The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)

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The first part of this three-part article, published in the Fall 2003 issue of the journal, discussed the reorientation of Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe under Mikhail Gorbachev and the far-reaching changes that ensued. The rapid sequence of events in Eastern Europe in 1989 led to the de facto collapse of the Soviet bloc. The demise of East European Communism, in turn, had profound implications for the Soviet Union itself, both directly and indirectly. The first part of the article showed how the changes in Eastern Europe generated direct support for separatist groups and protest movements in the Soviet Union and how the disruption of Soviet–East European intelligence ties distracted Soviet leaders from more immediate concerns at home. These factors contributed to the political instability and intra-elite divisions that ultimately doomed the Soviet state.1

The second part of the article, published here, focuses on the “indirect” spillover from the changes in Eastern Europe. It looks seriatim at four major consequences of the upheavals in Eastern Europe: (1) the discrediting of Marxist-Leninist ideology, (2) the heightened sense of the Soviet regime’s own vulnerability, (3) the diminished potential for the use of force in the USSR to curb internal unrest, and (4) the “demonstration effect” and “contagiousness” of regime change and democratization in Eastern Europe. These factors together made it considerably more difficult for Gorbachev to prevent the Soviet Union from unraveling.

The third part of the article, to be published in the next issue of the journal, will discuss the high-level recriminations in Moscow in 1990–1991 about the “loss” of Eastern Europe. The disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance sparked an acrimonious debate

that constrained Gorbachev’s options and helped fuel a hardline backlash in the Soviet Union from September 1990 through April 1991. The collapse of East European Communism also was one of the factors that inspired the coup plotters in Moscow in August 1991. In addition to discussing this aspect of the spillover from Eastern Europe, the third part of the article will lay out the main conclusions of the article as a whole. In particular, it will highlight the implications of the article for the burgeoning literature on the external context of democratization and political upheaval. Until recently, most scholars had downplayed the significance of external factors in political transitions, but this article shows that the spillover from Eastern Europe into the Soviet Union played an important role in the destabilization and collapse of the USSR.

**Indirect Spillover**

The indirect spillover from the events in Eastern Europe was at least as important as the direct spillover. The indirect spillover initially went in the opposite direction—that is, Gorbachev’s boldness in implementing reforms in the Soviet Union made it increasingly difficult for the hardline Communist regimes in Eastern Europe to hold out against the “winds of change”—but after 1989 the direction was reversed. The drastic changes in Eastern Europe transformed the context in which Soviet leaders and civic groups operated.

**Discrediting of the Ideological Base**

The collapse of East European Communism undercut the ideological raison d’être of the Soviet regime. For four decades, Soviet leaders had pointed to the “socialist commonwealth” in Eastern Europe as evidence that Marxism-Leninism was superior to Western democracy. The massive protests against the East European regimes in 1989, resulting in the abrupt demise of the Soviet bloc, laid bare the fundamental illegitimacy of the Communist systems that had been in place since the late 1940s. The inherent fragility of Communist rule in Eastern Europe had been evident long before 1989—most notably during the crises in Czechoslovakia and East Germany in 1953, in Poland and Hungary in 1956, in Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1970, 1976, and 1980-1981—but the unrest in these cases was quelled either by the local Communist authorities or by the Soviet Army. In the 1970s and 1980s some Western observers argued that the East European regimes had developed enough support and popular legitimacy to sustain themselves in
power without Soviet military backing.2 The events of 1989 thoroughly discredited this argument and exposed the bankruptcy of the Marxist-Leninist ideology that underlay the Soviet bloc. In the wake of those upheavals, even some of the staunchest East European Communists like Todor Zhivkov, who presided for thirty-five years over an orthodox Marxist-Leninist regime in Bulgaria, acknowledged that the ideological principles they had long espoused had turned out to be “utter nonsense.” In a telling, if disingenuous, interview a year after being forced from office, Zhivkov claimed:

If I had to do it over again, I would not even be a Communist, and if Lenin were alive today he would say the same thing. . . . I must now admit that we started from the wrong basis, from the wrong premise. The foundation of socialism was wrong. I believe that at its very conception the idea of socialism was stillborn.3

The ideological implications of the upheavals in Eastern Europe had a powerful effect on Soviet elites, who had been steeped in Marxism-Leninism and had been conditioned to believe that the Soviet system was legitimate. Until 1989, even those who were relatively cynical about Communist ideology were intent on reforming it rather than jettisoning it altogether. As Peter Kenez has recently pointed out, ideological strictures in the Soviet Union exerted a stronger hold on the nomenklatura (privileged elite) than is often realized:

Many of [the Soviet nomenklatura] were careerists, and some of them were corrupt, but it would be an error to blame most of these people for cynicism. The

2. This theme was especially salient in the literature on East Germany. See, for example, A. James McAdams, East Germany and Détente: Building Authority after the Wall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Henry Krisch, The German Democratic Republic: The Search for Identity (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983); Horst Dahn, Das politische System der DDR (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Autoren-Verlag, 1985); Klaus von Beyme and Hartmut Zimmermann, eds., Policymaking in the German Democratic Republic (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983); C. Bradley Scharf, Politics and Change in East Germany: An Evaluation of Socialist Democracy (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983); Henry Krisch, “Political Legitimation in the GDR,” in T. H. Rigby and Ferenc Fehér, eds., Political Legitimation in Communist States (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), pp. 110–127; and Klaus von Beyme, Ökonomie und Politik im Sozialismus: Ein Vergleich d. Entwicklung in d. sozialist. Ländern (Munich: Piper, 1975). Western academics were not the only ones who had this impression of life in East Germany. Sir Rodric Braithwaite, the final British ambassador to the Soviet Union, noted in his memoir—Across the Moscow River: The World Turned Upside Down (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 126—that “by the 1970s the experts in the Foreign Office in London and the Foreign Ministry in Bonn were convinced that a genuine patriotism was developing in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and that the rising generation of East Germans had forgotten about the West.” For a cogent critique of these assessments and the effect they had on Western (especially West German) policy, see Timothy Garton Ash, In Europe’s Name: Germany and the Divided Continent (New York: Random House, 1993).

majority of them remained believers; they had a vested interest in believing, because their livelihood depended on it. Genuine hypocrisy is difficult, and few people are capable of it. It is better and easier to convince ourselves that what we say is true. There was a group of people who had become Communists long ago and had spent their lives remaining faithful to their original commitments.4

Gorbachev was among the genuine believers. One of his main objectives from the outset was to “renew” Soviet ideology and adapt it to the challenges of the modern era.5 By 1989 he had revised or even discarded some long-standing principles of Marxism-Leninism (e.g., with his suggestion that proletarian internationalism should be subordinated to “all-human values”), but he did so in the conviction that these adjustments would strengthen, not weaken, the “underlying virtues of socialism.”6 The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was still the only legal political party in the country, and its claim to power still rested on Marxist-Leninist ideology. Far from disavowing Communism, Gorbachev repeatedly averred that he remained faithful to Lenin’s teachings and was seeking only to improve the Communist system. His decision to push for far-reaching change in Eastern Europe was based on the expectation that reform-minded Communist leaders would emerge who would join him in the pursuit of “socialism with a human face.” That scenario, if realized, would have preserved—and even bolstered—key features of the Marxist-Leninist ideology that underpinned and legitimized Communist rule in both the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

When events in Eastern Europe moved much further than Gorbachev


had anticipated, one of the consequences was that orthodox Marxism-
Leninism was fatally weakened through its link with the regimes and institutions that had collapsed. Even the more liberal ideological vision promoted by Gorbachev was thrown into disarray by the events of 1989. A memorandum adopted by the Soviet Politburo in early April 1990 acknowledged that recent events in Eastern Europe had sparked a “profound ideological crisis” and had pushed the CPSU to a “critical threshold.” The crisis facing the Soviet party, according to the document, was “intimately connected with, but deeper than, the demise of the command-administrative model of socialism.” This same point had been raised the previous day in the Soviet newspaper Izvestiya by two well-known political commentators:

Not only has the model of command-bureaucratic socialism in the East European region been rendered completely bankrupt, but also—and this is far more significant in terms of its long-run consequences—socialist values and the socialist idea as such have been seriously devalued. The very word “socialism” now evokes in people an allergic reaction and a sense of repugnance.8

In a similar vein, the Politburo memorandum concluded that “the changes in Eastern Europe and their influence on the rest of the world” would greatly alter “the contemporary understanding of socialism,” not least in the Soviet Union:

The authority of the Communist parties in [the East European] countries has been undermined among the masses, who now believe more than ever that socialism is incapable of fulfilling their basic needs. The Communists are dispirited, having lost confidence in the validity of the ideas for which they once struggled and made great sacrifices. . . . Public life in the countries of Eastern Europe is now dominated entirely by centrist and rightist parties that have set themselves against the Communist parties and have decisively rejected everything that was done during the [Communist] period. Even the purely cosmetic attributes of socialism are being rapidly eliminated. Methodical efforts are under way to discredit the entire basis of the socialist idea itself.9

Although Gorbachev subsequently assured the CPSU that “socialist values and the socialist idea have retained their unique importance,” his assurances


seemed rather hollow after the upheavals of 1989. It is not surprising that many Soviet officials and intellectuals began to question and lose faith in the principles they had long held dear.

Soviet elites who only recently had been firm believers in Marxism-Leninism found it difficult to cope with their growing doubts. General Dmitrii Volkogonov, a high-ranking Soviet military officer who became disaffected with Communist ideology at the end of the 1980s, later wrote that it was “agonizing” (muchitel’no) for him to “shed [his] illusions.” Volkogonov’s anguish was typical of the confusion and self-doubt that a large number of Soviet elites were experiencing. Some had become skeptical about certain aspects of Marxism-Leninism well before 1989 (as far back as the 1960s and 1970s), but the scope and intensity of the ideological disillusionment increased drastically as a result of the events in Eastern Europe. The wholesale collapse of the East European regimes illustrated, as vividly as possible, the disjunction between Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and the realities of life under Communist rule. As General Volkogonov later recalled:

When I was responsible for ideological training and propaganda in the armed forces, my belief in the official ideology did not waver. I was a loyal, convinced Communist. The discussions that followed the introduction of glasnost and the documents I saw when working on my biography of [Josif] Stalin [after being appointed director of the Institute of Military History] created some uncertainty, but even then I retained many of my convictions. But when I saw what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989, how could I not realize that so much of what we had been told, so much of what we had believed in, was just a lie? My work on the Stalin biography [published in 1989] moved me away from orthodoxy, but the fundamental changes in Eastern Europe made me rethink everything. I had no choice.

