, exercise direct and complete (“totalitarian”) rule over peripheral segments. Instead, the center may retain or establish formal and informal compacts with intermediaries who govern these segments with some autonomy in exchange for “the delivery of compliance, tribute, and military collaboration with the center.”\textsuperscript{14} Although the threat or use of force is important to ensure that the periphery complies with central edicts, it is never sufficient for maintaining long-term control of an empire. Central powers throughout history have ruled their domains using a mix of instruments, including collaboration with, and cooptation of, sectors

\textsuperscript{11} Verdery, "Whither 'Nation' and 'Nationalism?'" pp. 38–44.

\textsuperscript{12} The notion that state power is the ultimate goal of nationalists can be found in Breuilly, Nationalism and the State; Paul A. Brass, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991); and James G. Kellas, The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 54–57.

\textsuperscript{13} This definition is similar to the one used in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997). See also Alexander J. Motyl, Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 15.

\textsuperscript{14} Charles Tilly, “How Empires End,” in Barkey and von Hagen, eds., After Empire, p. 3.
of elites in the subordinate societies and the delivery of certain goods to publics in the periphery.15

Second, the society that wields central power must create and maintain an internal consensus—a consensus within the center—about the desirability of its role and the value of empire. Without such a consensus, the center will be unable to wield effective control over the periphery. If a consensus on imperial arrangements weakens, imperial rulers may be hampered from acting decisively in the face of peripheral actors’ demands for independence. This notion is borne out by Crane Brinton, who, in his classic Anatomy of Revolution, argues that a ruling class jeopardizes its rule when many of its members begin to believe that they hold power unjustly, that beliefs they took for granted were false or silly, and that they should help those who are challenging the status quo.16

Third, if forceful challenges by the periphery to imperial organization do arise, leaders at the center must have at their disposal sufficient instruments of coercion and the will to use them. Again, referring to Brinton’s work on revolutions (nationalist secessionism in an empire is akin to revolution), regimes have been overthrown not when they were most oppressive but when rulers 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.”17 The three features just described here—an effective center-periphery compact, consensus at the center regarding imperial rule and arrangements, and rulers’ will and competence to use force—are prerequisites for empire maintenance. If these factors are eroded or absent, the very existence of an empire will be in jeopardy.18

Was the Soviet Union an empire? The answer to this question, as Mark Beissinger has pointed out, has varied over time.19 The term “empire” in some


periods has carried a stigma and in other periods has not. Normative implications aside, however, there are several reasons for arguing that the Soviet Union was in fact an empire. First, the USSR had a controlling center and a controlled periphery. The center was Moscow, and the central rulers were (primarily, though not exclusively) the Russian and Russified elites who wielded power in key Soviet institutions. The periphery was the rest of the country, especially the republics outside Russia. Second, although Russians did not always benefit from policies implemented by the center—and at times, especially under Josif Stalin, they were treated brutally (as were other ethnic groups)—the Russians nonetheless constituted a society that, in many measurable (though not absolute) ways, dominated over other ethnic groups. Russian culture and Russian language were most salient in the USSR; the authorities treated expressions of Russian chauvinism or ethnic assertiveness with greater leniency than they did similar expressions by other ethnic groups; and ethnic Russians occupied the bulk of senior appointments in pivotal institutions of authority. 20 Third, the Soviet Union was organized along national-territorial lines, thereby maintaining and emphasizing the distinct cultural, linguistic, and territorial heritage and features of Russian and major non-Russian populations. 21 This administrative structure helped to sustain the division between center and periphery, and it reinforced the imperial organization of the state.

National and Ethnic Policies Before Gorbachev

Leonid Brezhnev declared in 1972 that “the national question, as we inherited it from the past, has been fully, definitively, and irreversibly resolved.” 22 Similarly, a scholar from the Soviet Academy of Sciences declared in 1986:

21. My use of the term “major” does not necessarily imply that these were the largest ethnic groups. In a few cases the titular ethnic groups of the USSR’s fourteen non-Russian republics were smaller than certain ethnic groups that did not have their own republics. There were, for example, far more Tatars than Lithuanians, Estonians, or Latvians, but the Tatars did not have their own union republic, whereas each of the Baltic nations did.
In the course of socialist construction, the formerly backward national hinterlands have long ago vanished; socialist nations have joined together to form an interethnic community—the Soviet people—that is new in its social parameters. Common cultural traits have developed,... [and] national discord is a thing of the past.23

Statements like these, however, concealed a more problematic reality. Although peace generally characterized interethnic relations in the Soviet Union from the mid-1950s on, and although separatist movements were largely dormant before Gorbachev came to power (especially after the postwar insurrections in western Ukraine and the Baltic states were crushed in the early to mid-1950s), there was little basis for proclaiming the triumph of socialist values and the disappearance of national differences.

What was the state of ethnic groups and nationalities in the Soviet Union before 1985? What factors helped create relative stability between center and periphery? To answer these questions, I will describe key features of the compact between center and periphery that allowed the Soviet regime to rule relatively peacefully for many years. Then I will discuss two factors that contributed to the weakening of center-periphery cohesion over time.

The Compact between Center and Periphery

Imperial regimes do not sustain their rule exclusively through the threat or use of force. Force is critical in creating an empire and deterring its enemies, but serious problems would arise if other instruments were not available to uphold imperial rule. In the Soviet case a center-periphery compact was a crucial supplement to the threat and use of force. The compact helped ensure relative peace and stability for decades, in part because it was flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances. The compact had a formal dimension, based on treaties and constitutional guarantees codified originally under the Bolshevik government of Vladimir Lenin.24 More important, however, were the informal dimensions of the compact.

Underlying the arrangement between center and periphery was the policy of korenizatsiya (the use of local cadres), which was practiced as early as 1918 and officially approved at the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party in 1923. The purpose of korenizatsiya was to woo nonRussians into the Soviet camp and to improve Soviet administrative operations among nonRussians. The policy emphasized two elements: (1) the learning and use of local lan-

guages in government, education, literature, political propaganda, and other social communication; and (2) the active recruitment and training of non-Russians to work in the government, Communist Party, and local Soviet organs. Lenin also argued that *korenizatsiya* would counter Great Russian chauvinism and would assist nationalities that had been victimized by Russian “ethnic arrogance and insensitivity” and had remained “stateless” and “backward” under tsarism.25

*Korenizatsiya* dominated Soviet policy in the 1920s. Non-Russian languages flourished and literacy grew rapidly among the empire’s multiple nationalities. Titular nationalities, in particular, benefited by increasing their numbers in the power structures of the Communist Party and seeing their languages used in books, newspapers, and journals.26 Although Stalin subsequently shifted toward a policy of assimilation and fought the “small nationalisms” that the earlier policies helped engender, *korenizatsiya* ultimately survived. After a period of Russification in the late 1930s, official support for local languages resumed. Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, *korenizatsiya* evolved into an institutionalized cadre policy involving the appointment of a local official to the top position (first secretary) in each republic’s Communist Party, and the simultaneous appointment of an ethnic Russian to the second position (known informally as the second secretary). This practice made center-periphery politics fairly predictable, as Russian and native officials were able to monitor each other to ensure the fulfillment of central edicts. In some instances, *korenizatsiya* evolved into nepotism, entrenched corruption, cronyism, illegal activity, and the virtual creation of fiefdoms in republics whose leaders ruled for as long as they pleased with almost no restraints, provided that they displayed proper obedience to Moscow, including the suppression of overt expressions of “anti-Soviet nationalism.”27

Local cadres enjoyed leadership positions not only in the Soviet Union’s ethnonational territories, but on occasion even in the highest bodies of Soviet

27. Those who failed to suppress ethnic nationalism were punished. In 1972, for example, Ukrainian Communist Party First Secretary Petro Shelest was removed from his position because he tolerated manifestations of ethnic Ukrainian nationalism. See “Dnevnik P. E. Shelesta,” in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istorii, Fond (F.) 666, Delo (D.) 2, Listy (Ll.) 333–48 (I am grateful to Mark Kramer for this citation); Shelest’s interview in *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 2 (January 1989), p. 14; and Nahaylo and Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion*, pp. 177–179. See also Ronald Suny, “State, Civil Society, and Ethnic Cultural Consolidation in the USSR—Roots of the National Question,” in Gail Lapidus et al., eds. *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 43 n. 12. Longevity in office—in some cases for more than twenty-five years—was especially evident among first secretaries in the Central Asian republics, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus, and the Baltic states.
power. This was particularly true under Brezhnev when, at one point, as many
as six non-Russians sat on the Politburo. In the Central Committee of the
Soviet Communist Party (CPSU), Ukrainians and Kazakhs established a
significant presence. The powers and privileges given to elites in the periphery
cemented linkages needed for imperial rule. These linkages were particularly
important in relations between the central leadership and the USSR's fourteen
non-Russian union republics. 28 A Soviet-wide elite emerged, consisting
of Russians and co-opted non-Russians in the periphery.

A second component of the center-periphery compact was the economic
modernization of the outlying republics. This push for modernization created
many opportunities for upward mobility among economic, political, social,
and intellectual elites. National and ethnic groups within the USSR (Russian
and non-Russian alike) paid an enormous price for the Soviet policies of
forced collectivization and crash industrialization, but these policies did lead
over time to higher standards of living in the periphery.

The Soviet government transformed the social landscape of the former
Russian empire through education, industrialization, and urbanization.
Whereas four out of five people in Tsarist Russia were illiterate, literacy rates
in the Soviet Union (in at least two languages, for many) became high by
world standards. Opportunities for higher education also expanded greatly,
and titular nationalities benefited from quota systems that gave them privi-
eged access to higher education and, subsequently, to white-collar jobs and
administrative and leadership posts. This process resulted in the concentra-
tion of non-Russian elites in urban industrialized areas and contributed to the
consolidation of national identity in Georgia, Armenia, Lithuania, and other
republics. Such consolidation, however, did not produce attacks against the
center during the years when the center was cohesive and the threat of force
was credible. Indigenous elites who benefited from opportunities for political,
social, and intellectual mobility opted instead to be loyal to the Soviet system
and cooperated with the center to suppress dissident nationalism whenever it
emerged. 29

and Mark Beissinger, eds., The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society (Boulder: Westview
Press, 1990), pp. 25–26; and Roman Laba, “How Yeltsin's Exploitation of Ethnic Nationalism
pendence on the center for their privileges and powers is a central theme in Roeder, “Soviet Federal-
ism.” For an account of the extensive corruption in Uzbekistan and the way it was tolerated by the
central authorities, see Telman Gdlyan and Nikolai Ivanov, Kremlevskoe delo (Moscow: Gramota,
1996).

Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR (New York: Columbia University Press,
1992), p. 228; Zaślavsky, “The Soviet Union,” p. 86; Fowkes, Disintegration of the Soviet Union,
pp. 79–82, 100–104; Seweryn Bialer, Stalini's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet

The Soviet regime also implemented economic policies favoring the periphery. Underdeveloped republics in Central Asia received a “larger than proportional share of investment resources” and direct subsidies from the center. To help stabilize nationality relations, Moscow undertook comprehensive regional development projects and provided supplementary financing to poorer regions and areas with harsh climates. Statistical data from 1961 to 1985 reflect the overall improvement of economic well-being in the periphery as a result of these policies. National income and industrial production grew consistently during the 25-year period, although rates of growth were higher in 1961–1970 than in 1971–1985. Per-capita consumption also rose almost consistently during the two-and-a-half decades, leading one economist to conclude that, despite uneven rates, living standards as a whole “improved markedly in all republics” from 1961 to 1985.

Along with the credible threat of force, the compact between center and periphery helped forge Soviet imperial cohesion. Many elites favored the maintenance of the Soviet Union, and the populations in outlying republics could see steady (if slow) material improvements in their lives. At the same time, a consensus in the center, among Russians and Russified Slavs who supported Russian hegemony, also helped maintain the Soviet order. This consensus was sufficiently strong in the late 1970s and early 1980s to preclude any Russian support for separatism in the periphery or for any steps that would weaken the integrity of the Soviet state. Most Russians viewed the entire Soviet Union as their homeland. For example, in the late 1980s when the Institute of Ethnology in Moscow polled Russians in the Russian Federation on what they considered their motherland (rodina), 70 percent responded “the Soviet Union.”