Numerous other high-ranking military officers went through an equally “agonizing” reassessment of long-held beliefs. Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, the former head of the Soviet General Staff who became the chief military adviser to Gorbachev, confided to U.S. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft in the summer of 1990 that he was filled with misgivings about everything he had long taken for granted. Having been “a soldier . . . who dedicated his life to the Soviet Union and the principles he had been taught it represented,” Akhromeev said that the profound changes sweeping through Eastern Europe

and the USSR had left him “deeply confused.” In earlier years, he had never doubted the superiority of the Communist system, but he now felt an increasing sense of bewilderment:

Suddenly he was being told that everything for which he had stood and fought was wrong. The Soviet Union, its leaders, its actions, and motivation—had all been a lie. His world had been uprooted, his moral and national moorings destroyed. He no longer knew what to believe, what to defend. His children despised him and the system he had represented.

A year later, in the wake of the failed coup d’état in Moscow (which Akhromeev supported), the Soviet marshal committed suicide.

The collapse of East European Communism shook the ideological convictions not only of Soviet military officers but also of many political elites, who began to disavow their long-standing allegiance to Communist principles. Boris Yeltsin, who had been a candidate member of the CPSU Politburo in the early Gorbachev years and had returned to prominence in March 1989 by gaining election to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, was inspired by the events in Eastern Europe to move more openly away from Communist orthodoxy and to mount what soon became a direct challenge to the ideological legitimacy of the Soviet regime. In late 1989, shortly after Communist rule in Eastern Europe disintegrated, Yeltsin argued that the demise of the “fraternal” parties “makes a mockery of the USSR’s own... commitment to the victory of socialism”:

I am very happy that our neighbors in the socialist countries [of Eastern Europe] have experienced such profound changes. I am happy for them. But it seems to me that in light of these changes we must reassess what we proudly call perestroika. When we do this, we can quickly see that we are practically the only country on Earth that is trying to enter the 21st century with an outmoded ideology left over from the 19th century.

In July 1990, Yeltsin demonstratively walked out of the 28th Soviet Party Congress and renounced his CPSU membership. He pledged to join with other prominent reformers who had left the Communist Party (notably

14. Ibid. See also S. F. Akhromeev and G. M. Kornienko, Glazami marshala i diplomatov: Kriticheskii vyzhod na vneshnyuyu politiku SSSR do i posle 1985 goda (Moscow: Mezdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1992), pp. 214–216 for Akhromeev’s own interesting account, written shortly before he committed suicide in August 1991, of his “overwhelming frustration” and “feelings of helplessness” as he “watched what was happening to the country” and saw “the socialist alliance being destroyed.”
15. Boris Yeltsin, Ispoved’ na zadannuyu temu (Moscow: PIK—Nezavisimoe izdatel’stvo, 1990), p. 183. Yeltsin later wrote that “the USSR ended the day that the first hammer banged against the Berlin Wall.” See Boris Yeltsin, Zapiski prezidenta (Moscow: Ogonek, 1994), p. 52.
Anatolii Sobchak and Gavriil Popov) in “offering the country a real program of transition to a new society.”

Aleksandr Yakovlev, one of the most influential aides to Gorbachev in the late 1980s, retained his CPSU membership after the upheavals in Eastern Europe, but he increasingly sensed that “the whole ideological and moral edifice” of the Soviet regime was a “sham” and a “lie.” At the July 1990 CPSU Congress, he warned the delegates that “when we see entire nations [in Eastern Europe] turning their backs on their Communist parties [and] rejecting Marxism-Leninism,” this “should spur us to rethink our own dogmas” and to “face up to the fact that the shift [away from Communism] is irreversible.”

By mid-1991, Yakovlev was working with Eduard Shevardnadze to set up an alternative, non-Communist political party akin to those that had recently been established in Eastern Europe. (Shevardnadze himself had left the CPSU in protest soon after he resigned as Soviet foreign minister in December 1990.) On 15 August 1991, four days before the attempted coup in Moscow began, Yakovlev was expelled from the CPSU. Upon being removed, he told a Russian journalist that although socialism as an “idea of justice” was not finished, the Soviet Union “never had any real socialism anyway. All we had was a travesty and the purest kind of deceit.” Yakovlev later acknowledged that his “gradual abandonment of Marxist conceptions” was an “arduous” process and that he initially felt “despondent” when he realized he “had been deluding [himself] for so long,” but he said he could “no longer deny” what was “so blindingly obvious” in both Eastern Europe and the USSR.

17. Aleksandr Yakovlev, Sumerki (Moscow: Materik, 2003), pp. 373–375. Both here and elsewhere in Sumerki, Yakovlev vividly describes his growing ideological disillusionment in the 1980s and early 1990s. In this respect and others, the book provides a fascinating account of the Gorbachev years—the first extended treatment of those years that Yakovlev has published. Although Yakovlev produced several other volumes of memoir-like reflections in the 1990s, only two of those earlier books deal more than fleetingly with the 1985–1991 period. One of them, Muki prochteniya byt'ya: Perestroika, nadezhdy, i real'nosti (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), was written while the events were still under way, and it reveals little behind-the-scenes information. The other, Omut pamyati (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), is a good deal more revealing than Muki prochteniya byt'ya, but it is far less detailed than the account in Sumerki, which is an invaluable source for anyone studying the Gorbachev era and the demise of the Soviet Union. Although the book, like all memoirs, must be used with circumspection, it stands up remarkably well overall when cross-checked with other first-hand accounts and with declassified and published documents.
Gorbachev himself, despite proclaiming his continued fidelity to the CPSU and the “socialist idea,” began moving further and further away from core Marxist-Leninist principles after the transformation of Eastern Europe in 1989. In March 1990 he set up a state presidency as an alternative structure to the CPSU (reinforcing the new parliament) and revoked the provision in the Soviet constitution (Article 6) that had enshrined the “leading role” of the Communist Party in Soviet society. Although Gorbachev retained his post as CPSU General Secretary, he increasingly emphasized his role as president of the USSR. In addition, he brought his notion of the “socialist idea” more closely into line with the social-democratic thrust and “all-human values” of the “new political thinking,” which earlier had been applied mostly in foreign policy. Even though Gorbachev continued to invoke Lenin and to insist that he “never felt ashamed to say that I am a Communist,” his evolving conception of “socialism” was a far cry from the rigid ideology that had long guided the CPSU. In late July 1991 he publicly lamented the “monstrous price we have had to pay for our blind adherence to ideological postulates and myths,” and he called on the party to “learn from the experience” of Eastern Europe in “making a decisive break with outmoded ideological dogmas and stereotypes”:

In the past, the [CPSU] regarded Marxism-Leninism as the only source of its inspiration, and it adopted the most extreme and distorted form of this doctrine to suit the whims of the day, based on a smattering of orthodox texts. We must expand our ideological arsenal to encompass the rich heritage of socialist and democratic thought from our own country and from the rest of the world.

Gorbachev emphasized that “our country’s experience and the events [in Eastern Europe] provide no reason to believe that communism is a practical goal,” and he even raised the possibility that, “with a multiparty system now emerging in the Soviet Union,” the CPSU should change its name to the Social Democratic Party.
At levels below the top leadership, the movement away from Marxism-Leninism was even more pronounced. Ideological cohesion had begun to erode in 1988 and early 1989 when glasnost led to a flood of revelations about “negative phenomena”—tragic episodes in Soviet history, deep-rooted social problems in the USSR, conflicts between Soviet nationalities, the appalling scale of environmental damage under Soviet rule, and numerous instances of high-level corruption and malfeasance—but the confusion within the CPSU was greatly magnified by the dramatic changes in Hungary and Poland in the spring and summer of 1989 and the subsequent collapse of Communism throughout Eastern Europe. Ideological uniformity in the USSR was replaced by disarray and the emergence of rival political groups both inside and outside the party.

The rapid decline of ideological consensus in the Soviet Union was bound to pose a dire challenge for the regime. As Crane Brinton observed in his seminal study of revolution, the position of a ruling class is endangered “when numerous and influential members of such a class begin to believe that they hold power unjustly, [and] that the beliefs they were brought up on are silly.”25 The debunking of these long-cherished beliefs, Brinton argued, would inspire many elites to support those who were seeking to change the status quo. Nothing could better describe the ideological turmoil that pervaded the CPSU after Communist rule in Eastern Europe disintegrated. The consequences of this development for the fate of the Soviet Union were fourfold.

First, the growing demoralization and loss of purpose among influential members of the CPSU facilitated the rise of opposition movements that wanted to end Communist rule. Diehard advocates of Marxism-Leninism were still around, but they were increasingly overshadowed by individuals and groups who were seeking a fundamentally different course. (Some of the new opposition groups supported liberal democracy and free markets, whereas

align himself with the newly-founded Democratic Reform Movement (headed by Yakovlev, Shevardnadze, and Gavril Popov), and establish a separate party to compete with the CPSU, but this seems highly doubtful. Gorbachev was well aware that the CPSU controlled vast resources (financial assets, real estate, buildings, etc.) and that only by remaining leader of the party would he be able to keep those resources under his control. If he were to leave the party and allow hardline Communists to regain control of it and use its resources for their own purposes, a newly-founded social democratic party would have found it very difficult to compete, no matter how many members left the CPSU and joined the new party. Because of this risk, it seems far more likely that Gorbachev would have sought to force the hardline Communists to provoke a split themselves, leaving them no choice but to establish a separate party of their own outside the CPSU. Then he could have transformed the Communist Party as he saw fit, including by giving it a new name. Because the August 1991 coup intervened and led (indirectly) to the demise of the CPSU, it will never be known for sure what Gorbachev might have done if the coup had not been attempted (and therefore if the Union Treaty had been signed on 20 August and a 29th Congress of the CPSU had been held in December 1991, offering a likely venue for the bifurcation of the party).

others, notably “Pamyat” and “Soyuz,” embraced an ultranationalist or fascist agenda.) The new opportunities afforded by the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in the spring and summer of 1989—against the backdrop of momentous changes in Hungary and Poland—enabled radical politicians in the Soviet Union to form the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies (MDG, founded by Andrei Sakharov and Boris Yeltsin, among others) to push for a free-market economy, political decentralization and democratization, and wide-ranging autonomy for the union-republics.26 The further precipitous decline of ideological cohesion in the Soviet Union after the demise of East European Communism helped produce alternative centers of authority that could—and did—challenge the Soviet regime for political supremacy. In particular, Boris Yeltsin, backed by the Democratic Russia movement (an outgrowth of the MDG), set up a government and popularly elected presidency that, he hoped, would enable him to eclipse Gorbachev and transform the Soviet Union into a loose confederation with Russia at its head.27

Second, the demise of a unifying ideology in the USSR meant that Soviet elites had much less of a stake in the preservation of the Soviet regime. George Schöpflin has aptly noted that “an authoritarian elite sustains itself in power not just through force and the threat of force but, more importantly, because it has some vision of the future by which it can justify itself to itself.”28 As Marxism-Leninism lost its grip over the Soviet establishment in the late 1980s, especially after the upheavals in Eastern Europe, a huge exodus from the Soviet Communist Party began. In 1990 alone, according to official data, nearly five million out of nineteen million CPSU members formally renounced their status, and millions more ceased to pay their dues and eschewed all party activities.29 At a CPSU Central Committee plenum in July

26. V. V. Zhuravlev et al., eds., Vlast’ i oppositsiya: Rossiiskii politicheskii protsess XX stoletiya (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1995), pp. 308–309.
27. It should be noted that although Gorbachev and his aides were deeply concerned about the liberal opposition, they also were increasingly worried about ultra-hardline groups like “Soyuz,” headed by Colonels Nikolai Petrov and Viktor Alksnis, and “Unity for Leninism and Communist Ideals” (Edinstvo, za leninizm i kommunisticheskie idei), headed by Nina Andreeva. Both groups by late 1990 were openly seeking Gorbachev’s removal. The extent of high-level concern about the hardline groups is evident in the secret cover memorandum from the Soviet minister of internal affairs, Boris Pugo, to the CPSU Secretariat, 30 November 1990, with the attached draft resolution (“Rezolyutsiya Vsesoyuznoi konferentsii obshchestva ‘Edinstvo, za leninizm i kommunisticheskie idei,’ 28 oktyabrya 1990 g., g. Leningrad: O politicheskom nedoverii General’nomu sekretaryu TsK KPSS M. S. Gorbachevu”), and a note explaining how the draft was obtained, in Arkhiv Gorbachev-Fonda (AGF), F. 2, Op. 11, Ll. 31–33.
1991, Gorbachev acknowledged that "the party is experiencing a severe crisis, the most acute crisis in its history." Even worse were the problems afflicting the Communist Youth League (Komsomol), the organ responsible for preparing young people to join the CPSU. Membership in the Komsomol had been falling since the early 1980s because of demographic constraints, but this trend increased precipitously in 1989 and 1990, as ferment engulfed Eastern Europe. By mid-1990 the Komsomol had largely ceased to function. Intellectuals and up-and-coming officials in Moscow (and in many of the union-republics) were ever more inclined to cast their lot with opposition groups and leaders like Yeltsin who wanted to end Soviet rule. This shift of allegiances—whether motivated by a principled rejection of the old order or by a desire for personal enrichment and the acquisition of private property—was reminiscent of the process described by Crane Brinton whereby elites in authoritarian societies who "come to distrust or lose faith in the traditions and habits of their class" are wont to "desert the established order [and] become leaders in the crusade for a new order."

Officials in Moscow who wanted to preserve the Communist regime were alarmed by the growing number of Soviet elites who were leaving the CPSU and joining ranks with "anti-socialist forces." In February 1991 the head of the Soviet Committee on State Security (KGB), Vladimir Kryuchkov, informed Gorbachev that "the weakening of ideological work in defense of the socialist idea" had been "devastating for the unity of the USSR and of Soviet society." Kryuchkov emphasized the "vital importance of maintaining"


31. Annual data on Komsomol membership and on many other matters pertaining to the huge efflux of young people from the Komsomol in 1989–1990 can be found in "VLKSM: Statisticheskiy i spravochnyi material," prepared by the Komsomol Central Committee apparatus, April 1990, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), F 1M, Op. 110, Dd. 483, 580. These files are stored in a section of RGASPI that was a separate archive known as Tsentr Khraneniya Dokumentov Molodezhnykh Organizatsii (TsKhDMO) from 1992 until 1999, when it was absorbed into RGASPI.


33. See, for example, the testimony of the Belarusian writer Kastus Tarasov on why he left the CPSU, in "Pochemu ya vyshel iz partii," Moskovskie novosti (Moscow), No. 15 (15 April 1990), p. 7.


35. "Dokladnaya zapiska: O politicheskoi obstanovke v strane," Memorandum No. 219-k (Top Secret—Special Dossier), from V. A. Kryuchkov to M. S. Gorbachev, 18 February 1991, in Lietuvos Tapyningasis Archyvas (LYA), Fondas (F) K-1, Apyrašas (Apy.) 49, Byla (B.) 87, Lapai (La.) 14–19.
state control over the mass media and of preventing the media from being watered down or, even worse, from becoming a propaganda organ for the anti-socialist forces.” He warned that unless Gorbachev made a determined effort to reestablish ideological consensus immediately, “there is a real danger that the USSR will break apart and that its whole sociopolitical and economic system will be destroyed.”

Third, the breakdown of ideological controls accentuated rifts that emerged in the late 1980s within the organizations responsible for defending Soviet rule: the army, the KGB, and the Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD). Throughout the Soviet era, these bodies (and their predecessors) had been under the control of the CPSU. Senior military, KGB, and MVD officials were all members of the party, and their primary task was to uphold Soviet rule. The abrupt decline of Marxism-Leninism after 1989, and the splits that ensued within the Communist Party, steadily reduced the party’s control over the military and internal security agencies. The political indoctrination programs that had cemented the CPSU’s “leading role” in these organizations were undercut by the downfall of Communism in Eastern Europe. Even some of the most orthodox KGB officials said that, in the wake of the upheavals in Eastern Europe, they had “begun to look at life more realistically and had come to realize that Communism is just a utopian illusion and that the CPSU in its current form has no future.” Sensing this change of mood, Soviet leaders worried that the erosion of party control would enable “anti-Soviet forces” to make inroads into the army and security apparatus. Kryuchkov warned Gorbachev in February 1991 that opposition groups “are taking persistent measures to extend their influence over the army and are striving to neutralize it as one of the guarantors of the unity of the USSR.” Yeltsin’s efforts to win support from key personnel in the military and security forces—efforts that proved crucial during the August 1991 coup attempt—would have been much less feasible if Soviet ideology had not been so gravely weakened by the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe.

Fourth, ideological disarray at the elite level helped spur, and was reflected in, a shift in public sentiment that facilitated the demise of the Soviet regime. In the pre-Gorbachev era, public opinion in the Soviet Union was of little importance, but in the late 1980s the introduction of glasnost and competitive elections gave the public a much more prominent role. Despite an initial groundswell of enthusiasm for the changes implemented by Gorba-

36. Ibid., La. 15.
chev, public support for the reform program and for Gorbachev himself plummeted in 1990. A series of opinion polls in 1989 and 1990 revealed that, in the spring of 1990, Gorbachev’s standing as the most “authoritative” and “respected” politician in the Soviet Union dropped from roughly 45–50 percent to less than 20 percent, whereas Yeltsin’s favorable ratings rose steadily, especially after he left the CPSU in July 1990.\(^3\) (The precise figures varied slightly depending on the specific survey, but the pattern was the same in all the polls. Yeltsin’s favorable rating surpassed Gorbachev’s in mid-1990, and the disparity widened thereafter.) Public esteem for Soviet political institutions, including the CPSU and the Council of Ministers, was still at relatively high levels in 1989 but fell to remarkably low levels (into the single digits) in 1990, in most cases dropping by more than 90 percent.\(^4\) During this same period, public support within Russia for the Russian republic government (headed by Yeltsin) increased sharply, soaring above 75 percent.\(^5\) This latter trend, as the surveys made clear, was attributable to the perception that the Russian government was opposed to the CPSU and to the Soviet regime.

Several factors, including the steep decline of the Soviet economy and the failure of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies to meet high public expectations, accounted for these changes of mood, but clearly one of the most important contributors was the impact of the East European upheavals on the Soviet regime’s ideological raison d’être. The deputy head of the CPSU International Department, Valerii Musatov, acknowledged as much in March 1991:

The turn of events in Eastern Europe has had a powerful negative impact on the broadest strata of Soviet society. . . . The collapse of the post-Stalinist model of socialism in the countries of Eastern Europe has been perceived at the level of or-

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\(^4\) Data compiled by the All-Union Center for Public Opinion, presented in “Sovetskii chelovek—eskiz portreta: Vsesoyuznyi opros obschestvennogo meneniya,” *Mosковские новости* (Moscow), No. 11 (16 March 1990), p. 11. See also A. Grazhdankin, “Obshchestvo i armiya,” *Izvestiya* (Moscow), 15 June 1990, p. 3.

ordinary consciousness and among the broad masses [in the Soviet Union] as the collapse of socialism more generally after it reached a historical dead-end.\(^{42}\)

Musatov warned that the situation was apt to deteriorate even further “now that societal changes in the [East European] countries are increasingly taking the form of a repudiation of old values and a rejection of everything connected with socialism.” This process, he argued, would continue to buffet the Soviet Union, fueling “ever greater public disillusion with the Communist Party and with the socialist way of life.”\(^{43}\) The steady erosion of the CPSU’s legitimacy after 1989, and the deepening fissures within the Soviet political elite, ensured that by 1991 the Soviet public had even less of a stake in the continued survival of the Soviet regime.

The collapse of Communist rule in Eastern Europe was by no means the only factor that undercut Marxist-Leninist ideology. Ideological reassessments had begun soon after Gorbachev took office, and they were moving rapidly ahead by 1989. Nonetheless, the changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 were so monumental that they raised doubts not only about orthodox Communist ideology but also about the feasibility of Gorbachev’s attempt to define a new “socialist idea.” A memorandum prepared for the Soviet Politburo by the CPSU International Department in June 1991 conceded that “the socialist idea is extremely difficult to promote [in the USSR and elsewhere] now that it has fallen into such disrepute in Eastern Europe.”\(^{44}\) If, as Gorbachev originally hoped, reform-minded Communist leaders had come to power in Eastern Europe to replace the old hardline regimes (as occurred for a brief while in Bulgaria and Romania), the blow to Soviet ideology would have been less severe.\(^{45}\) Some core principles would likely have survived. But the outright dissolution of Communism in Eastern Europe deprived the ideology of whatever appeal it still had.