### Erosion of the Center-Periphery Compact

Korenizatsiya was a double-edged sword. Although it helped Soviet leaders maintain their imperial holdings, it also consolidated ethnic and national

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identities among many groups. This process contradicted the ideal of Communist proletarian solidarity, which was at the core of Bolshevik ideology. Shortly after coming to power in 1917, the Bolsheviks realized that any plan to save the “October Revolution” by reconstituting the great expanse of the Tsarist Russian empire would require concessions to national groups that had been independent to one extent or another from 1917 to 1921. Lenin himself expressed sympathy for ethnic and national groups that, in his view, had suffered under the hand of Russian national chauvinism during Tsarist rule and were thus justifiably wary of rejoining a state that resembled the former empire. He and his followers had long insisted that nationalism would eventually disappear as socialism itself developed.33

In developing a political and legal framework for the new Bolshevik state, Stalin first proposed a federation with autonomy—but not sovereignty—for constituent parts of the state, with control centralized in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. Lenin opposed this, however, and Stalin revised his plan to respond better to the sensitivities of the non-Russian nationalities. In 1922 the Russian Republic, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Transcaucasus Republic signed the Union Treaty that created the Soviet Union. Two years later, in 1924, a Soviet Constitution was adopted, declaring the USSR an “integral, federal, multinational state formed on the principle of socialist federalism as a result of the free self-determination of nations.”34 Fifteen union republics eventually constituted the federation, each organized along ethnoterritorial lines—that is, each republic had a titular nationality representing the republic’s dominant ethnic group, which then received nominal control over the republic’s territory. To reinforce self-determination, the Soviet constitution also granted the fifteen republics the right to secede from the union, a right that meant more on paper than in practice.

The legal framework of the Soviet Union, along with korenizatsiya, validated and reinforced the idea of nations and their legitimacy as bases for state administration and organization. This was evident not only at the union-republic level, but at all levels of state administration in the early Soviet years. The result was what might be called “ethnic affirmative action run amuck” from 1918 through the 1920s. Nearly all nationalities, differentiated mainly by language, established their own administrative and territorial units. From

1918 to 1922, for example, Stalin, who was then Soviet commissar for nationalities, brought into being the self-governing republics and administrations of Bashkiriya, Tatarstan, Kirgiziya, Dagestan, Kareliya, and Yakutiya. By the late 1920s, union republics contained national okrugs, national raions, national soviets, native executive committees, native soviets, village (aul) soviets, clan soviets, and nomadic soviets. In addition, the regime encouraged the development of distinct written languages for all ethnic groups, even when this did not seem entirely rational or efficient, as with groups that previously had not used a written language.35 By 1928, newspapers were being published in at least forty-seven languages (increasing to fifty-nine by 1933 and sixty-six by 1938) and books in sixty-six languages. The regime also required official business and education to be conducted in the languages of the various ethnic communities. National consolidation accelerated when Soviet leaders endorsed and supported the cultural development of ethnic groups through indigenous libraries, literary organizations, theaters, academies, and associations. The Communist Party established ethnic quotas at all levels of administration, creating an “exuberant national carnival” in which Ukraine, for example, had Russian, German, Polish, Jewish, Moldovan, Chechen, Bulgarian, Greek, Belarusan, and Albanian soviets.36

Under Stalin, and especially in the 1930s, Soviet policy shifted from widespread cultivation of ethnic and national culture and administration to the forcible suppression of non-Russian or “bourgeois” nationalism. Although the regime continued to support the use of multiple languages, it began to combat the nationalism of smaller nations and openly promoted Russian nationalist ideas. Stalin ordered the systematic removal of local ethnic Communist leaders, cultural luminaries, and literary figures. These purges decimated local elites not only in union republics such as Azerbaijan and Ukraine but also in non-union republics including the Crimean and Tatar autonomous republics.37 The promotion of Russian nationalism was consistent with Stalin’s inclinations toward Russian chauvinism from the earliest years after he became the top Soviet leader.38 When the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Re-


38. In 1921 Stalin exhorted his fellow Georgians to fight against local nationalism in favor of union...
public (RSFSR) adopted its new constitution (modeled on the Soviet constitution) in 1937, a Pravda editorial rhapsodized:

> Russian culture enriches the culture of other peoples. The Russian language has become the language of world revolution. Lenin wrote in Russian. Stalin writes in Russian. Russian culture has become international, for it is the most advanced, the most humane. Leninism is its offspring, the Stalin constitution its expression. 39

During World War II, Russian nationalism infused Stalin’s rhetoric as he sought to mobilize the population to repulse Germany’s attacks.

Nation-building did not end under Stalin, however. Although official enthusiasm for ethnonational development waned, the authorities retained the principle of nationality as a fundamental part of individual identity and political organization. This was consistent with Lenin’s and Stalin’s belief that nations were real, objective, and enduring entities—at least until Communism was fully built. In 1932 the regime introduced individual passports that specified every citizen’s nationality at birth, creating a national and ethnic identity for the rest of that person’s life. These passports remained in use even when official policy stopped emphasizing the development of non-Russian ethnic and national identities. Larger nationalities continued to be reinforced and consolidated, particularly at the union-republic level, and smaller groups were encouraged to merge with larger ones with whom they shared common features. Nationalities whose experience of statehood and political independence was scant or non-existent (including Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Central Asian republics) gained the trappings of pseudo-statehood within the Soviet Union. As Yuri Slezkine puts it, under Stalin’s reversal, Soviet policy
cut down on the number of national units but . . . never questioned the national essence of those units. . . . [T]he ethnic groups that already had their own republics and their own extensive bureaucracies were actually told to redouble their efforts at building distinct national cultures. . . . [N]ationality policy had abandoned the pursuit of countless rootless nationalities in order to concentrate on a few full-fledged, fully-equipped “nations.” 40

with great Russia. In his 1924 speech proclaiming “socialism in one country,” he excoriated Trotsky and others for their insufficient faith in the Russian proletariat. During the period of New Economic Policy he also acknowledged and tacitly supported the nationalism of those Russian elites who had joined the party as a means of restoring great Russia. See Deutscher, Stalin, pp. 238–244, 489–490.


40. Slezkine, “USSR as a Communal Apartment,” pp. 442 and 445. See also Cheshko, Razpad Sovetskogo Soyuza, pp. 156–65; and Suny, “State, Civil Society,” pp. 22–43. The cooling of Soviet enthusiasm for ethnic development is reflected in the declining number of peoples registered as “ethnoses” in the Soviet Union: from 194 in 1926 to 101 in 1979. Among the ethnic groups that were
The building and reinforcement of nations in the Soviet Union created intrinsic fragility in the makeup of the USSR. Over time, Soviet policies consolidated ethnic identities, especially at the union-republic level. These republics evolved into building blocks for the possible—but certainly not inevitable—attainment of separate states in the future. The second half of Lenin’s axiom of developing units that were “national in form, socialist in content” was never realized in any systematic way. Although Lenin also correctly argued that nations were “historically contingent,” Soviet policy allowed contingency to evolve into near permanence. Thus, throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, national and ethnic identities in many cases did not give way to a higher, supranational Soviet Communist loyalty or to a single Russified national identity.41

The Inequality and Repression of Nationalities

Another factor that weakened the center-periphery compact over time was the contradictory declaration of the equality of nations and the practice of unequal treatment and cruel repression. The inequitable treatment and cruelty inflicted on many groups created a powerful focus for grievances that were vented fully under Gorbachev—grievances that undermined Soviet legitimacy. Russians and non-Russians alike expressed these grievances. In the periphery bitter memories of deception, abuse, and terror under Soviet rule prompted dissent and strained the center-periphery compact. Among Russians similar memories fueled popular discontent and eroded enthusiasm for imperial rule.

Early on Lenin advanced the idea of the “equality of all nations.” Only by letting nations fully develop, he argued, would “backward” peoples overcome their primitive national consciousness and move to a higher proletarian consciousness. Article 70 of the Soviet constitution trumpeted the equality of the amalgamated into larger ones were the Yomuds, Tekinsks, Goldens, and others who became the Turkmen nation, and Altai-Kizhi, Telengits, Teleuts, and others who were encompassed by the Altai people. See Yu. V. Bromlei, “Etnicheskie protsessy v SSSR,” Kommunist (Moscow), No. 5 (February 1983), pp. 56–65.

41. As Slezkine argues, Soviet policy created tension in “the coexistence of republican statehood and passport nationality. The former assumed that territorial states made nations, the latter suggested that primordial nations might be entitled to their own states. The former presupposed that all residents of Belorussia would (and should) some day become Belorussian, the latter provided the non-Belorussian residents with arguments against it. The Soviet government endorsed both definitions without ever attempting to construct an ethnically meaningful Soviet nation or turn the USSR into a Russian nation-state, so that when the non-national Soviet state had lost its Soviet meaning, the national non-states were the only possible heirs.” Cited from Slezkine, “USSR as a Communal Apartment,” p. 451. On problems and resistance that the regime encountered in attempting to create a supranational “Soviet” identity, see Nahaylo and Swobodnik, Soviet Disunion, pp. 174–198.
union republics of the USSR. In late 1982 the newly appointed head of the CPSU, Yurii Andropov, reaffirmed Lenin’s approach:

What is the essence of the path established by Lenin? Briefly, it could be put this way—it is the fully voluntary union of free peoples as the guarantee of maximum durability of the federation. . . . It is the full equality of all nations and national groups, and the concomitant attempt to liquidate inequality among them, not only legally but in fact. It is the free development of every republic, every national group.42

In practice, however, blatant injustice and coercion often made a mockery of official declarations of equality and fairness. Under Stalin, in particular, the Soviet regime practiced what Valerii Tishkov calls “ethnocide,” claiming millions of victims through forced collectivization, dekulakization, and mass deportations. In Ukraine the latest demographic evidence indicates that up to four million people died in a famine created by Stalin’s effort to crush the peasantry.43 (Up to a million people in Kazakhstan and another million in southern Russia also died from the famine.) When Ukrainians tried en masse to flee to other regions to find food, Stalin ordered that they be forcibly barred from leaving. Mass deportations of ethnic groups began in the late-1930s, especially in the Far East and in the western territories occupied by Soviet troops in 1939 and 1940 under the terms of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. During World War II Stalin diverted hundreds of thousands of troops to carry out wholesale deportations of nationalities whom he accused (groundlessly) of having collaborated with the Nazis. Entire nations were removed from their homelands and were not permitted to return until many years or even decades later.44 Although Khrushchev rehabilitated some of the deported peoples and released large numbers of deportees from forced-labor camps, he failed to re-dress many of the wrongs inflicted on them. In particular, the Crimean Tatars were not allowed to return to their historical homeland, despite repeated pleas. The Soviet authorities attempted to suppress any discussion of the terrible costs of Stalin’s ethnic cleansing, but these attempts never fully succeeded. Dissidents in the periphery and in Moscow, including prominent human


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rights advocates, used the issue of deported peoples to delegitimize the Soviet regime.45

Among Russians, numerous political leaders, members of the intelligentsia, and ordinary people died in the Stalinist repressions, which wiped out millions of people. Toward the eve of World War II Stalin slaughtered as many as 40,000 Red Army officers, the majority of them Russians. Because Russians were not exempted from the horrors of Stalinism, many of them subsequently objected to the equation of the Soviet regime with Russia. During the Gorbachev era, some Russians began to voice demands for independence from the Soviet Union.46

After Stalin died, Soviet policy toward nationalities returned to a more even-handed, but still unequal, basis. Although korenizatsiya and informal quotas (e.g., a certain number of seats in the Politburo were reserved for the Ukrainian party first secretary, for the first secretary from one of the Baltic states, for the first secretary from one of the Caucasus states, and for the first secretary from one of the Central Asian states) devolved some power to elites in the periphery and helped cultivate their loyalty to the center, power in the most important union institutions remained concentrated in the hands of Russians and Russified Slavs. This was true of the Communist Party, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet,47 the various ministries and state committees, and the armed forces and security apparatus.48 Many of the legal rights accorded to the republics, notably the right to secede, became but a meaningless provision on paper. In essence, the Soviet Union functioned more like an imperial hierarchy than a federation of equals. The three Baltic states—Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania—were incorporated into


46. One Russian scholar rejects the term “ethnocide” to depict what happened in the 1920s and 1930s. Because Russians themselves were repressed and killed, he prefers to use the term “civil war” to describe the state’s wanton destruction of any and all who might oppose it. See Cheshko, *Raspad Sovetskogo Soyuza*, p. 106. See also Nahaylo and Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion*, p. 74.

47. In the Supreme Soviet itself, a body with largely symbolic powers, non-Russians and non-Slavs were more than adequately represented. In 1970 they comprised 26.1 percent of the population of the Soviet Union but held 40.3 percent of seats in the Supreme Soviet. See Carrère d’Encausse, *Decline of an Empire*, p. 125.

48. In the late 1970s Russians accounted for 61.37 percent of the Soviet officer corps, and Ukrainians for 26.25 percent. See U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Ethnic Composition of the Soviet Officer Corps*, DIA–7900037, Washington DC, 1979, p. 3; report authored by Allen Hetmanek, Bruce Thompson, and Richard Trout. For an analysis that minimizes the Russians’ political comparative advantage, claiming that Russian representation in the CPSU exceeded their ratio in the population as a whole by only 8 percent, see Cheshko, *Raspad Sovetskogo Soyuza*, p. 115. This might be true of Communist Party membership overall, but certainly not of the party leadership.
the union via the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but the populations in those republics (and, to a lesser extent, in other republics such as Moldova, Azerbaijan, and western Ukraine) never fully accepted their status as constituent units of the USSR.

The Soviet policy of suppressing historical memory in the Baltic states meant that the incorporation of those republics into the Soviet Union was a taboo subject. When Gorbachev finally allowed public discussion of this piece of history, Baltic separatist nationalism intensified as a result. Disregard for history also accounted for such measures as Khrushchev’s transfer of the Crimean peninsula—an area tightly linked to Russian history and collective memory of Russian heroism and greatness—from the Russian Federation to Ukraine in 1954, a gesture that at the time (when republic borders were of little import) seemed largely inconsequential. Similarly, Soviet authorities took industrial territories that were populated predominantly by Russians and incorporated them into the Kazakh Republic, formed in 1936. During the Gorbachev era, Russian nationalists referred to Sevastopol and the northern territories of Kazakhstan to discredit the Soviet state on the grounds that it did not serve Russian interests.49

Rampant negligence and exploitation also marked Soviet policies in the ecological sphere, giving rise to anti-Soviet sentiments and movements. Many citizens in the periphery blamed the Soviet Union for such disasters as the pollution of Lake Baikal, the drying and shrinking of the Aral Sea (which caused the deaths of many in Karakalpak and continues to jeopardize the lives and livelihoods of about four million people), and the catastrophic accident at the Chornobyl nuclear plant that claimed many lives and contaminated large portions of western Ukraine and Belarus. In Russia, Soviet plans to divert rivers from north to south to irrigate the arid southern regions of the RSFSR became a focal point for Russian anti-Soviet nationalism and the discrediting of the Soviet system.50 Economic subsidization of the periphery at the expense of the Russian republic was yet another “unfair” policy cited by many Russians when demanding separation from the union. Finally, repressive policies in the religious sphere—policies that intensified under Khrushchev—cultivated anti-Soviet sentiments among such groups as the Uniates (Byzan-


50. Valery Tishkov, “The Soviet Empire Before and After Perestroika,” in Rudolph and Good, eds., Nationalism and Empire, p. 204; and Nicolai N. Petro, “The Project of the Century: A Case Study of Russian National Dissent,” Studies in Comparative Communism, Vol. 22 (Autumn/Winter 1987), pp. 235–252. Central Asian republics, which stood to benefit from the river-diversion project and which received subsidies from the center, tended to favor Soviet policies as a whole. Not surprisingly, these republics did not wish to secede from the USSR and were opposed to the breakup of the Soviet state.
tine Catholics) in western Ukraine, Roman Catholics in Lithuania, Sufi Muslims in Central Asia, and Russian Orthodox believers in Russia.51

Nationalist and Ethnic Challenges to Soviet Rule

To assess the role of nationalism and ethnic pressures in the demise of the Soviet Union, it is important to ascertain their impact in the years before Gorbachev came to power. Although center-periphery relations were generally stable under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, problems occasionally arose when discontented national and ethnic groups expressed opposition to the central regime. What was the cumulative impact of such opposition?

In the immediate post-1945 era the Soviet Union confronted armed insurgencies in several of the territories it had annexed during or immediately after World War II—notably, in western Ukraine, western Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Stalin ordered the secret police (NKVD) and army to crush these insurgencies, but the process took considerably longer than expected. Some of the nationalist groups were able to continue putting up resistance until the early- to mid-1950s.52 Eventually, however, through the use of unrelenting violence and terror, the combined NKVD and army forces managed to put down the rebellions. The suppression of these insurgencies cemented Soviet rule in the western republics and forestalled any further armed uprisings.

From the mid-1950s until the late 1980s the Soviet authorities’ willingness (both perceived and real) to use force against opposition groups deterred any sustained outbreaks of mass nationalist unrest. On a smaller scale, however, some groups did attempt to seek redress for nationalist grievances. Their

51. Although Khrushchev stepped up the intensity of anti-religious campaigns and atheistic propaganda in the USSR, the Soviet regime never uniformly implemented an anti-religious policy. Instead, it co-opted religious institutions and leaders where possible and persecuted mainly those whose religious beliefs were closely tied to anti-Soviet nationalist feelings. See Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, “Nationalities and Soviet Religious Policies,” in Hajda and Beissinger, eds., Nationalities Factor, pp. 148–174. On Russian Orthodox dissent in the USSR, see Jane Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

52. A vast amount of documentary evidence about the armed uprisings in western Ukraine, western Belarus, and the Baltic states is now available in the archives of those former Soviet republics. Specialists in the Baltic states and Ukraine have published many collections of declassified documents and lengthy accounts of the uprisings. Of particular importance in Ukraine have been documents published in the semi-annual journal Z archiviv VUChK, HPU, NKVD, KHB, put out by the Instytut Istorii Ukrainy. For a comparison of the nationalist resistance movements in Ukraine with those in western Belarus and the Baltic states, see Anatolii Rusnachenko, Narod zhurenyn: Natsional’no vyzvol’nyi rukh v Ukraini i natsional’ni rukhy oporu v Bilorusii, Lytvi, Latvi, Estonii u 1940–50-kh rokakh (Kyiv: Universyets’ke vyd-vo Pulsary, 2002). I am grateful to Mark Kramer for alerting me to these sources and for providing copies of thousands of pages of photocopied documents he obtained from the Ukrainian, Baltic, and Russian archives.
actions included literary and other cultural expressions of ethnic identities, underground nationalist publications that criticized the Soviet regime, mass petitions by (and for) aggrieved minorities, public demonstrations, and, in a few instances, violent resistance. Some discontented groups, particularly Jews and Volga Germans, expressed their dissatisfaction by literally exiting the system through the emigration option that was available to them (but not to other nationalities).

It is not necessary here to describe in detail the various forms of national opposition and resistance during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, but it is worth briefly mentioning the most significant incidents from the mid-1950s through the advent of Gorbachev. Table 1 lists mass disturbances from 1957 to 1986 that were linked to ethnic and national issues and center-periphery relations.

It is difficult to pin down the exact numbers of all dead and wounded from the mass disturbances listed in Table 1. The available data suggest, however, that nationalist and ethnic violence in the post-Stalin era was minimal and highly manageable. The Soviet regime kept nationalism and ethnic agitation under control, and the State Security (KGB) and Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) troops arrested and punished “troublemakers” and nationalist agitators before they could seriously challenge the authorities. Of the more than 8,000 people who were arrested and imprisoned for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” from 1956 to 1985, a considerable number were nationalist dissidents. Many of them received sentences of ten years or more. Others, including indigenous leaders and military officers whose loyalty to the Soviet Union was thought to be dubious, were dismissed from their posts or incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals. Soviet repression and punitive measures easily kept nationalist and ethnic pressures contained. Incidents of ethnic nationalist mobilization tended to be isolated, and at no point was the mobilization from below sufficient to pose a decisive challenge to the top. The cumulative impact of nationalism and ethnic pressures on the Soviet imperial state from

53. See Fowkes, Disintegration of the Soviet Union, ch. 4, on the varieties of national resistance in the Soviet Union.

54. For further documentation of ethnic unrest in the pre-Gorbachev era, see “Ne dopustim kritiki Stalinu,” Izvestiat (Moscow), No. 6 (1995), pp. 41–43 (my thanks to Mark Kramer for this source and the next one); “Dokladnaya zapiska. O raskrytii antisovetskikh proyavlenii, imevshikh mesto v g. Vilnyuse,” 11 June 1966, in Lietuvos Ypatingasis Archyvas (LYA), Fondas (F .) K-1, Apyra as (Ap.) 3, Byla (B.) 51, Lapai (La.) 1–3; Nahaylo and Swoboda, Soviet Disunion; Fowkes, Disintegration of the Soviet Union; and Elizabeth Fuller, “Georgia, Stalin, and the Demonstrations of 1956,” Radio Liberty Report 19086, 3 May 1988.

### Table 1: Mass Ethnic Disturbances in the Soviet Union, 1957–1986 (Partial List)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place/No. Of Participants</th>
<th>Nature Of Disturbance</th>
<th>Official Response</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 1956</td>
<td>Tbilisi, Sukhumi, Gori, and Batumi, Georgia</td>
<td>Initially, a protest against rumors of Khrushchev’s impending repudiation of Stalin; evolved into anti-Soviet nationalist demonstrations and demands for Georgian independence.</td>
<td>Troops and tanks sent to stop mass demonstrations; KGB arrested demonstrators</td>
<td>106 dead, 100s wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Groznyi, Checheno-Ingushetiya</td>
<td>Russians massacre an undisclosed number of Chechens trying to return to their original homes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Sumgait, Azerbaijan; 800</td>
<td>Citizens carrying Stalin portraits angered by police removal of portraits Conflict between Chechens and Laks over rape of a Lak woman by a Chechen</td>
<td>Police use force; 6 held for criminal responsibility</td>
<td>1 wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Khasavyurt, Dagestan; 700</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 held for criminal responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Erevan, Armenia; 100,000</td>
<td>Commemoration of 50th anniversary of “Turkish genocide”</td>
<td>militia volunteers sent; fire hoses used on demonstrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Lithuania; unknown</td>
<td>Distribution and posting of anti-Soviet, nationalist leaflets and posters in Vilnius</td>
<td>Authorities arrest six people and charge them with criminal behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Place/No. Of Participants</td>
<td>Nature Of Disturbance</td>
<td>Official Response</td>
<td>Casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Tbilisi and Mtskheta, Georgia; 1,000 and 2,000</td>
<td>Student protests against firing of professor of Georgian literature; protests in defense of Georgian rights and language</td>
<td>Shevardnadze speaks to protesters in Tbilisi and agrees to meet with their representatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>North Ossetia; 4500</td>
<td>Mass nationalist “hysteria” roused by funeral of a murdered driver</td>
<td>26 held under criminal charges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Dushanbe, Tajikistan; 700</td>
<td>Fight between Tajiks and non-titular nationality at a movie theatre; Tajiks beat up ethnic Russians at the theatre</td>
<td>5 held under criminal charges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: “O massovykh besporyadakh s 1957 goda.” This highly classified document, compiled by KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov at Gorbachev’s request, was declassified in 1995 and published in Istochnik (Moscow), No. 6 (1995), pp. 146–153. I am grateful to Mark Kramer for providing me with this document.
the mid-1950s through the mid-1980s was minimal and did not threaten the viability of the USSR.


The experience of the Habsburg empire suggests that political liberalization (or “enlightened absolutism” in the case of the Habsburgs), including the introduction of civil liberties, can facilitate the rise of breakaway nationalism and undermine the hegemony of ruling nations and regimes. Liberalization provides much greater opportunities for aggrieved individuals and groups to voice their discontent against the state, to propagandize their ideas, and, generally, to discredit state authority. In the Soviet case, Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika, and the attendant removal of fear and repression in the Soviet Union, facilitated the growth of assertive ethnic nationalism among the empire’s constituent units. The extent and intensity of nationalism and ethnic pressures under Gorbachev soon reached unprecedented levels. Did the central authorities respond to these challenges effectively? Did the center fight hard enough to keep the union? I will address these questions by looking at the experiences of particular nationalities that tried to secede from the Soviet Union. The most active separatist movements under Gorbachev were in the Baltic republics and, to a lesser extent, in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Ukraine also eventually became separatist (especially in the western provinces of the republic), but at a much later point than the others, and not chiefly because of ethnic nationalism. By February 1991 the Baltic republics, Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia all had declared their intent to become independent states and refused to participate in Gorbachev’s referendum on preserving the union.

56. In the Austro-Hungarian empire, reforms that culminated in the abolition of serfdom reinforced the nationalism of peasant nations directed against the imperial center. See John-Paul Himka, “Nationality Problems in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union: The Perspective of History,” in Rudolph and Good, eds., Nationalism and Empire, pp. 80–84.


58. Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, and Belarus all declared independence in the latter half of 1991, following the aborted coup in August.
Separatist Nationalism

The Baltic States
The Soviet Union forcibly incorporated the three Baltic republics in 1940 after they had enjoyed two decades of independence between the world wars. From the time of Stalin’s death through the ascendance of Gorbachev, nationalist unrest and protests in the Baltic republics often beleaguered Communist authorities.