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\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) “TsK KPSS: O prodolzhenii polititcheskogo dialoga KPSS s zarubezhnymi partiyami i ikh mezhdunarodnymi ob’edineniyami,” Report No. 04605 (Secret), from V. S. Rykin, deputy head of the CPSU International Department, 7 June 1991, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 11, D. 95, Li. 1–5.

\(^{45}\) In Bulgaria, the replacement of Todor Zhivkov by more reform-minded Communist leaders in November 1989 proceeded for a brief while along the lines that Gorbachev favored, and to some extent the changeover in Romania (from Nicolae Ceaușescu to a more flexible Communist leader, Ion Iliescu) in late December 1989 also worked out the way Gorbachev had hoped. But in the summer of 1990, huge student demonstrations and anti-Communist rallies in Sofia culminated in the downfall of the Bulgarian president, Petur Mladenov. A few months later, a new round of demonstrations precipitated the collapse of the Bulgarian Socialist (former Communist) government headed by Andrei Lukansov. Thus, by the fall of 1990, even Bulgaria and Romania had moved, albeit faltering, into the post-Communist era.
Perceptions of Vulnerability

The collapse of East European Communism had an indirect but crucial impact on relations between the Soviet regime and the newly formed opposition groups in the USSR. During the first few years of the Gorbachev period, the latitude for far-reaching political change in the Soviet Union was still uncertain. Initially, most of the "informal" groups (*neformaly*) that emerged in Russia and the other union-republics were supportive of Gorbachev and perestroika, and their demands focused mainly on goals that the Soviet leader himself was pursuing. But as the leeway for change continued to expand, the objectives of these groups became much more ambitious. The growing assertiveness of the "popular fronts" and other grass-roots organizations in the Soviet Union was consistent with Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that a sudden easing of authoritarian rule is likely to embolden, rather than placate, opponents of the regime:

> It is not always when things are going from bad to worse that revolutions occur. It more often happens that when people who have long endured an oppressive regime without complaint suddenly find it relaxing its pressure, they rise up against it. . . . A grievance is patiently endured so long as it seems permanent, but it comes to appear intolerable once the thought of removing it arises.

By early to mid-1989, as events in Poland and Hungary were moving far beyond the limits that existed in the past, many of the unofficial groups in the Soviet Union began stepping up their demands. Coal miners in Russia and Ukraine embarked on large-scale strikes in July 1989 to seek better working conditions and greater compensation. Although the miners voiced support for Gorbachev and his reforms, the strikes were an unmistakable sign of the growing militancy of the workers’ movement. Similarly, in the union-republics, where the leeway for peaceful mobilization by 1989 was vastly greater than in the past, the newly formed popular fronts and other unofficial groups were ever more willing to test the bounds of official tolerance. Despite a brutal crackdown in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, in April 1989, nationalist groups in the three Baltic republics began to sense that they could aspire not only to extensive autonomy but also to full-fledged independence. Although Gorbachev and other high-ranking Soviet officials repeatedly warned that Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania would have to remain part of the USSR, politi-

cal activists in those republics increasingly viewed the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states (a “long-endured grievance,” in Tocqueville’s phrasing) as “intolerable” now that “the thought of removing it” had finally arisen.

Coming at a time of mounting political ferment in the Soviet Union, the upheavals in Eastern Europe in 1989 fueled a widespread perception in the Baltic states and other union-republics that the moment was right to challenge the Soviet regime. If Gorbachev had clamped down in Eastern Europe and had used large-scale force to prevent the Communist governments from collapsing, separatist groups in the USSR undoubtedly would have been more fearful that attempts to defy or break away from Soviet rule would incur a violent response. Vytautas Landsbergis, who was one of the founding leaders of the Sąjūdis independence movement in Lithuania in 1988 and was elected president of the republic in 1990, later recalled that the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe gave Sąjūdis greater confidence in pressing its demands for independence:

At an early stage, proposals for national autonomy might have been satisfactory for some Lithuanians for a while. Although many of us [in Sąjūdis] wanted to push harder right away, others were more cautious. But after watching Soviet rule come to an abrupt end in Eastern Europe, we all knew that Lithuania had a chance—its best chance ever—to assert our sovereignty and end the brutal occupation by Moscow. We could see that the rulers in the Soviet Union were weaker and more vulnerable than ever before.49

By early 1990, pro-independence sentiment in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia had grown immeasurably stronger. Although the violent suppression of the Azerbaijani Popular Front by the Soviet Army in January 1990 temporarily diminished the perception that the Soviet regime was highly vulnerable, Gorbachev’s failure to proceed with a more general clampdown elsewhere gave a fillip to opposition leaders who believed that the incursion into Azerbaijan was an aberration, rather than the start of a regular pattern. In the elections for republic-wide offices in the USSR in February and March 1990, pro-independence slates of candidates achieved overwhelming victories in all three of the Baltic states, giving them control of the governments there.

49. Interview with Vytautas Landsbergis, by the author, Cambridge, MA, 20 November 2000. It should be noted that Sąjūdis, which (as mentioned above) was originally supportive of Gorbachev and perestroika, was not the most radical organization on the Lithuanian scene by 1989. The Lithuanian Freedom League (Lietuvos laisvės lyga), which had existed underground since 1978 and had reemerged, more or less openly, in 1988, advocated a boycott of the March 1989 elections for the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies and condemned Sąjūdis for agreeing to take part. The Freedom League alleged that Sąjūdis’s stance was tantamount to “conferring approval on the repressive system of colonial rule” and “giving consent to the USSR Constitution that legalizes Lithuania’s annexation.” See “Į Lietuvos piliečius,” in Lietuvos Laisvės Lygos Informacinis Rindėnas (Vilnius: LLL, 14 March 1989), p. 2.
The increasingly defiant mood in the Baltic republics after the upheavals in Eastern Europe sparked alarm in the KGB, which had set up a special “directorate for the protection of the Soviet constitutional order” in late August 1989, a few days after the Solidarity-led government took office in Poland. The new directorate was intended to combat a wide range of internal threats, including “subversives,” “anti-Soviet organizations that are actively trying to foment anti-socialist demonstrations and mass disturbances,” and “hostile elements that are planning to bring about the forcible overthrow of the Soviet government.”50 In February 1990 the head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, reported to Gorbachev that “the situation now unfolding in [Eastern] Europe” would compel the KGB to take extra measures against “nationalist, anti-socialist, and extremist forces” in the Soviet Union and against those responsible for “separatist processes, anti-constitutional actions, and other destructive phenomena.”51 A few months later, two senior KGB officials in Vilnius informed their superiors in Moscow that even after economic sanctions had been imposed against Lithuania in March–April 1990 to try to force the government to revoke its declaration of independence, Sąjūdis and the large majority of Lithuanians were unwilling to back down:

The anti-socialist, chauvinist, and separatist elements have gained the upper hand and are pursuing their subversive aims, looking to foreign governments for support. They say that “if the Soviet government could do nothing to prevent the downfall of its socialist allies [in Eastern Europe], why do we have anything to fear?” The danger that socialist gains in the republic will be lost is now greater than ever.52

Given the dramatic nature of the events in Eastern Europe, the prospect of independence for the Baltic states finally seemed plausible, and the governments and populations there were no longer willing to settle for less.

In that respect, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe helped radicalize the political opposition in the Soviet Union. If Gorbachev had come to the “defense of socialism” in 1989 by sending troops into Eastern Eu-
rope as previous Soviet leaders did, he would have drawn a line—indirectly but forcefully—for the burgeoning separatist organizations and protest movements in the USSR. But by doing the opposite—by allowing and even facilitating the complete dissolution of Communist rule in Eastern Europe—Gorbachev inadvertently emboldened the very individuals and groups in the Soviet Union that were most intent on challenging the Communist regime and breaking away from the Soviet state. Only a year or two earlier, the notion that these opposition movements could achieve fundamental changes in the makeup of the Soviet Union would have seemed utterly fanciful. But after witnessing the remarkable series of events in Eastern Europe, many Baltic leaders and ordinary citizens were convinced that, as Vytautas Landsbergis put it, “we could finally end the illegal occupation of our country and rejoin the community of free nations.”

The growing perception among opposition groups—and among the wider public—that the Soviet regime might prove to be as fragile as the governments in Eastern Europe had an important effect on Soviet elites, many of whom began to worry that their own positions (and even their well-being) would be undermined if they clung too long to a ruling party that was in danger of being eclipsed. The British ambassador to Moscow in 1989–1991, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, recalled the anxiety that spread within the CPSU after the collapse of the East German and Czechoslovak regimes and the violent downfall of the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu:

At the end of [December 1989] the people of Romania rebelled. Ceaușescu tried repression. It failed. On Christmas Day he and his wife were summarily shot. All this was shown on Soviet television. Soviet viewers saw the Communist parties of Eastern Europe collapsing one after another, their prestige and pretensions utterly gone. Soviet Communists began to fear for their own Party, for their jobs, and even for their lives.

The mounting unease about the durability of the Soviet regime contributed to the surge of defections from the CPSU, reinforcing the impact of the ideological disarray. The steady diminution of the party’s ranks spurred on the groups that were defying the central government, and the increased boldness of these groups, in turn, gave Soviet elites even greater incentive to abandon the CPSU before it was too late. As this cycle intensified, both the perception and the reality of the Soviet regime’s vulnerability waxed ever larger.

54. Braithwaite, Across the Moscow River, p. 130.
Diminished Potential for the Use of Force

The collapse of hardline Communist regimes in Eastern Europe was preceded by three crucial events in the first half of 1989—the final withdrawal of all Soviet military units from Afghanistan in February, the violent crackdown in Tbilisi by Soviet army troops and security forces in April, and the much larger assault by Chinese soldiers against unarmed demonstrators in Beijing in early June—that helped shape Gorbachev’s policies regarding the use of force in both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The subsequent demise of East European Communism greatly reinforced this pattern and made it even less likely that violent repression could be used, either by Gorbachev or by those around him, to hold the Soviet Union together.

The pullout from Afghanistan brought an end to more than nine years of fighting between Soviet troops and Afghan guerrillas. When the Soviet Politburo sent a “Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces” into Afghanistan in late December 1979 to prop up the faltering Afghan Communist regime, no one in Moscow anticipated that the Soviet Army would get bogged down in a prolonged counterinsurgency war.55 Soviet leaders assumed that the mere pres-
ence of tens of thousands of Soviet troops would cow the guerrillas into submission and would stabilize the Afghan Communist government. Contrary to these expectations, however, a number of factors—the vast supplies of weaponry, ammunition, communications equipment, financial support, and training that the Afghan guerrillas received throughout the war from external sources (particularly the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China); the ability of the guerrillas to retreat to sanctuaries in Pakistan and Iran over rugged, mountainous terrain; the deficient training, vulnerable logistics, and low morale of the Soviet troops; and the unwillingness of Soviet leaders to commit more than 110,000–120,000 soldiers to the conflict at any one time (presumably because they were reluctant to divert combat troops from elsewhere, especially Europe)—prevented the Soviet Union from crushing the insurgency.56 The Soviet troops in Afghanistan often resorted to brutal tactics.
causing indiscriminate destruction, bloodshed, and upheaval. (The civilian death toll by the end of the war exceeded 1.2 million, and the number of refugees was more than 5.5 million.) At several points, the Soviet forces nearly wiped out the resistance. Nonetheless, in each case, fresh infusions of weapons and funding kept the insurgency going, and the guerrillas took full advantage of their sanctuaries and wide popular support. Because the Soviet Army lacked a clear-cut way of winning, the war became (and was perceived as) a stalemate broadly similar to the American experience in Vietnam. The fighting was not unbearably costly for the Soviet military, but it did impose a considerable political burden on the USSR in the international arena and, to some extent, at home.

Before Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Soviet leaders dismissed any notion of pulling Soviet troops out of Afghanistan. After Gorbachev took office, he, like his predecessors, initially seemed disinclined to undertake a full withdrawal. But by early to mid-1986, when Gorbachev began promoting “new political thinking” in foreign policy, the war in Afghanistan came prominently onto the Soviet Politburo’s agenda. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze


59. For example, at a CPSU Politburo meeting in March 1983, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko argued that the “difficulties” confronting Soviet troops in Afghanistan made it imperative to seek a “mutually acceptable political settlement.” This modest proposal was immediately and angrily rejected by the Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, who emphasized that “we are waging a battle against the American imperialists, and they are well aware that in this sphere of international politics they have lost their positions. That is why we absolutely cannot back down.” Andropov insisted that the Soviet Union would have to keep its troops in Afghanistan for as long as necessary—perhaps even for decades—to crush the “bandits.” See “Zasedanie Politiburo TsK KPSS 10 marta 1983 goda,” 10 March 1983 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 14, D. 29, Ll. 12–14.

60. There is, as yet, no fully satisfactory account of the Soviet decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. For diverse perspectives on the matter, see Sarah Mendelson, Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Raymond L.
soon forged a consensus among Politburo members that the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan would be desirable. From then on, they sought mainly to devise the best way to extricate the Soviet Army without precipitating a humiliating collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Shevardnadze, Georgii Shakhnazarov, Anatoli Chernyaev, and other key foreign policy officials contributed to the final plan. The pullout of Soviet forces was announced with great fanfare in February 1988 by Gorbachev, who pledged that within ten months after a series of U.S.-Soviet and Afghan-Pakistani agreements were signed in Geneva, all Soviet troops would be removed from Afghanistan.

The withdrawal of Soviet forces, which was completed on schedule in mid-February 1989, took place at a time when glasnost had given rise to
much more candid and extensive coverage of Afghanistan in the Soviet media, including articles about the fate of Soviet troops who had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. The spate of unfavorable reports in the Soviet media helped spur the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies to adopt a resolution on 24 December 1989 declaring that “the decision in 1979 to send Soviet troops into Afghanistan deserves to be condemned both morally and politically.” This resolution, coming so soon after the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe had disintegrated and after the Soviet government had made clear that it would not be dispatching soldiers to Romania (despite statements by Western leaders that they would actually welcome Soviet military intervention against the pro-Ceaușescu loyalists), undercut any lingering sense that the use of force in Afghanistan had ever been justified. Although Soviet leaders did their best to ensure the survival of the Afghan Communist regime after February 1989 by providing it with huge quantities of weaponry and support matériel, the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the much greater

63. According to official data, a total of 642,000 Soviet soldiers took part in the war during the roughly nine years that it lasted. Of these, some 14,453 were killed, and 53,753 were wounded. See General G. F. Krivosheev, ed., Gifr sekretnosti snyat: Poteri vooruzhennykh sil SSSR v voynakh, boevykh deistviyakh i voennykh konfliktaakh—Statisticheskoe izdelenie (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993), p. 311.


media coverage of the war had far-reaching effects on Soviet society. The Soviet military, which until the late 1980s had enjoyed an exalted position in the USSR, came under severe and sometimes withering scrutiny. Rightly or wrongly, the removal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan was widely seen—both inside and outside the Soviet Union—as a defeat of the once-vaunted army. The Afghan war was not the only factor that led to the much harsher press coverage of military affairs and to the downgrading of the army’s role in Soviet society, but it certainly was one of the most important factors. At the very least, the withdrawal bolstered the attempts by “new thinkers” to discredit the utility of force.


68. A vivid and thoughtful account of the unrest in Tbilisi and the resulting clampdown is provided in Mark R. Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 182–185 and 347–354, but unfortunately Beissinger makes no use of declassified documentation and only limited use of the many memoirs now available. As a result, key parts of his discussion of the decision to use force are inaccurate. Brian Taylor does draw on some formerly secret documents and new memoirs in his brief but interesting analysis of the crackdown in “The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR,” Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 37–39, but a number of recently declassified items from the Georgian and Russian archives (cited below) raise questions about his interpretations. My own brief account here is not intended to be exhaustive. I will simply provide enough information to explain the impact of the crackdown in Tbilisi, its connection with Gorbachev’s decision not to use force in Eastern Europe, and the longer-term repercussions within the USSR.
as “nationalistic, anti-socialist, and anti-Soviet slogans,” including calls for Georgia’s secession from the USSR. Although the demonstrations and hunger strikes remained peaceful throughout, and although the size of the protests gradually diminished, the leaders of the Georgian Communist Party were alarmed by the unrest and were increasingly fearful that the whole Georgian government was about to be overthrown.69

The situation took a fateful turn on 7 April when the CPSU Politburo, chaired by Egor Ligachev (standing in for Gorbachev, who at the time was in London with Shevardnadze and Yakovlev), agreed to send Soviet army troops and MVD anti-riot forces to Tbilisi to protect key buildings and roads, thus compensating for the dearth of reliable local police.70 That same day, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov ordered one of his deputies, Army-General Konstantin Kochetov, and the commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, Colonel-General Igor Rodionov, to fly immediately to Tbilisi.71 After

69. Among the myriad documents attesting to the panicked reaction of the Georgian leadership, see “Postanovlenie Byuro Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kompartii Gruzii: O vvedenii osobago polozheniya v g. Tbilisi,” Resolution No. 121/1 (Top Secret), 7 April 1989, in Volkogonov Collection, Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, Harvard University, D. 19, L. 1; “Postanovlenie Byuro Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kompartii Gruzii: O merakh v svyazi s nekotormi obstonenii politicheskoi obstanovki v respublike,” Resolution No. 122/2 (Top Secret), 8 April 1989, in Volkogonov Collection, Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, Harvard University, D. 21, L. 1–2; and “Vkhodyashchaya shifrtelegramma No. 219/Sh,” ciphered telegram (Top Secret) from J. Patiashvili to the CPSU Politburo, 8 April 1989, received at 8:50 p.m., in Volkogonov Collection, Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, Harvard University, D. 29, L. 1–2. A wealth of other documentation and testimony is provided in Anatolii Sobchak, Tbilisskii izlom, ili Krovavoe voskresen’e 1989 goda (Moscow: Sretenie, 1993), esp. pp. 82–138. Sobchak chaired a Soviet parliamentary commission that investigated the crackdown in Georgia and compiled a secret “concluding report” in December 1989, “Zaklyuchenie Komissii S’edna narodnykh deputatov SSSR po rasledovaniiyu sobytii, imevshikh mesto v g. Tbilisi 9 aprilya 1989 goda.” The commission’s report was declassified by the Russian government in 1993 and published in Istoricheskii arkhiv (Moscow), No. 3 (1993), pp. 102–120, along with a few related items. Sobchak’s Tbilisskii izlom includes some formerly secret documents and lengthy excerpts from testimony gathered by the commission, along with his own retrospective observations, which complement the excerpted materials in the chapter titled “The Tbilisi Syndrome” in his earlier memoir, Khoshchenie vo vlast’: Rasposleni’e izloma (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), pp. 79–104. Sobchak’s commission, however, did not have access to the transcripts of two crucial meetings of the Georgian Defense Council cited below. The Defense Council transcripts help clear up key issues that the Sobchak commission was unable to resolve.


71. No doubt, one of the reasons that Yazov chose to send Kochetov as well as Rodionov to Tbilisi is that both men had served as commanders of the Transcaucasus Military District (headquartered in Tbilisi) and had long been close friends with similar career paths. Both of them had started as regiment commanders in the “Iron” Division of the Transcarpathian Military District in the early 1970s. After Kochetov was appointed commander of the “Iron” Division, he became a patron of Rodionov,
Kochetov, Rodionov, and the army and MVD units arrived in the Georgian capital on the evening of 7–8 April, the Georgian authorities desperately sought permission from Moscow to impose a state of emergency. Although the head of the Georgian Communist Party, Jumber Patiashvili, and a few other senior Georgian officials initially were hesitant about using force and tried to delay a final decision, other members of the Georgian Defense Council were intent on violently dispersing the protesters from the very start.