In Lithuania nationalist sentiments burgeoned in the context of Gorbachev’s reforms. In June 1988, Lithuanian intellectuals and other activists joined forces with some members of the Lithuanian Communist Party to form Sąjūdis, the Lithuanian Movement for Reconstruction. Initially Sąjūdis did not voice demands for independence and operated strictly within the bounds permitted by Gorbachev’s reforms and by the CPSU. Early demands included Lithuania’s economic self-management, the restoration of national traditions and symbols, greater official status for the Lithuanian language, human and civil rights, and military service in Lithuania for Lithuanians.59

Shortly after the Nineteenth CPSU Conference in July 1988 adopted a resolution on the democratization of Soviet interethnic relations (mezhnatsional’nye otnosheniya), Lithuanian Communist officials adopted some of the demands of Sąjūdis in a document submitted to the CPSU Central Committee under the title “On Perfecting Interethnic Relations in the USSR.”60 The document recommended extensive cultural, budgetary, legal, and other rights for the republics, but within the context of a renewed union treaty and a more genuine Soviet federation. Radical nationalist demands were not voiced until after members of Sąjūdis soundly defeated the Communists in elections to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in Moscow in March 1989. Sąjūdis thereafter pushed for a reexamination of the “Secret Protocols” to the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 (protocols that governed the division of Eastern Europe and other regions between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany). By highlighting the pact’s illegality, they hoped to show that the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet state was invalid and, therefore, that Lithuania’s independent statehood should be restored.

In Latvia and Estonia, the Estonian and Latvian Popular Fronts, formed in 1988, were the locus of nationalist activity. Latvian and Estonian griev-

ances against the USSR centered on environmental, cultural, and human rights issues, on the Russification of the republics’ populations, and on the illegitimacy of the “Secret Protocols.” In 1989 the Baltic republics jointly petitioned Moscow to establish a parliamentary commission to examine the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Gorbachev eventually acceded to this demand and established a special body chaired by his reform-minded adviser Aleksandr Yakovlev. Hearings on the “Secret Protocols” emboldened Baltic nationalist groups, and anti-Soviet demonstrations ensued. Most dramatic was the formation of a “human chain”—linking as many as two million people—from Tallinn to Vilnius in August 1989. These demonstrations put pressure on Soviet authorities to acknowledge that the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union had been illegal.61 From 1988 to 1990 the Baltic republics took further steps emphasizing their resolve to become independent: declarations of sovereignty (Estonia in November 1988 and Lithuania in May 1989), laws of economic independence (Estonia and Lithuania in May 1989), laws that made the local language the official or state language of the republic (Latvia in October 1988, Lithuania in November 1988, and Estonia in January 1989), and declarations calling for independence or a transition period leading to independence (Estonia and Lithuania in March 1990, and Latvia in May 1990).

Local Communist authorities in the Baltic states began warning as early as 1988 of the threat posed by the growth of nationalism. With support from local KGB forces they sought to quell the tide of separatism, but managed to adopt only a number of weak measures toward this end. Some of these measures in 1988 and 1989 included more open discussion of historical symbols such as the Latvian flag and hymn; the use of Soviet historical organizations such as the All-Union Society for the Preservation of Historical Monuments and Culture to highlight pre-Soviet Lithuanian culture and history (and thereby gain the sympathy of Lithuanian youth); and recommendations to urge the United States to refrain from assisting Baltic nationalists.62


Other largely ineffective measures taken by the Soviet authorities to respond to events in the Baltic republics included Gorbachev’s visits to Latvia and Estonia in 1987 and to Lithuania in early 1990. In between these visits Gorbachev frequently sent emissaries to the region to listen to Baltic demands and seek a modus vivendi with nationalist leaders. The Soviet leader initially tried to obstruct Baltic demands for a review of the “Secret Protocols” but eventually agreed to set up the Yakovlev commission, which released an unprecedented official acknowledgment of the existence of the protocols. In general, Soviet policy toward the Baltic states, until early 1990 (after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe), remained largely tolerant. No reprisals were taken against Baltic declarations of sovereignty or Baltic assemblies that branded Soviet troops as “occupiers.” The center relied mostly on public statements and meetings to defend the Soviet Union against Baltic separatism. Even when the situation became critical after Lithuania passed a law on the restoration of independence in March 1990, Gorbachev responded by holding more meetings between Baltic leaders and the Politburo in Moscow. At one Politburo meeting, Army-General Valentin Varennikov, the hardline commander-in-chief of Soviet Ground Forces, suggested that emergency rule be introduced in Lithuania and that tens of thousands of additional troops be brought in under the pretext that they were invited by “patriotic” forces. This idea, however, was rejected.

Perhaps the most forceful early response by local Communist authorities to Baltic nationalism was the directive issued by the hardline Lithuanian party first secretary, Ringaudas Songaila, ordering the army and police to prevent celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of Lithuanian independence in February 1988. Such displays of force, however, were extremely rare. Far more common was the exodus of Baltic Communists to the reform-minded nationalist camp, a move that became particularly attractive under Moscow’s new policy of popularly contested elections. After a few embarrassing setbacks Communist elites quickly realized that only by taking on the nationalist mantle could they hope to remain in power. For example, after the victory of na-

63. Mark Kramer’s article “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 178–256, convincingly shows that the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe had an important effect on Gorbachev’s policy vis-à-vis the Baltic states.


tionalists in the March 1989 elections for the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, Latvian Party First Secretary Alfred Rubiks wrote a pithy document to the Politburo outlining the Communist Party’s loss of control and authority in his republic, the infiltration of Latvian nationalists into the party hierarchy, and the rise of the Latvian National Front as a real alternative to the Communist Party. Nonetheless, despite Rubiks’s pleas and warnings, Moscow did not take any decisive measures to halt Baltic nationalism.

Ultimately, the central authorities did resort to coercive measures against the Baltic states. In April 1990 Moscow turned off oil and gas pipelines to Lithuania, and Vilnius retaliated by blocking natural gas transfers to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. In May 1990, Lithuanian leaders sought to ward off Moscow’s onslaught by offering to suspend the recently adopted laws on independence. But they made clear that they would not suspend the declaration of independence itself. In June, Lithuania further agreed to a moratorium on its declaration of independence, and Moscow ended its economic blockade, bringing to an end the first standoff.

During a second standoff in Lithuania between Baltic nationalists and union supporters in January 1991, the Soviet regime sought to make a stronger show of resolve. Soviet riot troops and KGB forces stormed several buildings in Vilnius to remove the elected government of Vytautas Landsbergis (the leader of Sąjūdis) and to install the so-called Lithuanian National Salvation Committee, an entity created by the KGB to reassert control of the republic. Fourteen people were killed, prompting worldwide condemnation, including a strong protest from the United States and a threat to cancel a summit and U.S. aid to the Soviet Union. Days later Soviet riot troops and KGB units in Latvia attacked the republic’s Ministry of Internal Affairs headquarters, killing five people. Despite these initial thrusts, Gorbachev declined to follow through on plans to impose full states of emergency in Lithuania and Latvia and to dissolve the local governments in those republics.

Although force was used in January 1991, there was no indication of consensus, resolve, or firm leadership at the center on this matter. The use of


67. Gorbachev has consistently denied that he ordered the use of force in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991, but, as Brian Taylor shows, there is ample reason to be skeptical about these denials. See Brian Taylor, “The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR,” Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 40–42. For Gorbachev’s denials, see Mikhail Gorbachev, Memoirs (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 575–581.

68. In another show of force in May 1991—when MVD troops took down unsanctioned customs
force in Latvia and Lithuania appeared half-hearted at best, and the only lasting effect within the Baltic states (as well as in Russia and several other republics) was to radicalize the opponents of the Soviet Union and the CPSU. The crackdowns in Vilnius and Riga stirred vigorous protests in Russia, legitimized Yeltsin’s call for Gorbachev’s resignation, and became a focal point for the founding conference of the Democratic Congress in Kharkiv on 26–27 January 1991. The Congress demanded that the CPSU be removed from power, encouraged the republics to flout Gorbachev’s “anti-constitutional” decrees, and recommended the transfer of control over industrial enterprises and the army to the republics. Russian political groups that were active in the Congress subsequently helped Yeltsin gain election to the Russian presidency, thereby pushing along factors and events that would ultimately spell the end of the Soviet Union.69

The use of force in January 1991 to prevent Baltic secession was a case of “too little, too incompetent, too late.” By that point public sentiment in the Baltic republics had taken on a much more radical edge than in either 1988 or 1989. No longer would the Baltic peoples be satisfied by anything short of outright independence. Gorbachev, for his part, seemed determined never to permit independence for the Baltic states, but if that was the case, he should have used force more decisively and effectively, and at an earlier stage, against the Baltic separatist movements. Deliberations in the highest bodies of Soviet power were consistently irresolute from 1987 to 1991. Given the ambivalence and indecision at the center, as well as the solid determination in the periphery (plus external support from the West and from Eastern Europe for Baltic independence), the secession of the Baltic republics increasingly moved closer to reality.70


70. As late as August 1990 the U.S. Senate’s consideration of a measure to grant $10 million in humanitarian aid to Lithuania created consternation among Soviet authorities. Understanding the threat of Lithuania’s separatist nationalism, and knowing that Western aid could only advance this cause, the Central Committee of the CPSU instructed the Soviet Foreign Ministry to oppose the pending U.S. measure as interference in Soviet internal affairs and to link the issue to defense negotiations between the two countries. Again, this illustrates a response that addressed only slim margins of the Baltic secessionist problem and failed utterly to add any variable favorable to keeping the Soviet Union intact. See TsK KPSS, “K voprosu o gumanitarnoi pomoshchi SShA Litve,” 23 August 1990, Rossiiskii
Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova

Like the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova also had strong nationalist movements. In Georgia nationalism dated back to the early 1920s, after Bolshevik Russia invaded the republic and reincorporated it into the Soviet Union. Georgian nationalists at first defied the Bolsheviks and, in 1924, attempted to restore Georgian independence. However, Soviet troops crushed the rebellion and imposed Soviet rule there. Two other major outbreaks of nationalist unrest occurred in Georgia, in 1956 and 1978, but these, too, did not alter Georgia’s status as a constituent part of the Soviet Union.

In the first years of Gorbachev’s rule Georgian nationalists expressed concern over ecological, historical, and religious issues. By 1988–1989 however, Georgian nationalist groups had begun to adopt a more exclusivist ethnic stance and an anti-Soviet orientation. Some informal groups demonstrated against other nationalities residing in the republic, especially Abkhaziyans and Azeris who, they argued, mistreated Georgians. In February 1989 thousands of Georgians marched in Tbilisi to commemorate the Soviet invasion of Georgia. Two months later, calls by Abkhaziyan nationalists to separate from Georgia incited a fierce popular and official reaction. Massive demonstrations ensued in Tbilisi, as protesters demanded that Abkhaziya remain part of Georgia and that Georgia itself break away from the Soviet Union. At the time, Gorbachev and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze were on a state visit to Britain, but someone in Moscow (it is not clear who it was and with what authorization the person acted) ordered troops and police to quell the demonstration. Nineteen people died and thousands were injured when the security forces opened fire. After this incident mass demonstrations for Georgian independence ebbed, but anti-Soviet feelings intensified, as became evident in March 1991 when a republic-wide referendum on Georgian independence yielded an almost unanimous vote in favor. A month later, the Georgian Supreme Soviet declared the republic’s independence.

Armenia, unlike Georgia, was incorporated into the Soviet Union under relatively auspicious circumstances. Faced with the threat of a powerful and genocidal Turkey at the close of World War I, Armenians opted to align themselves with Russia under the banner of the Soviet state. From the 1950s through the mid-1980s Armenian nationalism was relatively quiescent, and the republic as a whole maintained a Russophile orientation. One issue that aggrieved Armenians deeply, however, was the mass slaughter of Armenians perpetrated by the Turks in 1915–1916. When the Bolsheviks sought to gloss

over this episode in Armenian history, it caused deep resentment in Armenia—resentment that lasted all through the Stalin era and afterward. In 1965 Armenians took to the streets to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide, and from then on the Soviet authorities allowed the republic to observe the event officially each year. They also permitted Armenia to build a monument to the victims of the genocide.