Those favoring repression were strongly supported by General Kochetov, who (presumably with Yazov’s blessing) was eager to crush the demonstrations and was scornful of Georgian officials who “fail to recognize the direness of the situation.” Kochetov demanded “urgent and decisive action” by the Georgian government to “quell the unrest provoked by extremist elements and depraved individuals.” Although Patiashvili and his colleagues were still hoping to receive explicit authorization from the Soviet Politburo before they implemented a crackdown, Kochetov told them that “the magnitude of the crisis is not fully appreciated in Moscow” and that therefore “a decision [to use force] must be adopted here on the scene.” He assured the Georgian leaders that he would “inform Moscow about any decisions that are adopted,” but he exhorted them not to wait any longer before ordering the army and MVD units to “remove all demonstrators from the main city square and restore the normal functioning of the Georgian government.” Accordingly, the Georgian Defense Council on the evening of 8 April approved “swift and resolute...
measures" to "restore order" and to "rectify the gravely deteriorating and increasingly catastrophic political situation." This decision set in motion a large-scale crackdown in Tbilisi on 9 April under the direction of General Rodionov, an operation that killed nineteen people, including fifteen women, wounded nearly three hundred, and exposed many thousands of bystanders to tear gas and other noxious anti-riot chemicals.

In subsequent days, many commentators and parliamentarians in the Soviet Union expressed fierce criticism of the violence and denounced the army for its role. Gorbachev, who returned to Moscow from London late in the evening on 7 April, claimed that he had not known about the crackdown in advance—a claim that, in retrospect, seems plausible. After a brief period

76. Ibid., L. 5. This decision was the crucial one. It was then immediately reaffirmed by (or in the name of) the highest party and state bodies, namely, the Georgian Communist Party Bureau (Politburo) and the Georgian Council of Ministers. The formal document authorizing the crackdown, "Rasporyazhenie No. 24rs 8 aprelia 1989," Order No. 24rs (Top Secret), was issued in the name of the Georgian Council of Ministers chaired by Zurab Chkheidze.

77. Gorbachev's assertion that he did not know of the crackdown in advance has been challenged by many observers, but the newly released documents that are cited above lend credibility to his position and help clear up the discrepancies in memoir accounts. There is no doubt that Gorbachev was briefed on the Georgian situation as soon as he and Shevardnadze returned to Moscow at around 11:00 p.m. on 7 April. Gorbachev himself acknowledges this in his memoirs, Zhizn' i reformy, Vol. 1, p. 514. The Soviet leader received further information about the crisis in Tbilisi when the CPSU Politburo met in an emergency session on 8 April. Even so, it is doubtful that these briefings and discussions would have enabled Gorbachev to learn about the impending army-MVD operation. The transcripts of the Georgian Defense Council meetings, which were previously unavailable to scholars, make clear that the decision to use force was adopted by the Georgian leadership without explicit authorization from the Soviet Politburo. The transcripts also make clear that the Soviet Politburo, far from authorizing a crackdown, had in fact recommended that the Georgian authorities "wait another 2–3 days" before arresting the organizers of the demonstrations. Although two high-ranking officials in Moscow—Defense Minister Yazov (acting through Deputy Defense Minister Kochetov) and the former KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov, who by this time was in charge of the CPSU commission that oversaw the MVD and KGB—apparently did give authorization for a crackdown on 9 April, they did so on their own without informing other members of the Politburo. The evidence for Yazov's involvement in the matter is particularly strong. Kochetov certainly would not have urged the Georgian Defense Council to order the use of force unless he had received explicit instructions to that effect from Yazov. Although Yazov later told the Sobchak commission that he did not authorize the crackdown (see the excerpts from his testimony transcribed in Khozhdenie vo vlast', pp. 88–89, 90–91), his denials are contravened by the documentary evidence, and it is not surprising that the Sobchak commission concluded that he did in fact issue an explicit order to both Kochetov and Rodionov via the telephone on 8 April. The fact that the decision to crack down was adopted in Tbilisi, not in Moscow, helps explain why the first-hand accounts by officials who were based in Moscow diverge so markedly. Aleksandr Kapto, a senior CPSU official who took part in the Soviet Politburo meeting on 8 April, writes that the Politburo members "discussed measures to restore order in Tbilisi." He implies that Gorbachev, on this basis, must have been aware of the plans for a forceful crackdown on 9 April. See Aleksandr Kapto Na perekrestkah khvostov: Politicheskie memuary (Moscow: Sotsial'no-politicheskii zhurnal, 1996), p. 311. Kapto's version is similar to the accounts by a few others who were present during the high-level deliberations in Moscow, including Nikolai Ryzhkov (who was then Soviet prime minister) and Valerii Boldin (then head of the CPSU General Department and a senior aide to Gorbachev). Boldin in his memoirs claims that "Gorbachev knew everything" about the crackdown but "shifted all the blame to the military" because of his own "cowardice." See V. I. Boldin, Krashenie p'edestala: Sternikh i portreta M. S. Gorbacheva (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), pp. 346–349 (quoted passage from..."
of hesitation, he made the momentous decision to condemn the bloodshed and to disavow all responsibility for the soldiers’ actions, which he described as “harmful to the interests of perestroika, democratization, and the renewal of our country.”

Although Gorbachev tempered his criticism with stern warnings that the Soviet government would not permit “destructive forces” to “redraw borders or [to] break up the national-republic structure of the country,” he emphasized that he was “deeply grieved” by the loss of life in Tbilisi. Moreover, he sent one of his closest aides, Eduard Shevardnadze, to Georgia to appeal for calm and reconciliation. Shevardnadze, who was of Georgian origin and had served as head of the Georgian internal affairs ministry and Communist Party in the 1970s and early 1980s before taking up his post in Moscow, left no doubt about where his (and, implicitly, Gorbachev’s) sympathies lay. In an emotional speech to Georgian party officials on 14 April, Shevardnadze declared that “no one and nothing can justify the deaths of innocent people. We [must] ensure that this sort of tragedy never happens again either here or elsewhere in the Soviet Union.”

Had Gorbachev decided instead to depict the crackdown as a necessary (if perhaps somewhat excessive) reaction to destabilizing unrest, he would have signaled that other attempts to foment instability in the USSR would likely be met with an equally vigorous response. But by essentially endorsing the harsh criticism of the repression, Gorbachev inadvertently created a “Tbilisi syndrome” that provided a rallying point for separatist groups and protest movements in the Soviet Union and gave them an incentive to step up their activities in the belief that peaceful demonstrations would no longer be forcibly subdued. This latter belief gained particular impetus from the official pledge (voiced by Shevardnadze) that the Soviet government would “never permit this sort of tragedy to happen again.” Gorbachev’s denial of responsi-

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bility for the violence and Shevardnadze’s reprobation of the troops’ actions sparked deep antagonism with General Rodionov and other senior military officers, who felt betrayed by the political leadership and were outraged by what they perceived as the scapegoating of the army.80 Gorbachev’s demeanor also sowed hesitancy among other commanders of army units and security forces (KG and MVD) about the possible deployment of their personnel in future crackdowns, lest they too be abandoned by Gorbachev and then subjected to relentless vilification afterward if things went awry. In all these respects, Gorbachev’s response to the Tbilisi affair circumscribed his options for relying on force against opponents of the regime.

No less important in shaping Gorbachev’s ability and willingness to use force at home was the crisis in Beijing in April–June 1989 that crushed China’s fledgling “pro-democracy” movement. After several weeks of peaceful (if boisterous) protests by vast throngs of students, young workers, peasants, and other people in and around Tiananmen Square, the Chinese authorities ordered a massive crackdown by the army and security forces.81 The general

80. The complaints voiced by Rodionov and other military officers about the scapegoating of the army were only partly warranted. Although Rodionov later claimed—in numerous interviews and memoirs—that he had been opposed to the crackdown and had tried until the last minute to forestall it, the bulk of the evidence (including his own testimony to the Sobchak commission, as transcribed in Sobchak, Tbilisskii izlom, pp. 110–111, 129–130) does not corroborate his assertions. When Rodionov arrived in Tbilisi on the evening of 7–8 April, he did not yet have authorization for a crackdown and was therefore not urging that the army be used for that purpose, but by the following day, after he spoke with Yazov on the phone, he seemed fully ready to oversee the operation. The newly available transcripts of the Georgian Defense Council meetings on 8 April leave no doubt that, at that point, Rodionov did not object to the crackdown in principle and was worried only that the Georgian leaders were hesitant about granting their explicit consent. The transcripts belie Rodionov’s subsequent assertions that on 8 April he urged the Georgians not to embroil the army in internal political disputes and warned them he did not have enough troops to enforce martial law. See, for example, the misleading post-facto accounts in Kapto, Na perekrestkakh zhizni, p. 321; Aleksandr Zhilin, “General Igor’ Rodionov: Vozvrashchenie iz ssylki,” Muskovkie novosti (Moscow), No. 29 (21–28 July 1996), p. 7; Nataliya Gervyryan, “General Rodionov: Prikazy ne obsuzhdayutsya,” Kommersant (Moscow), No. 27 (23 July 1996), pp. 6–7; and the interview with Shevardnadze in Leonid Pleshakov, “Ubezhdat’ pravdoi,” Ogoniok (Moscow), No. 11 (March 1990), pp. 2–6.

secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Zhao Ziyang, had wanted to pursue a genuine compromise with the demonstrators and to introduce broad political reforms, but he was unable to win support from his colleagues on the CCP Politburo. Although one senior official, Hu Qili, did side with Zhao, they were outflanked by eight party elders led by Deng Xiaoping, who warned that “if things continue like this, we could even end up under house arrest.” Other Politburo members strongly backed Deng’s views, arguing that “retreat” would lead to the “destruction of the People’s Republic” and the “overthrow of our party and government.” At Deng’s behest, the Chinese Politburo approved “decisive measures to put down the counterrevolutionary riot” and authorized the “use of any means necessary to remove people who interfere with this mission.”

On the evening of 3–4 June, cordons of troops from the 27th Group Army Unit and the security forces moved into the center of Beijing and clashed with demonstrators at numerous points around the square. The troops then opened fire on serried crowds of protesters, killing more than a thousand and wounding at least several thousand.

82. Zhao Ziyang spoke strongly in favor of a political compromise at sessions of the CCP Politburo’s Standing Committee on 13, 16, and 17 May 1989, but Deng Xiaoping left no doubt that he fundamentally disagreed with Zhao. See Nathan and Link, eds., The Tiananmen Papers, pp. 147–152, 177–181, and 184–189. From then on, Zhao’s ouster was only a matter of time. (He was replaced by Jiang Zemin shortly after the crackdown.) When reading Zhao’s comments nowadays about the need to “use the methods of democracy and law” in accommodating the protesters, one cannot help but be struck by the similarity to the policies advocated in the late 1980s and early 1990s by leading Soviet “new thinkers” such as Aleksandr Yakovlev and Georgii Shakhnazarov. By contrast, the staunch hardliners on the Chinese Politburo in 1989, particularly Wang Zhen (who described the protesters as “goddamn bastards” and called on the army to “show them no mercy”) and Li Peng, were similar in their outlooks to the ultra-hardliners in Moscow, such as Oleg Baklanov and General Valentin Varennikov, both of whom were instrumental in the attempted coup in August 1991.