Under Gorbachev Armenian nationalism flared as a result of conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous oblast located in Azerbaijan but inhabited predominantly by Armenians. For historical and symbolic reasons the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) loomed large in the Armenian national consciousness. In early 1988 tens of thousands of Armenians signed a petition requesting the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Shortly thereafter the local NKAO administration formally requested transfer of the region to Armenian jurisdiction. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians took part in demonstrations in Armenia, Moscow, and Nagorno-Karabakh to express support for this demand. Later, when the Armenian government in Erevan formally declared Nagorno-Karabakh a part of Armenia and the Azerbaijani government made a counterdeclaration, Gorbachev and other leaders basically abdicated central responsibility by asking the two republics to resolve the problem themselves. Eventually, Moscow refused to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia. This decision, followed by anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait in 1988 that killed at least thirty-two Armenians and wounded hundreds catalyzed the transformation of the Armenian national movement into an anti-Moscow and anti-Soviet crusade.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh continued to fester in 1988–1990, producing more violence and mutual expulsions of populations by Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Soviet government took the NKAO under its direct administration in the early part of 1989, but this action provided only a temporary respite. The central authorities allocated money for the development of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Gorbachev met with prominent members of the Armenian intelligentsia to seek their help in resolving Armenian-Azeri differ-

72. At least one scholar notes that the Azeri Communist Party had ceded Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia in 1920, but the Soviet government never formalized this cession. In 1923 the region was officially reincorporated into Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh symbolizes several things to Armenians: Turkish genocide against Armenia (many Armenians equate Azeris with Turks), Western betrayal of Armenia because British forces helped Azerbaijan acquire Nagorno-Karabakh in 1918, and objectionable border arrangements created by the Soviet regime. See Edmund M. Herzig, “Armenians,” in Smith, ed., Nationalities Question, p. 152.

ences. These measures, however, were insufficient to resolve a conflict that had already led to considerable bloodshed. In addition to making conciliatory gestures, Soviet officials used force—albeit on a limited basis—against both Azeri and Armenian nationalists. In January 1990, Soviet troops stormed Baku and killed as many as 150 Azeris aligned with the Azerbaijani Popular Front. The ostensible aim of the intervention was to stop Azeri massacres of Armenians, but the real goal was to prevent the Azerbaijani Popular Front from taking power. In May 1990, Soviet troops also killed twenty-nine demonstrators in Erevan and elsewhere in Armenia. These actions and the continued stalemate over Nagorno-Karabakh caused Armenian dissatisfaction to intensify. In August 1990 the Armenian parliament declared the republic’s transition to independence from the Soviet Union.

Moldova, like Georgia and Armenia, also developed a powerful nationalist movement under Gorbachev. Historically, linguistically, and culturally, Moldovans were part of the Romanian nation, and the bulk of Soviet Moldova’s territory was traditionally known as Bessarabia. Russia acquired Bessarabia in 1812, but after the Bolshevik revolution the territory became part of the independent state of Romania. The Soviet regime never accepted the transfer of Bessarabia to Romania and set up a Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic to the east of the Dnestr River, with an eye to reclaiming Bessarabia (which lay to the west of the Dnestr). Under the secret protocols to the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Soviet forces moved into Bessarabia and reannexed it. Although Romania, backed by Germany, briefly regained control of Bessarabia during World War II, the Soviet Union reasserted control of the territory in 1944 and soon thereafter incorporated it into a new Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

Except for a few brief periods, Soviet leaders throughout the pre-Gorbachev era sought to create and preserve a Moldovan national identity that would be distinct from Romanian identity. The authorities prohibited the use of the Latin script for Moldova’s Romanian language, replacing it with Cyrillic. After a rift emerged between the Soviet Union and Romania in the mid-1960s, the Soviet regime imposed restrictions on Romanian publications.


that could be brought into Moldova. By the 1970s, however, partly as a result of the rise of a Moldovan intelligentsia and partly because of the continued tensions between Bucharest and Moscow, pan-Romanian sentiment began to reemerge in Moldova. This sentiment was expressed far more openly under the political liberalization implemented by Gorbachev. By 1989, demands for reunification with Romania began to surface in Moldova. In August 1989 nearly half a million demonstrators, led by the Popular Front of Moldova, held a rally in Chișinău demanding that Romanian be made the republic’s official language. In April 1990 Moldova replaced its Soviet flag, and in June 1990 the Moldovan parliament passed a declaration of sovereignty. Tensions between Moscow and Chișinău continued to grow over the next several months. In December 1990 hundreds of thousands of Moldovans gathered to demand independence and to express opposition to any new union treaty. After the failed August 1991 coup, Moldova declared its independence.76

As with other refractory groups in the Soviet Union, the central authorities did not respond forcefully to quell Moldovan nationalism. In 1989 Soviet officials eased travel restrictions between Romania and Moldova and promised to grant greater cultural rights to the Moldovans. In September 1990 Moscow sent Soviet MVD troops to protect a congress organized by pro-Soviet activists in Moldova’s Transnistria region (a strip of land along the east bank of the Dniester). According to one participant, Moscow wanted to warn the Popular Front of Moldova that unless it relinquished its bid for independence, the republic might be dismembered.77 Although this action may have generated some concern that force would be used on a wider scale, very little actually came of it. In the end Gorbachev refrained from taking any decisive steps to crush Moldovan separatism.

Ukraine
Unlike the Baltic republics, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, Ukraine did not have a mass separatist movement during most of the Gorbachev years. There were certainly organized Ukrainian nationalist groups such as Rukh (formed in 1989), but none of them approximated the influence and numbers of the

popular fronts in other republics. One of the factors that tempered Ukrainian nationalism was the presence of roughly 11 million ethnic Russians in Ukraine, nearly a quarter of the republic’s population. Although the Russian minority was concentrated in eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, Ukrainian activists were aware that expressions of vehement Ukrainian nationalism might stimulate an irredentist response from the Russian government, possibly leading to civil conflict or the dismemberment of the republic. The Ukrainian population’s ambivalence regarding independence from the Soviet Union was apparent in the results of the referendum held in March 1991. With an 80.2 percent turnout of registered voters, Ukraine yielded a 70.5 percent affirmative response to the all-union question regarding the desirability of preserving the USSR as a “renewed federation.” At the same time, 80.2 percent said yes to an additional republic question regarding the use of the Ukrainian declaration of sovereignty as the basis for defining the republic’s status in any future federative association.78

By the summer of 1991, especially after the aborted coup d’état in August, public sentiment in Ukraine shifted strongly in favor of separatism. On 24 August the Ukrainian parliament adopted a declaration of independence, and on 1 December 1991 the republic conducted a national referendum on independence. Over 90 percent of voters, including those in heavily Russian-populated areas of the republic, voted in favor of Ukrainian independence. Subsequent analyses show that the majority of voters in Ukraine came to support independence because they believed that a separate existence from the USSR might be the best guarantee for their economic well-being. Most of the Ukrainian political elites who campaigned for independence did not do so in the name of ethnic Ukrainian nationalism, but in the name of potential economic advancement. Because Ukrainian politicians (even outspoken nationalists such as Volodymyr Chornovil) did not embrace an ethnic exclusivist platform, it was much easier for Russians in Ukraine to support the campaign for independence in the belief that they, too, would enjoy the expected economic benefits.79 The case of Ukraine illustrated less the power of ethnic nationalism than the widespread belief among elites and publics in the periphery that the center was increasingly unable to deliver requisite goods. This


point will be further discussed in the section below on the failure of the center to uphold the economic aspect of the center-periphery compact.

**Net Assessment**

From the preceding account we can determine whether ethnic challenges were sufficiently grave to threaten Soviet dismemberment by 1991. My answer is a qualified no. Ethnic separatism was strongest in the Baltic republics, and, given that region’s history and the support voiced by Western countries (especially the Scandinavian countries) for Baltic independence, the Baltic governments were unlikely to yield on secession from mid-1990 on. In the early years of perestroika, however, when Baltic leaders were strongly supportive of Gorbachev, a union treaty offered with real autonomy would have sufficed for some time, perhaps indefinitely. By late 1990, however, the Soviet Union could have kept Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia only at great human and military cost and at the risk of alienating the West.

The declarations of independence by Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova also seemed amenable to negotiation by the center, particularly because all three of these republics were dealing with conflicts (internal and otherwise) that Moscow could have manipulated to its advantage. Georgia and Moldova were confronted by secessionist movements on their territory, and Armenia was embroiled in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. In Moldova, President Mircea Snegur actually expressed willingness to support Gorbachev’s union treaty in late 1990 in exchange for Moscow’s termination of support for separatists in Transnistria. With regard to Armenia, an early resolution of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (either reestablishing it as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic [ASSR] or putting it under Moscow’s long-term jurisdiction), coupled with the consistent use of force against any potential Armenian and Azeri violations of such an arrangement, undoubtedly could have kept Russia’s longtime ally in the Soviet fold.

Mass mobilizations, disturbances, and deaths associated with separatist nationalism indicated cracks in the Soviet state edifice, but these were not severe enough to destroy the state. From September 1985 to August 1989,

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80. This point is stressed in Simonyan, “Strany Baltii v gody Gorbachevskoi perestroiki,” pp. 56–60
81. Even if the USSR let the Baltic republics go, the loss would have been small in terms of territory and population (2 percent). The center, however, would have faced a serious challenge of credibly drawing the separatist line with the Baltics and effectively using force and other means to prevent other republics from following suit. My arguments in this paper imply that strong political resolve at the center could have dealt with this challenge, but the absence of such resolve dictated the fate of the Soviet Union.
forty-seven large demonstrations took place in the Soviet Union, but almost all of them occurred in the six separatist republics. These demonstrations, though attended by vast numbers of people, were peaceful and did not fatally threaten Soviet power. During this same period, deaths resulting from actions to quell nationalist separatism numbered in the low hundreds (predominantly in the Caucasus) and did not increase dramatically even by 1991. It is worth noting that, elsewhere in the world, when states have sought to quell armed ethnic separatism, they have been able to do so for long periods of time (even if they ultimately fail), as long as they are willing to tolerate great costs in lives and resources. This has been the case with the Kashmiris in India, the Kurds in Turkey, the Moros in the Philippines, the Timorese in Indonesia, the Eritreans in Ethiopia (who managed to break away only after thirty years of fierce civil war), the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and other groups.83 In another instance, when the Ottoman empire faced ethnic separatist revolts from thousands of its subjects in the 1870s in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria (aided by Serbia and Montenegro), the empire used brutal force and continued to survive for another four decades.84 Under Gorbachev, by contrast, the Soviet government treated nationalist groups in a civilized way, taking such measures as the passage of a Law on Secession in April 1990 and even creating legal obstacles to the center’s blatant use of force.85 As a whole, the central authorities’ indecision and civility were a weightier cause of Soviet disintegration than the strength of nationalist separatism itself.

**Ethnic Conflicts**

This section will discuss the severity of a number of ethnic conflicts, including intercommunal violence and ethnically grounded protests against the center. To what extent did these events threaten the cohesion of the Soviet state? The first significant ethnic conflict under Gorbachev occurred in 1986 in Kazakhstan, when Moscow replaced the First Secretary of the republic’s Communist Party with an ethnic Russian. Thousands of young people rioted and vandalized Communist Party property in Alma-Ata, the capital.86 Soviet troops


84. Tuminez, *Russian Nationalism since 1856*, pp. 156–158.

85. For example, the Soviet law on emergency presidential power could be applied only with the consent of republic leaders, making it more difficult for Moscow to exercise arbitrary authority in the republics.

86. Alma-Ata was later renamed Almaty. In the post-Soviet era it ceased to be the capital of Kazakhstan (a status now enjoyed by Agmola), but it remains the informal capital.
met the rioters with force, killing two people. According to a KGB account, some of those who were wounded and taken to hospitals also subsequently died. The official death toll from this incident remains at two, but the actual number who died may be as high as ten.87

The most serious ethnic conflict during Gorbachev’s rule was the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Although full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan did not erupt until after the Soviet Union disintegrated, more than eight hundred people were killed in this conflict during the Gorbachev era. Among the dead were at least thirty-two Armenians killed in pogroms in Sumgait in 1988, sixty-eight or more Armenians killed in pogroms in Baku in January 1990, and approximately 150 Azeris killed by Soviet troops in Baku the same month. In addition, from 1988 to January 1990 as many as 600,000 people were forcibly displaced by the conflict.88

Nagorno-Karabakh had the makings of an intractable conflict and proved to be one in the post-Soviet period.89 However, as is true of most conflicts, actions taken at an earlier stage to prevent escalation could have made the task of conflict management easier. In 1988, when the conflict turned violent and Armenian and NKAO officials formally announced that the region had been incorporated into Armenia, Soviet leaders could have defused (or at least contained) the dispute by decisively settling the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, most likely by making it an ASSR or putting it under direct presidential rule, with the promise of swift and harsh punishment for paramilitary groups on either side who might violate the arrangement. Far from being decisive, however, the Soviet government’s response to Nagorno-Karabakh was slow and irresolute, reflecting naïveté and a partial abdication of central responsibility.90 In early 1988 Gorbachev recommended more glasnost between Armenia and Azerbaijan and asked both sides to adhere to the spirit of “socialist internationalism.” Others, such as KGB Chairman Viktor

87. See the data in Table 1.
89. As of 1994 the estimated number of deaths from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had risen to nearly 10,000, the large majority of which occurred after the Soviet Union broke apart. See Seymour, ed., ACCESS Guide, p. 57.
Chebrikov, proposed using the army at an early stage, but the CPSU Politburo rejected his suggestion. Others in the Politburo preferred granting more economic aid to Nagorno-Karabakh and creating a special commission to resolve the territory’s status. In top-level meetings at the Kremlin Gorbachev constantly eschewed military solutions in favor of vague political measures. He said he understood that people’s frustration was rising and that many were asking, “Where is Soviet power? How much more can we take?” But he insisted that the only answer was “reconciliation” (primirenie).  

The Soviet government’s eventual use of force in Baku in January 1990 was ostensibly intended to stop interethnic fighting, but in reality it was designed to crush the Azerbaijani Popular Front, which had already seized power in the Lenkoran and Dzhalilabad districts of the republic and taken down the border posts between Azerbaijan and Iran. The invasion of Azerbaijan marked the apex of the central government’s resolve to use force to hold the union together (spurred perhaps by the immediate precedent of the collapse of Communist power in Eastern Europe and the USSR’s loss of its “outer empire”). After Soviet troops intervened, the central government imposed emergency rule in Azerbaijan, forcing the Azerbaijani Popular Front into retreat. Some of the Front’s extremist leaders went underground, and the Azerbaijani Communist Party was able to reconstitute itself and resume its functions under the new leadership of Ayaz Mutalibov, who could rely on Soviet troops for protection. The center’s use of force did not end the ethnic conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, but it effectively stemmed Azerbaijan’s separatist crisis. Only in late 1991, after the failed August coup and the precipitous decline of authority and consensus at the center, did Azeri leaders reassert their independence against Moscow.

91. Gorbachev Foundation, Soyuz mozhno bylo sokhranit’, pp. 23–30; and Gorbachev’s address to Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moskovski komosomolets (Moscow), 27 February 1988, p. 1. The Azerbaijani leader, Ayaz Mutalibov, indicated in a report in 1992 that a “crisis of power,” characterized in large part by the center’s “indecisiveness” and the disappearance of trust in the center’s ability to govern, was a key factor in the crises that struck Azerbaijan in January 1990. See “Probe of 1990 Baku Tragedy Faults Center,” p. 8.


Although the use of force in Baku effectively (if temporarily) parried a serious challenge to the center, an analysis of elite decision-making on the issue indicates that the center had not come to a strong consensus on the desirability of using force to hold the union together. Soviet leaders did not devise clear procedures for dealing with future challenges similar to the Azerbaijani Popular Front. High-ranking Soviet officials, notably Shevardnadze and Egor Ligachev, were openly wrangling about who had authorized the use of troops in Tbilisi the previous year. In April 1991, Moscow relied on force again, this time to assist Azeris in expelling Armenians from settlements outside Nagorno-Karabakh.94 These actions were far too limited to strengthen the cohesion of the Soviet Union. The central government did not use enough force to produce a durable settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh, and its actions only added to the resentment felt by both Azeris and Armenians against Moscow.

Ethnic conflicts also buffeted the neighboring republic of Soviet Georgia. The rise of a Georgian nationalist government under Zviad Gamsakhurdia sparked a backlash and led to the formation of two secessionist movements in the republic. One of these movements emerged in South Ossetia, where only 14 percent of the native population (Ossetians) were fluent in Georgian. In August 1990 the South Ossetians adopted a declaration of sovereignty and asked to be incorporated into the Soviet Union. Fighting that broke out between South Ossetian and Georgian forces in February 1991 killed nearly thirty people. The conflict also generated 100,000 refugees by early 1991.95 The other secessionist movement in Georgia was formed in Abkhazia, a region that had experienced periodic unrest in earlier decades (especially in 1956 and 1978). In 1988 the Abkhazians petitioned the Soviet government to restore Abkhaziya to the status of a union-republic, a designation it had enjoyed in 1921–1930. As many as 30,000 Abkhaziyans subsequently demonstrated for the right to secede from Georgia. In response, ethnic Georgians organized mass protests in Tbilisi against the Abkhaziyans, who constituted only 18 percent of the population in Abkhaziya. (Most of the rest of the population in Abkhaziya was Georgian.) In April 1989 twenty civilians were killed in Tbilisi when (as mentioned above) Soviet troops moved against demonstrators. In Abkhaziya three months later, eighteen people died in a clash between Georgians and Abkhaziyans over the status of Abkhaziyan State University. In August 1990, Abkhaziya declared its sovereignty in response to

Georgia’s own declaration of sovereignty vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The situation remained at an impasse until after the Soviet Union broke up, when armed hostilities resumed between Georgia and Abkhazia.

The conflicts in Georgia posed a challenge to Soviet authority by 1991 but were not so unmanageable as to threaten the cohesion of the Soviet Union. Because it seemed likely that Georgia itself would be dismembered if it broke away from the USSR, the Soviet government could easily have exploited the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts to its own benefit. However, most of the actions taken by the central authorities were too late or too timid to make any difference. In January 1991 Gorbachev issued an ultimatum for Tbilisi either to restore South Ossetia's status as an autonomous republic (a designation that Gamsakhurdia had annulled) or to face the entry of Soviet troops into the republic. The Georgian authorities simply ignored this ultimatum, without suffering reprisals. After fighting broke out between Ossetians and Georgians in the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali in 1991, Soviet MVD troops came to keep the peace. But the peace did not last long, and renewed skirmishes continued long after the Soviet Union disintegrated in December 1991.

In Central Asia the most intense ethnic conflict during the Gorbachev era erupted in June 1990 between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan (along the Ferghana Valley). Several days of interethnic rioting, and a crackdown by Soviet troops, resulted in 148 deaths and more than a thousand serious injuries. The immediate cause of the violence was a dispute between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks over the distribution of homestead land. Many Uzbeks were angered by the Soviet government’s decision to grant land to ethnic Kyrgyz, a program that seemed to exclude the Uzbeks. A related conflict arose between Uzbeks and Meshkhetian Turks, an ethnic group that had been deported en masse to Central Asia by Stalin. To curb the bloodshed, Soviet officials ended up evacuating 4,500 Meshkhetian Turks to Russia for resettlement. These violent incidents, though problematic for Soviet authorities, tended to be contained and did not lead to chronic instability. Moreover, the union republics involved, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, remained strong supporters of the preservation of the USSR.

97. Indeed, by 1992 the post-Soviet Russian government was regularly exploiting Georgia’s internal divisions to keep the newly independent Georgian state within Russia’s sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States.
99. Other ethnic clashes also produced fatalities in Central Asia, including the killing of 18 people in Dushanbe in February 1990 after rumors spread that Armenian refugees were getting preferential
Separatist conflicts in Moldova—one pitting the Moldovan authorities in Chișinău against a hardline pro-Soviet movement in Transnistria (led mainly by ethnic Russians), and another between the Moldovan authorities and the Gagauz (Turkic-speaking) minority in southern Moldova—were not entirely ethnic in nature, but they did have an ethnic dimension. In November 1989, soon after the Moldovan parliament adopted laws enshrining Moldovan/Romanian as the official language, the Gagauz minority issued a demand for autonomy. In October 1990 the local Gagauz government prepared a referendum on autonomy, without the approval of the Moldovan authorities. Members of the Popular Front of Moldova, seeking to block the referendum, were prevented by Soviet troops from moving southward, so they instead confronted and attacked a group of Transnistrian loyalists. In another clash that same day between Transnistrian rebels and Moldovan nationalists in Dubosari, six people died. The violence in Moldova, like that in Georgia, was an irritant and distraction for Moscow, but it did not threaten the integrity of the Soviet state. The Moldovan authorities even claimed that they would support Gorbachev’s new union treaty if Moscow ceased helping the hardliners in Transnistria. Until the coup in Moscow in August 1991—an event denounced by the Chișinău government but applauded by the Transnistrrians—Moldovan officials were more inclined to stay in the union than to risk a full-fledged civil war in their republic.

By 1990 ethnic conflicts and the use of the Soviet army and MVD to respond to them had caused 1,049 deaths, 8,951 casualties, and over half a million refugees. The largest numbers of refugees came from Armenia (173,000), Azerbaijan (330,000) and Uzbekistan (64,000). Did these disturbances and their effects fatally threaten the integrity of the Soviet Union? At times the warring groups did directly challenge Soviet authority, leading to problems of governance and law and order. However, these pressures from below were not severe enough to destroy the state. The much more important problem was the failure of Soviet leaders to act early or consistently enough—and above all their failure to use force decisively and in a sustained, consistent manner—to...
curb the demands of ethnic groups and to prevent the outbreak or escalation of ethnic conflicts.\textsuperscript{103} The fact that mass killings, ethnic wars, refugee flows, and other disturbances intensified after the Soviet Union broke apart, and yet none of the post-Soviet states collapsed as a result, further bolsters the conclusion that the Soviet Union could have survived the challenge of ethnic conflicts on its territory.

### Demographic, Religious, and Linguistic Pressures

The impact of demographic, religious, and linguistic factors on the breakup of the Soviet Union also deserves examination. The results of the countrywide census in the Soviet Union in 1970 and other statistical studies have prompted some scholars to argue that changes in the demographic makeup of the Soviet Union threatened the stability of the Soviet empire. Scholars point, in particular, to the decreasing rate of Russian and Slavic population growth relative to the high growth rates among the Turkic-Muslim peoples of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. In 1959, Russians accounted for 54.65 percent of the Soviet population, but that figure declined to 53.37 percent by 1970. Although this decrease is not highly significant at first glance, it becomes more so when discrepancies in birth rates between the Slavs and Muslims of the Soviet Union are taken into account. Fertility statistics compiled in 1960 and 1974 show that the Turkic-Muslim groups had average birth rates of 38.7 per thousand and 30.2 per thousand in those two years—figures well above the average in the USSR. In contrast, Slavs had birth rates well below the average in the same years, at 22.7 per thousand and 15.5 per thousand. Statistics for 1979–1989 further indicate that the main Slavic groups increased by only around five percent—the Russian population by 5.6 percent, Belarusians by 6 percent, and Ukrainians by 4.2 percent—whereas the trends for the Muslim populations were sharply upward (34 percent for Uzbeks, 32 percent for Kyrgyz, 45 percent for Tajiks, 34 percent for Turkmen, and 24 percent for Azeris). By the late-1980s the average family size was 3.1 for Russians and Belarusians, 3.2 for Ukrainians, 5.0 for Azeris, 5.4 for Kyrgyz, 7.0 for Tajiks, 6.2 for Turkmen, 4.9 for Kazakhs, and 6.1 for Uzbeks.\textsuperscript{104}


\textsuperscript{104} I calculated the first set of birth rates from figures in Carrière d’Encausse, \textit{Decline of an Empire}, 122.
Western analysts drew several conclusions from the Soviet demographic data. Although none argued that the Turkic-Muslims would soon overwhelm Russians demographically and politically, some claimed that the most demographically dynamic groups might seek political power commensurate with their growing share of the Soviet population. In addition, some scholars argued that population growth might generate economic demands in the periphery that the center would be unable to satisfy, possibly leading to disturbances and mass unrest. According to this view, the strength of empire would wane as the percentage of Russians steadily declined in the governing bodies of republics such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan, all of which were becoming more ethnically homogenized through the growth of the titular nationalities and the out-migration of Russians.105

As it turned out, the demographic trends, disparate though they might have been, did not create strong centrifugal pressures. The Muslim republics of Central Asia were stalwart supporters of the Soviet regime, irrespective of their demographic advances. Admittedly, some demography-related factors (such as competition over fertile land) led to conflicts that challenged the Soviet government, but these were neither massive nor sustained. In the Caucasus Azerbaijan turned against Moscow not because of demographic pressures but because of dissatisfaction with the center’s response to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Neither in the Caucasus nor in Central Asia did demographics equal politics. The argument that the “indigenization” of governing bodies could cause problems for the Soviet Union was borne out to some extent in the western Soviet republics, but only when Gorbachev’s introduction of competitive elections paved the way for popular fronts to dominate the local governments. This facilitated various declarations of sovereignty and independence, and contributed to ethnic pressures against the center. Nonetheless, as discussed above, these pressures were not fatal and could have been contained if the central authorities had responded more decisively.