83. Comments by Deng at meeting of the CCP Politburo’s Standing Committee on 17 May 1989, ibid., p. 189.

84. Comments by Deng Yingchao, Chen Yun, and Wang Zhen at an enlarged meeting of the CCP Politburo’s Standing Committee on 18 May 1989, ibid., pp. 204–211.


86. The precise number killed and wounded is as yet unknown and may never be known. Based on a canvas of major hospitals in Beijing, the Chinese Red Cross concluded that 2,600 civilians and troops were killed and more than 7,000 were wounded. In a secret cable to U.S. Secretary of State James Baker on 22 June 1989, the U.S. embassy in Beijing described the Chinese Red Cross’s figures as “not an unreasonable estimate” but noted that the totals “do not include [unrecorded] deaths on the streets.” See “What Happened on the Night of June 3/4?” Cable No. 1411 (Confidential), 22 June 1989, in George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas, Subject File: China Documents, FOIA Documents Collection 2000–0950-F, Doc. E44. Other estimates—some lower, some higher—also have been proposed, but no firm corroboration is yet available. Apparently no one was killed in
sands of other protesters were arrested over the next few days on charges of “counterrevolutionary rioting.”

The lessons of these events for officials in Moscow were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the crisis illustrated the potential efficacy of all-out force. The massacre and systematic arrests of “lawless elements and counterrevolutionary ringleaders” put an abrupt end to the escalating protests in China and allowed the Chinese Communist authorities to reestablish tight control. The crackdown was seen by some in Moscow—and, even more, by hardline leaders in Eastern Europe, who spoke appreciatively of the “Chinese solution”—as a model for a step that the Soviet Union itself might eventually have to take, if only as a last resort.87

On the other hand, the repression in China had a jarring effect on many Soviet officials, including Gorbachev, who by all accounts was taken aback and dismayed by the scale of the bloodshed.88 During a visit to Beijing two weeks before the crackdown, Gorbachev was asked at a news conference what he would do if confronted by large-scale demonstrations in Moscow comparable to those taking place in the Chinese capital. He replied that “if problems of this sort or of a similar nature were to occur in the Soviet Union, we would analyze their specific features and seek political methods of resolving them.”89

87. East German and Romanian Communist leaders were especially enthusiastic about the “Chinese solution.” See, for example, the text of a secret speech delivered on 9 June by East German State Security Minister Erich Mielke, reproduced in “Krenz und Mielke vereinbarten auf Geheimkonferenz chinesische Lösung,” Der Welt (Hamburg), 21 May 1990, p. 6. See also the secret deliberations recorded in “Chinesische Lösung”: Wollten Stasi-Leute ein Blutbad unter Demonstranten provozieren?” Der Spiegel (Hamburg), No. 51 (18 December 1989), pp. 42–44; Ewald König, “Der Honecker-Befehl zum Blutbad war am 9. Oktober schön unter schrieben,” Die Presse (Vienna), 24 November 1989, p. 4; and the two-part article by Cordt Schnibben, “Ich bin das Volk: Wie Erich Honecker und sein Politbüro die Konterrevolution erlebten (I),” Der Spiegel (Hamburg), No. 16 (16 April 1990), pp. 72–90; and “Makkaroni mit Schinken, bitte: Wie Erich Honecker und sein Politbüro die Konterrevolution erlebten (II),” Der Spiegel (Hamburg), No. 17, 23 April 1990, pp. 78–98.

88. As noted in Part 1 of this article, both Georgii Shakhnazarov and Anatolii Chernyaev recalled, in interviews, how shaken Gorbachev was when televised images streamed in of the mass repression in Beijing and its aftermath. Gorbachev in his memoirs deals at length with his trip to China (and provides excerpts from transcripts of his talks with Chinese leaders), but he is much more reticent about his reaction to the Tiananmen Square massacre. He leaves no doubt, however, that he was deeply unnerved by it. See Gorbachev, Zhisli i reformy, Vol. 2, pp. 334–351. A similar account of Gorbachev’s (and Shevardnadze’s) reactions is provided by Pavel Palazhchenko, Gorbachev’s English-language interpreter, who accompanied the Soviet leader on the trip to Beijing. See Pavel Palazhchenko, My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 137–138. Palazhchenko indicates that both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze found the crackdown “abhorrent” but were in a “real quandary” about how to respond. Neither of them was willing to emulate Andrei Sakharov, who immediately and publicly condemned the killings.

89. “Press-konferentsiya M. S. Gorbacheva v Pekine,” Pravda (Moscow), 18 May 1989, p. 3. The di-
Although Gorbachev stressed that his comments were not intended as “advice to the Chinese people about how they should act in this specific situation,” he made clear throughout his visit that he supported “political processes and political solutions,” not mass bloodshed. Rather than viewing the Tiananmen Square crackdown as a model to emulate, Gorbachev (as well as many other high-ranking Soviet officials, especially Yakovlev and Shevardnadze) regarded it as something he desperately wanted to avoid. The Chinese authorities had reasserted control of Beijing, but at a price that Gorbachev found totally unacceptable, with a death toll more than 50 to 100 times higher than in Tbilisi in April 1989. As noted in Part 1 of this article, the traumatic violence in Tiananmen Square was one of the factors that impelled Gorbachev to strive more actively for the peaceful transformation of Eastern Europe. It also reinforced his determination to pursue non-violent solutions to the rapidly proliferating tensions and crises within the Soviet Union.

Coming so soon in the wake of these three momentous events—the final withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the crackdown in Tbilisi, and the massacre in Beijing—the downfall of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe reinforced many of the lessons that Gorbachev had drawn about the desirability of eschewing large-scale violence. To be sure, Gorbachev’s unwillingness to use force outside the Soviet Union did not necessarily foreshadow his response to dangers within the country. Even democratic states, as Stephen Kotkin has pointed out, have often relied on large-scale violence to crush urgent internal threats:

In India during the 1980s and 1990s the central authorities killed many thousands of separatists in the name of preserving the integrity of the state, at little or no cost to the country’s democratic reputation. The Indian government consistently issued unambiguous signals about what lines could not be crossed, and used force against secessionist movements that crossed them.

Until well into 1991, Kotkin argues, “no one [in the USSR] could exclude the possibility of an attempted crackdown to save the Union.” Indeed, the abrupt collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and the dismantling of the secret police organs in the former East-bloc countries (especially the State Security Ministry in East Germany, which was disbanded after

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90. This is evident not only from the Soviet media’s extensive coverage of Gorbachev’s trip, but also from the relevant passages in the Chinese documentation. See Nathan and Link, eds., The Tiananmen Papers, pp. 153–198.


92. Ibid., p. 92.
the apparent storming of its headquarters by protesters\(^93\)), prompted some high-ranking officials in the CPSU and KGB to fear that the same thing might happen in the Soviet Union unless they took forceful action to prevent it.\(^94\) They urged Gorbachev to use all-out violence, when necessary, to forestall or crush severe internal threats. The influence of these officials was manifested during the Soviet Army’s large-scale incursion into Baku in January 1990 to quell interethnic fighting and to uproot the radical leaders of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, who had instigated a rash of violent attacks against Armenians in Baku. The operation killed at least 140 people and wounded more than 720.\(^95\)

Yet, even if some officials in Moscow may have favored a broad internal clampdown after the upheavals in Eastern Europe, the drastic reorientation of Soviet–East European ties was itself an impediment to that option. The policy that Gorbachev adopted vis-à-vis Eastern Europe in 1989—a policy that conspicuously ruled out Soviet military interference—inadvertently limited his freedom of action at home by making it more difficult for him to contemplate resorting to force, no matter how grave the threats he confronted. Having refrained from sending troops into Eastern Europe to prevent the wholesale collapse of Communist regimes, Gorbachev found it even harder than before to justify the violent suppression of peaceful groups within the Soviet Union that were seeking independence or an end to Communist rule. Although the option of using large-scale repression at home was not wholly undercut by Gorbachev’s decision to eschew forceful measures abroad, his renunciation of military action in Eastern Europe made it much more difficult

93. The word “apparent” is used here because it later came to light that provocateurs from the former state security (Stasi) apparatus had infiltrated the crowd and helped orchestrate the “attack” on the former Stasi complex. Contrary to the appearance of a forceful storming of the headquarters, demonstrators were in fact let into the building by elite guards who were cooperating with the provocateurs; and it was the provocateurs, not the genuine protesters, who caused much of the damage to offices upstairs. It is not clear why former Stasi personnel would have wanted to arrange an attack on their own headquarters, but presumably it was because they hoped to foster the impression of mob violence and thereby demonstrate that a security apparatus was still needed. If that was in fact their intention, it clearly backfired. For further details on this episode, see Anne Worst, *Das Ende eines Geheimdienstes, oder: Wie lebendig ist die Stasi* (Berlin: LinksDruck Verlag, 1991), pp. 32–59.


for him to rationalize the use of force within the USSR, particularly against opposition groups that were relying solely on peaceful protests. Moreover, the bloodshed in Romania in December 1989 showed that in some circumstances the use of repression to stave off change could actually make things worse, and it thus cast even greater doubt on the notion of relying on violent coercion to hold the Soviet Union together.