One final point worth noting about the demographic trends is that the fastest growing titular nationalities did not necessarily exert the strongest pressure on the center. On the contrary, some of the strongest pressure came from groups like the Estonians and Latvians, who believed that their numbers were diminishing as Russians and other nationalities settled in their republics. Many Estonians and Latvians resented the Soviet regime, whose policies they blamed for their unfavorable demographic situation. Moreover, demographics

was not the core element in the Baltic peoples’ opposition to the Soviet Union. The perceived illegitimacy of Soviet rule in the Baltic states was a historical reality aggravated, but not caused, by demographic factors.

Linguistic pressures in the Soviet Union proved only slightly more difficult to contain than the demographic trends. In some cases language grievances facilitated the rise of ethnic nationalism. Some of the titular groups wanted their own language to predominate over Russian, which had long been the lingua franca in the Soviet Union. In addition, many of the non-Slavic nationalities were irritated that the Russians who had settled in their republics never bothered to learn the local language. According to the 1970 census, for example, only 3 percent of some 20 million Russians living outside the RSFSR had learned the native languages of their republics.106

In 1989 and 1990, almost every republic of the Soviet Union passed a law or constitutional amendment conferring official status on the language of the titular nationality. The three republics that did not do this—Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—already had provisions in their 1978 constitutions establishing their languages as the official ones in their republics. The language laws passed in 1989 and 1990 fell into two categories: those intended to facilitate the predominance of the indigenous language over Russian (in Estonia, Lithuania, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan; and those that sought to accommodate multiple languages and to designate each language’s functions within the republic (Latvia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus).107 No strict correlation exists between the republics that passed the strictest language laws and those that were most intent on separating from the Soviet Union. One reason that language was not a particularly salient factor in the breakup of the Soviet Union was that Soviet language laws and practices were generally liberal. The Soviet regime pursued a dual policy that, on the one hand, developed Russian as a means of efficient communication for an empire in which more than a hundred languages were spoken, and that, on the other hand, also preserved the distinctiveness of many non-Russian languages. Soviet language policy never sought to extirpate the use of non-Russian languages; instead, it was adjusted to take account of the political status of a nationality and the size and population density of an ethnic group.108

106. Nahaylo and Swoboda, Soviet Disunion, p. 175.
Even more than demographic and linguistic trends, religion was only a peripheral factor in the breakup of the Soviet Union. Contrary to the expectations of some, Islam in Azerbaijan and Central Asia did not serve as a catalyst for mass discontent with, or rebellion against, Soviet rule. The Soviet regime over time had implemented policies to prevent the rise of pan-Islamic solidarity among the republics of Central Asia, to siphon Islamic activities into four officially approved muftiates in the country, and to keep “the religious fervor of believers within limits prescribed by Soviet laws.”

The CPSU Central Committee acknowledged in 1990 that its approach to Islam had been narrow and simplistic, and that under the pretext of fighting “reactionary Islamic traditions” it had quelled legitimate national traditions and caused the estrangement of Muslims from the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, even when Gorbachev decreed freedom of conscience and religion, this opening did not rouse Muslims in the USSR to rally around Islam and to fight against Moscow. Similarly, among the Christian denominations that were long identified with nationalist causes—the Armenian Gregorian Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church in Lithuania, and the Uniate Church in western Ukraine—only the Catholic Church in Lithuania (and, to a lesser extent, the Uniate Church in Ukraine) became a significant factor in the rise of anti-Soviet ethnonationalism. Underground publications of the Catholic Church and its adherents, protests against Soviet religious oppression, and international petitions on behalf of the Church over the years helped forge Lithuanian national identity and strengthen sentiments against the empire.

**Russian Nationalism: Yeltsin’s Revenge, and Public Apathy toward Empire**

The Russian republic historically, territorially, demographically, and organizationally was by far the most important component of the Soviet state. The Soviet Union inherited most of what was the Tsarist Russian empire, and the RSFSR accounted for three-quarters of Soviet territory and the bulk of Soviet economic and natural resources. Moreover, the population of the RSFSR, more than 80 percent of which was ethnic Russian, constituted over half of the Soviet population. All the main Soviet power structures—the CPSU, the

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army, the KGB, the MVD, the economic and military-industrial ministries, and other organizations—were concentrated in Moscow. Because of the dominant role of Russia in the maintenance of the Soviet imperial state, a consensus among Russians on the value of empire was needed to hold the Soviet Union together.

In 1990 and 1991, Russian support for the maintenance of the Soviet state critically wavered. This was partly a result of Russian nationalism. However, unlike other nationalisms in the Soviet republics, Russian nationalism did not involve mass ethnic mobilization against the center. Instead, it was confined to a narrow circle of elites, especially Yeltsin and his supporters, who used nationalist rhetoric and arguments to wrest legitimacy from Gorbachev as head of the Soviet Union and to argue for a preponderant Russian state that would eclipse the Soviet regime. As discussed below, Yeltsin and his entourage did not realize until too late that their espousal of Russian nationalism and a preponderant role for Russia would deal a fatal blow to the Soviet state (as opposed to the Soviet regime). Yeltsin managed to exact his revenge against Gorbachev, but at the cost of losing the Soviet Union. The wider population in the RSFSR—though not mobilized in opposition to the Soviet Union—was also pivotal in the disintegration of the empire. The large majority of Russians proved indifferent to the cause of empire, being unconvinced of its value and unwilling to act or make sacrifices for its maintenance. In essence, Russian elites and masses both lost the will to preserve the empire and ended up defecting from it.

At the elite level, consensus broke down as rival centers of power—one led by Gorbachev and the other by Yeltsin—vied for supremacy in Moscow. A strong element of personal animosity marked this rivalry, arising from Gorbachev’s decision in October 1987 to humiliate Yeltsin and remove him from the Politburo.112 Yeltsin was intent on seeking revenge. He effectively used Russian nationalist rhetoric to challenge Gorbachev and wrest central power from him. When seeking to become chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet in 1990 and to win election to the Russian presidency in 1991, Yeltsin adopted populist and nationalist themes. Initially he called for economic, political, and cultural independence for all peoples of the USSR; then he sharpened his rhetoric to identify Russia’s “spiritual, national, and economic rebirth” as the main task of Russians. He argued that Russia for too long had been an appendage of the Soviet center and had lost its independence. He co-opted symbols used by his more strident nationalist opponents, and he ordered the restoration of the Russian tricolor flag. For his inauguration as Russian president, he invited the head of the Russian Orthodox Church to speak.


If only inadvertently, Yeltsin and his colleagues repeatedly thwarted Gorbachev’s efforts to save the Soviet Union. For example, at the first Russian Congress of People’s Deputies in May 1990, Yeltsin urged the parliament to pursue bilateral treaties with other union-republics. In August 1990, in a speech to the Latvian parliament, he further urged the destruction of the hierarchical core of the Soviet Union, cast doubts on the viability of a new union treaty, and proposed a loose confederative grouping of Soviet republics in a “commonwealth of sovereign states.”\footnote{Gorbachev Foundation, \textit{Soyuz mozhno bylo sokhranit’}, pp. 106–108.} Under Yeltsin’s leadership, Russia signed bilateral treaties with other union-republics, including Ukraine and Kazakhstan in 1990, creating a network of pseudo-interstate relations within the Soviet Union.

Throughout 1991, members of Yeltsin’s team, especially Gennadii Burbulis, worked to create a new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that would replace the Soviet Union. At the same time, Yeltsin himself maintained the appearance of cooperating with Gorbachev on a new union treaty. This dual approach was evident when Russia participated in the referendum on the union in March 1991 but added a separate question on the desirability of holding popular elections for the Russian presidency (a step that would undermine the legitimacy of Gorbachev, who had not been popularly elected as president of the Soviet Union). Yeltsin also campaigned against a “yes” vote for the union, arguing that the proponents of the measure wanted to “preserve the imperial, unitary essence of the Union.”\footnote{Radio Rossiya, 15 March 1991, quoted in Ann Sheehy, “The All-Union and RSFSR Referendums of March 17,” \textit{Report on the USSR}, Vol. 3, No. 13 (29 March 1991), p. 20.} Similarly, although he signed with Gorbachev (and eight other republic leaders) what journalists hailed as a “landmark agreement” on a union treaty in April 1991, he simultaneously was negotiating with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan on his proposal to form the CIS. In the ultimate betrayal of Gorbachev, Yeltsin joined with the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine on 8 December 1991 in announcing the creation of the CIS and the demise of the Soviet Union, precluding any further consideration of Gorbachev’s draft union treaty. Yeltsin and his aides pursued the CIS option in the belief that it would provide a means for keeping most of the Soviet Union together, with Russia at the head. They planned to consign Gorbachev and other Soviet institutions to a purely figurehead role. It is telling, in this regard, that just ten days before the Ukrainian referendum on in-
dependence, Yeltsin refused to believe expert data and analyses indicating that Ukraine would likely vote for independence.116

The breakdown of consensus at the mass level regarding the value of empire manifested itself in several ways: in electoral support for Yeltsin; in the growing unpopularity of Gorbachev; in the absence of a mass movement favoring the maintenance of empire and Russia's leading role in it; and in Russian public support for secessionist movements outside Russia. Yeltsin, as already mentioned, used nationalist rhetoric in his successful campaigns for parliamentary chair in 1990 and for the Russian presidency in 1991, an election he won handily. When Soviet troops moved against Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991, large crowds of Muscovites expressed solidarity with the Baltic governments by signing petitions at the "embassies" that Yeltsin had allowed the Baltic states to open in Moscow in 1990. On 20 January more than 150,000 people took part in a protest rally in Moscow organized by Yeltsin's allies in the "Democratic Russia" movement, an event that dismayed Soviet leaders because of the "anti-Soviet" and "anti-Communist" condemnations of Soviet policy in the Baltics.117 The outpouring of Russian public support for the Baltic republics came as a surprise even to the Baltic representatives themselves.118 A month later when the Russian parliament tried to oust Yeltsin (a move backed at least indirectly by Gorbachev), some 400,000 people showed up in a demonstration on the Russian leader's behalf. The only major groups in the RSFSR that strongly supported the maintenance of empire were the extreme Russian nationalists. However, they fared poorly in all the elections in 1989–1991—the 1989 Soviet parliamentary elections, the 1990 Russian parliamentary campaign, and the 1991 Russian presidential election. Leading

116. Galina Starovoitova, then adviser to Yeltsin, said that Yeltsin was shocked when told that approximately 75 percent of Ukrainian voters would likely say "yes" to independence. Yeltsin said that outcome was impossible. See tape of Galina Starovoitova comments, "Seminar on Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Ukraine," Carnegie Corporation of New York, 5 November 1997. Adam Ulam, in contrast, claims (incorrectly) that Yeltsin realized "just in time [after the August 1991 coup] that the system . . . could not be preserved, and it was he who delivered the final blow to both the Soviet Union and to the political career of his one-time boss and tormentor." See Adam B. Ulam, "Charting the Communist Collapse," Washington Post Book World, 5 January 1997, p. 2 and Laba, "How Yeltsin's Exploitation," pp. 5–13. Because Yeltsin's team had been pursuing a CIS-type option as early as 1990 (as indicated by Burbulis himself), it is difficult to accept Ulam's argument that the CIS indicated Yeltsin's foresight in light of the near impossibility of saving the union after August 1991. For Burbulis's account of Russian negotiations with other republics, see Gorbachev Foundation, Soyuz mozhno bylo sokhranit', pp. 290–292, 289–306; "Gorbachev and Yeltsin Agree to Union Treaty," Financial Times (London), 25 April 1991, p. 1; and "Sideshow to Soviet Votes: Gorbachev vs. Yeltsin," The New York Times, 17 March 1991, p. 10.


figures in the pro-empire camp fared so dismally in 1990 that they received less than the minimum threshold of 4 percent of the vote.119

Outside electoral politics there was no evident mass movement in Russia for the preservation of the Soviet Union (not to mention for the continued leadership of Gorbachev, who was the strongest articulator and supporter of a renewed union). The closest perhaps that Russians came to saying they still wanted the USSR to continue in some form was during the March 1991 referendum. Of the nearly 76 percent of eligible Russian voters who turned out, roughly 71 percent cast ballots in favor of the union. But this affirmative vote was not as enthusiastic as it might appear. The 71 percent reflected barely half (53.5 percent) of the eligible voters in Russia. In nearly equal numbers (69.85 percent) they said “yes” to Yeltsin’s question regarding elections for a new Russian presidency, a measure opposed by Gorbachev.120 Several months later, when Ukraine voted for independence and the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords became a fait accompli, no mass protests ensued in Russia against the CIS or Yeltsin, whose team had engineered the demise of the USSR.

Many Russians, reacting to glasnost’s revelations about past injustices inflicted by the Soviet regime on Russians (as well as other nationalities) in the Soviet Union, resented the blame heaped on the RSFSR by those who equated Russia with the Soviet regime. Many of them also were angered by the country’s impoverishment and other ills that, in their view, stemmed from Moscow’s imperial burdens. As a result they disavowed the Soviet empire and even supported (or at least did not oppose) secessionist movements. Some argued that the Soviet regime had discriminated against Russians as an ethnic group in terms of resource allocation, educational opportunities, occupational support, and representation in the Communist Party.121 The nationalist writer Valentin Rasputin was the first to propose (jokingly, some have said) in 1989 that Russia should “secede from the union.” Legislators in the Russian Con-


gress of People’s Deputies followed in 1990 with a call for Russian sovereignty and even independent statehood. In March 1990 the Moscow City Soviet sent a telegram to Vytautas Landsbergis in Lithuania to support the republic’s drive for independence and self-determination. In April 1990, 50 percent of Russians polled in Vilnius supported Lithuanian secession. Yeltsin, with mass support behind him, also went to Lithuania in 1991 to exhibit solidarity with the Baltic cause after Soviet force was used in Vilnius and Riga in January 1991. The extent of public support for Yeltsin’s stance became evident when many Russians signed petitions pledging solidarity with Lithuania and Latvia. In plebiscites on Estonian and Latvian independence in March 1991, many (though not all) Russians in these republics came out in support of independence. In Riga, Latvia, for example, with a population that was only one-third Latvian, 60.7 percent voted for independence. In every election district in Latvia (a republic with a population that was only half Latvian) the majority of voters favored Latvian independence. In Estonia, Russian-dominated cities like Sillamäe and Narva did vote against independence; but in urban areas overall—the areas in which 92 percent of Estonia’s Russians lived—the vote affirming independence was 65 percent (with a 78 percent voter turnout). Because Estonians as a whole constituted only half the population in urban centers, one can assume that a significant percentage of ethnic Russians in the cities voted in support of Estonian independence.

Without a firm consensus in the center regarding the value and desirability of empire, the Soviet Union could not continue to exist. Indeed, after Russia declared its sovereignty in June 1990, other republics followed, including Ukraine, Belarus, and the Central Asian republics, which did not have strong national-separatist movements. By the end of 1990 all fifteen union republics had declared sovereignty, and the end of the Soviet Union began to loom large.

**Economic Failure in the Center-Periphery Compact**

Economic advances were one of the Soviet state’s instruments for keeping center-periphery relations intact. Under Gorbachev, however, this part of the compact also unraveled. Although a full discussion of Soviet economic devel-


opments under Gorbachev is beyond the scope of this article, several points are worth emphasizing.  

First, the Soviet Union was not in a state of economic crisis when Gorbachev came to power in 1985. From 1985 to 1988 most economic indicators—agricultural production, industrial production, food output, retail-trade volumes, consumer-goods production, and volume of services—in Russia and other Soviet republics actually improved.

Second, only after Gorbachev’s introduction of economic reforms did centrifugal tensions, strikes, and interethnic conflicts arise and expose the weakness of the centralized economy. In the face of these problems the center had little independent wherewithal to generate economic resources from a periphery that was no longer bound by rigid discipline and fear. Republics, including Russia under the increasingly defiant Yeltsin, failed to fulfill production plans or simply withheld resources from the center. By the first half of 1990, republic budgets overall were running a surplus, whereas the center’s budget was in deficit, causing wide macroeconomic instability.

Third, by 1990–1991 clear signs of an economic crisis had appeared, but the center under Gorbachev failed to devise and implement policies that would restore economic cohesion, discipline, and productivity. The crisis took the form of sharp drops in food and other production, in availability of housing, and in popular consumption. The available data suggest that the supply of all products in the USSR was halved in 1985–1990, coinciding with the period of perestroika. In some cases staple foods were rationed, as prices (especially in non-state stores) rose, and reports of hunger and poverty in places like Ukraine circulated.

124. The economic dimension of the Soviet collapse is examined in depth in Gertrude Schroeder, “The Soviet Economy and the Fate of the USSR,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 2004), forthcoming.


to take decisive steps to improve the Soviet economy, Gorbachev finally assembled a four-man economic reform team to devise a comprehensive program. But he ended up settling for a watered-down compromise proposal rather than adopting the “500-Day Plan” that the economists proposed. (It is worth noting that the 500-Day Plan was far from perfect, was belatedly put together, and might not have resulted in any appreciable improvement even if Gorbachev had stuck with it.)

Finally, the center not only failed to respond effectively to economic problems but in the end facilitated secession by agreeing to delegate many economic prerogatives and powers to the republics in the name of economic independence (ekonomicheskaya samostoyatel’nost’). This was particularly true in the Baltic republics, which seemed to cope best with the economic challenges in the Soviet Union. Because the republics that were most intent on gaining independence were, in relative terms, faring better economically than the rest of the Soviet Union, the center’s devolution of economic functions inadvertently reinforced the message that independence from the USSR was a good thing.

“Not with a Bang but a Whimper”: The Fall of the Soviet Union

On 8 December 1991 the presidents of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine sealed the fate of the Soviet Union when they signed the Belovezhskaya Pushcha agreement establishing the CIS and declaring the end of the USSR. The parliaments of eleven union-republics approved the agreement despite Gorbachev’s vehement protests. The situation for the Soviet regime thus became untenable. Even if Gorbachev had been willing to resort to “bloody slaughter” (as he put it in his memoirs), he finally had to concede that nothing more could be done either peacefully or through force. Without his knowledge, several of his aides and the Soviet defense minister, Evgenii Shaposhnikov, were

already engaged in negotiations with signatories of the CIS agreement. Their loyalties clearly were not tied to the old center.\textsuperscript{129}

Why did the Soviet Union break up in 1991? Why did an imperial structure that withstood war and revolution disintegrate during what was a relatively peaceful time in Soviet history? The preceding analysis highlighted three aspects of imperial control: (1) a compact between center and periphery; (2) consensus at the center regarding the desirability and maintenance of empire; and (3) the ability and will to use force against challengers to imperial rule. In Gorbachev’s Soviet Union the center failed to uphold these components of control, allowing nationalist and ethnic pressures to become a greater force than warranted, and ultimately causing the demise of the Soviet Union.

The compact between center and periphery clearly needed to be changed when Gorbachev came to power with the aim of reinvigorating the Soviet economy. The compact had already undergone various metamorphoses in earlier stages of Soviet history, from Lenin to Brezhnev. Under Gorbachev several measures could have helped make the compact tenable and operational. Instead of greater Russification of central cadres, as had been the trend since the late Brezhnev period,\textsuperscript{130} Gorbachev could have introduced a countrywide reform at the beginning of his tenure that would have strengthened the practice of having strong peripheral representation in central institutions of power. Such a step at an early stage could have welded ties between central and peripheral elites, allowing all of them to focus on economic troubles. The initial target of the major nationalist movements (Sájüdis, the Popular Front of Moldova, the Armenian National Front, and others) was not Moscow. Furthermore, Gorbachev could have opted for minimal or extremely slow political liberalization and focused greater attention on economic reform. As Philip Roeder has argued, it was primarily political reform (i.e., the center’s abdication of control over ethnic mobilization assets) that allowed nationalists to organize, propagate their ideas, and enlist supporters of their causes, thereby creating major problems of governance.\textsuperscript{131}

The breakdown of consensus in Russia, especially at the elite level, regarding the value of empire and the need for Russian unity in support of the USSR was a determining factor in the demise of the Soviet state.\textsuperscript{132} This


\textsuperscript{131} Roeder, “Soviet Federalism.”

breakdown was especially evident in the dynamics of the Gorbachev-Yeltsin rivalry. It also manifested itself in the aftermath of the Soviet crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991. Large numbers of Russians protested the Soviet use of force, and prominent experts (e.g., Gorbachev’s economic adviser, Nikolai Petrakov) abandoned the Gorbachev camp. Other visible Russian figures, such as the university rector Yurii Afanasev, openly condemned the repression and bloodshed. In these circumstances it is difficult to see how Gorbachev could have convinced Yeltsin and his closest colleagues to take his side in the fight for the union. To be sure, Gorbachev could have pursued one obvious option—namely, to manage more adeptly his relations with the elites of several key republics. Had Gorbachev done so, Yeltsin might have found it harder to create a fait accompli at Belovezhskaya Pushcha, the action that codified the demise of the Soviet Union. As it was, Yeltsin and his team had problems getting the Kazakh leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, to sign the CIS document, and Kazakhstan abandoned what Yeltsin’s entourage had originally envisioned as a four-republic agreement. The two other signers, Ukraine and Belarus, were not the most secessionist republics in the union, and the center could have done more to cultivate and retain the loyalty of their elites. As for ordinary citizens in Russia, very few were inclined to sacrifice much for imperial maintenance, and some even supported secessionist movements in the USSR (as well as Russia’s own break with the Soviet regime). Most citizens, however, were not actively mobilized either against or in favor of breaking up the Soviet Union. Although Russians on the whole may not have been willing to back the center, they were not the key force pushing for Soviet disintegration.

Ultimately, Gorbachev’s unwillingness to use large-scale coercive violence on a consistent basis, was the most critical factor in the collapse of imperial control. He himself, however, was not the only one responsible for the center’s eschewal of the decisive use of force. As Victor Zaslavsky notes, over decades “the coercive apparatus [of the Soviet Union had] became less harsh and less visible, even though it remained a major instrument of intimidation” that shaped people’s perceptions of the likely consequences of acts that crossed the line of acceptable behavior. Gorbachev only completed the process by removing fear itself from the minds of Soviet citizens. His last chance to use massive coercion and impose presidential rule to keep the Soviet Union to-

133. Gorbachev Foundation, Soyuz mozho bylo sokhranit’, p. 291.
134. Zaslavsky, “The Soviet Union,” pp. 77–78. In a related point, one former elite worker in the party apparatus has argued that Gorbachev’s weakening and emasculation of the CPSU, the “core of the system,” was the main reason for the Soviet collapse. See Onikov, KPSS, p. 114.
gether might have been shortly after the March 1991 referendum. In all nine republics that officially participated in the referendum, voters strongly supported the union (though, admittedly, the results were likely influenced by the wording of the question). Even in the six republics in which voting was held only at military bases and certain state enterprises (the Baltic states, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia), a majority of those who voted were supportive of the union. If Gorbachev had needed a legal pretext to institute presidential rule and use force to preserve the union, this would have been the moment. But, being a ruler with a blessedly pacific turn of mind, he refused to do so.136

The Soviet Union did not have to disintegrate in 1991. It might well have fallen apart eventually, given the inherent weakness of its imperial structure resulting from the officially encouraged construction and consolidation of ethnic identities, the center’s growing inability to bring about continued material improvements in the lives of its citizens, and the rising disillusionment and cynicism in Soviet society. But the downfall need not have occurred when it did. The Soviet empire could have lasted for many more years, perhaps even decades, had there been a different leader or set of leaders determined to maintain imperial control, even at great military, social, and human cost. Without such leaders in power, the center failed to assert its authority in a decisive manner. The loss of will at the top ultimately allowed nationalist and ethnic pressures to rise to the fore, contributing to the destruction of what only recently had seemed (in the words of the Soviet anthem) “an indissoluble union.”


136. John Lloyd, “When Gorby Went West,” *The Observer* (London), 17 November 1996, Review sec., p. X. Gorbachev and his colleagues understood the gravity of the March 1991 referendum. The CPSU leadership gave strict instructions for all party bodies to do everything possible to ensure that most voters participated in the referendum and voted affirmatively. The challenges were clear as well—as when the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet resolved in January 1991 to conduct its own poll and not that of the center. But instead of showing an iron fist, neither the CPSU instructions on the March referendum nor Gorbachev’s response to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet indicated that strong and swift punitive measures would be meted out against those who defied central orders. In other words, Soviet leaders knew that the risk of imperial collapse was real, yet they hesitated even at the most crucial moments to wield the brutal power of the state. See “Lithuania Polls Citizens on Preserving USSR,” *CDSR*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (1991), pp. 7–8; and “O vsenarodnom golosovanii (referendume) o sokhranenii Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik,” CPSU Secretariat resolution (Top Secret), 1 March 1991, in LVA, F. 101, Ap. 67, B. 36, La. 53–56. My thanks to Mark Kramer for giving me a copy of this document.
Acknowledgments

I want to thank Vicky Dorfman and Cameron Hall for research assistance; Henry Hale for useful comments; and Mark Kramer for his blunt criticism, valuable guidance, generous assistance with archival sources, and witty e-mail correspondence.