After the intervention in Azerbaijan, which ostensibly was intended in part to halt violent Azeri attacks against ethnic Armenians, Gorbachev rarely ordered the use of force again. Even when he did resort to force, it was generally on a much smaller scale than in January 1990, and it tended to evoke widespread criticism both at home and abroad. The crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991 was far more limited than Gorbachev’s hardline advisers had hoped, but it sparked vehement complaints and large protest rallies in Russia as well as in the non-Russian republics. Opposition leaders sought to induce the Soviet government to enact legal measures prohibiting the use of armed troops against peaceful demonstrators. Although the various legal provisions that were adopted in 1990 and 1991 did not offer safeguards as firm or as elaborate as the opposition groups had hoped, the mere fact that Gorbachev was willing to acquiesce in and even encourage formal restrictions on his coercive powers was a sign of the broader constraints he was facing. Indeed, despite the continued surge of unrest in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s leeway for using force became more and more attenuated. The implications of this trend for the stability of the Soviet Union were immense. As Reinhard Bendix pointed out in his classic study of monarchical regimes, the capacity to use violence against dire threats is essential to the preservation of a state: “Wherever a mandate to rule is to sway the minds and hearts of men, it requires the exercise of force or the awareness that those

96. In reality, the attacks against Armenians were largely over by the time Soviet troops moved in. The main reason for the incursion, as Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov acknowledged, was to crush the Azerbaijani Popular Front. See the interview with Yazov transcribed in Igor Andreev, “Baku 26 yanvarya,” Izvestiya (Moscow), 26 January 1990, p. 2.


who rule are able, and will not hesitate, to use force if that is needed to assert their will."

Gorbachev’s reluctance to order violent repression at home and his decision to forgo the use of force in Eastern Europe eroded the morale of the personnel and organizations in the Soviet Union that were responsible for safeguarding the integrity of the state. In late 1989 and 1990 the Soviet Politburo received a plethora of memoranda and intelligence reports indicating that the ferment and upheavals in Eastern Europe and the spillover into the Soviet Union were “taking their toll on the morale and psychological condition of military servicemen and state security employees, causing them to feel irresolute and uncertain about what will come next.” The commander of the Soviet MVD’s elite rapid-reaction forces, General Yuri Shatalin, warned in October 1989 that his troops, having witnessed the lack of a decisive response to the protests in East Germany, would themselves be “less prepared to deal with a surge of violent instability at home.” Soviet newspapers featured a litany of articles in 1990 about military officers who vowed they would not open fire on civilians even if ordered to do so. In a typical case, a unit commander in the Leningrad Military District, General Benedikt Fedorov, declared in June 1990 that the changes in Eastern Europe and the turmoil within the USSR had produced “such a deep crisis in the [Soviet Communist] Party” and had made “the situation so unpredictable” that “many military men [in the Soviet Union] now feel themselves to be independent of orders from the party.” The situation, he argued, “is so difficult and so dangerous that every military man must act according to his own principles and not according to orders from the party.” Fedorov issued a blunt warning to the leaders of the CPSU:

Many orders in our history were carried out without thinking, and had disastrous results. Today, much of the army believes we must carefully consider the

101. Interview with General Shatalin in “General-polkovnik Yu. Shatalin: ‘My prishli zashchitit’ vas,’” *Krasnaya zvezda* (Moscow), 6 October 1989, p. 2. Fittingly, Shatalin’s interview appeared alongside an even lengthier interview with the East German national defense minister, Heinz Kessler, who seemed utterly oblivious to the depth of the crisis in the GDR. Shortly afterward, Kessler was swept from power.
general thrust of an order before acting on it. . . . In the present situation, I seri-
ously doubt whether the army would follow orders to fire upon civilians unless
the violence was begun by civilians. In the event of such orders from above,
many ordinary soldiers would refuse to obey, as would many lower- and mid-
dle-level officers.104

Fedorov and other unit commanders who said they would not permit
their troops to be deployed against unarmed civilians cited a number of recent
events—the violence in Tbilisi, the Soviet decision to refrain from interven-
ing in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, and the chaotic bloodshed in Ro-
mania—as justifications for their position. Their comments stirred intense
anger at the top levels of the Soviet Defense Ministry. The head of the Soviet
Army's Main Political Directorate, Colonel-General Nikolai Shlyaga, de-
nounced “certain military commanders who . . . are unprepared to fulfill their
solemn constitutional duty to ensure the armed defense of the homeland.”105
Shlyaga claimed that “statements of insubordination” by Fedorov and other
“irresponsible people” were “undermining the cohesion of the Army and
Navy” and “generating enormous moral and psychological pressure on our
soldiers,” causing them to be “insouciant about the defense of the socialist
fatherland.”106 Shlyaga’s remarks were echoed by another hardline officer,
General Leonid Ivashov, who expressed consternation at “the passivity and
confusion displayed by a number of commanders [who] . . . are afraid to order
their troops to use weapons even when their own units come under deadly at-
tack.”107 Colonel-General Viktor Ermakov, the Soviet deputy defense minister
in charge of the ministry’s main personnel directorate, was especially worried
that “disobedience” would grow as a result of the “pressure exerted on reserve
officers [in the non-Russian republics] by separatist and nationalist forces.
Many of the officers are simply crumbling under this fierce psychological
pressure.”108

Senior Defense Ministry officials increasingly sensed that the “alarming”

104. Ibid.
105. Lieutenant-Colonel V. Kosarev, “Resheniya diktuet zhizn’: V Komitete Verkhovnogo Soveta
SSSR po voprosam oborony i gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti,” Krasnaya zvezda (Moscow), 13 June
106. Ibid.
107. Interview with General Leonid Ivashov on Moscow Domestic Service radio, 8 December 1990,
transcribed by British Broadcasting Corporation.
108. Comments by General Ermakov transcribed in “Vnov’ ‘karayushchaya ruka Moskvy,’” Krasnaya
zvezda (Moscow), 22 September 1990, p. 2. This point was emphasized even more strongly in the
CPSU Secretariat resolution “O neotlozhnykh merakh v svyazi s usileniem antiarmeiskikh proyavlenii
v ryade regionov strany,” Sr-11/17 (Top Secret), 15 November 1990, with attached memorandum
prepared by the CPSU Commission on Military Policy, chaired by Oleg Baklanov, in RGANI, F. 89,
changes within the Soviet military, spurred on by the “harmful effect” of developments in Eastern Europe, would soon be irreversible. Alluding to “what happened to the Warsaw Pact,” General Ivashov warned in late 1990 that “the reliability of the Soviet Armed Forces is now so much in doubt that any further delay in adopting decisive measures will merely aggravate the situation.”109 This same point was stressed by the head of the KGB, Kryuchkov, in early February 1991 when he told Gorbachev that unless the government immediately authorized the use of large-scale repression (“extraordinary measures”), the military and the KGB would no longer be able to forestall a “dire crisis” in the Soviet Union.110 In a thinly veiled criticism of Gorbachev’s reluctance to impose an all-out crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991, Kryuchkov emphasized that “recent events in the Baltic republics have had a very negative effect on the morale of army troops and have reinforced doubts, especially among senior officers, about the ability of the country’s leadership to reassert control of the situation.”111

To the extent that the changes in Eastern Europe contributed to Gorbachev’s indecisiveness about the use of force against internal threats, they weakened a central pillar of the Soviet regime. Crane Brinton observed in his study of revolution that regimes have been overthrown not when they were most repressive, but when the rulers undertook reforms and became “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.”112 Gorbachev’s vacillations in the Baltic republics in January 1991, when he first authorized a crackdown but then failed to complete it, reflected the diffidence and irresolution that Brinton described. The Soviet leader’s Hamlet-like qualities, and his failure to use force consistently and decisively, were evident before the upheavals began in Eastern Europe, but they became all the more pronounced after the events of 1989.

This is not to say that a general crackdown would have been wholly infeasible in the Soviet Union even as late as mid-1991. Mark Beissinger has claimed that “force could not have saved the USSR,”113 but it is worth remembering that in the spring of 1989 many Western observers insisted that events in China had gone too far for the Chinese Communist Party to reestablish full control.114 The violent crackdown near Tiananmen Square put an imme-

109. Interview with General Ivashov on Moscow Domestic Service radio, 8 December 1990, transcribed by British Broadcasting Corporation.
111. Ibid., L. 6–7.
114. Jim Hoagland cites some telling examples of these erroneous predictions in his “As If It Never
diate end to that line of argument. Because almost all of the leading Chinese officials were willing to tolerate mass bloodshed, they were able to restore public order throughout China remarkably quickly. If hardline elements had seized power in the Soviet Union in 1990 or 1991 and had engaged in repression on a comparable scale against any shows of defiance, a similar result might well have obtained.

Even if that is the case, however, the political context in the Soviet Union in 1990–1991 was very different from that in China in 1989. In China, political liberalization had barely begun in 1989, whereas in the Soviet Union the enormous political changes in the late 1980s increasingly constrained the actions not only of Gorbachev but of many of those around him. Shortly after the crackdown in Beijing, Kryuchkov lamented that the Soviet government had been much less resolute than the Chinese authorities: “To ensure that trouble-spots do not spin out of control, we need to crush them as soon as they emerge. But that is precisely what we are so often failing to do.”115 The largely peaceful collapse of Communist rule in Eastern Europe magnified the constraints on Soviet leaders and, indirectly, reinforced Gorbachev’s (and others’) aversion to the use of large-scale violence at home. It also spawned further rifts within the army and security agencies. Although Gorbachev tried desperately to prevent the Soviet Union from unraveling, neither he nor most of those around him shared the Chinese authorities’ willingness to rely on systematic, deadly repression. Gorbachev’s acceptance of the disintegration of the East European Communist regimes did not mean that the breakup of the Soviet regime or the USSR was inevitable, but it did set the stage for what was to come.

“Demonstration Effect” of Changes in Eastern Europe: The Context

When political crises erupted in Eastern Europe in the pre-Gorbachev era, Soviet leaders tried to ensure that the only information available to Soviet citizens about those events was the official version approved by the CPSU Politburo. During upheavals in Czechoslovakia and East Germany in 1953, Po-

land and Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1968, and Poland in 1980–1981, high-ranking Soviet officials exercised rigid control of the Soviet mass media and censored all coverage of external developments. By severely limiting the flow of information, they sought to minimize the spillover from Eastern Europe and to prevent the crises there from becoming a catalyst of unrest within the Soviet Union itself.116

By 1989, however, the top-down control of information had eroded a great deal. Glasnost by that point had taken firm root within the Soviet media, especially in the press. The roundtable process in Poland and the ferment in Hungary were covered extensively and often accurately by Soviet journalists. When the “winds of change” began to spread into the other East European countries, some officials in Moscow wanted to restrict Soviet press coverage of the escalating turmoil. Aleksandr Kapto, who as head of the CPSU Ideology Department was broadly responsible for the Soviet media, sent a memorandum to the Soviet Politburo emphasizing the “exceptionally important obligation of the mass media to shape public opinion in a desirable way.”117 In another memorandum in mid-November 1989, Kapto warned that unlimited “coverage of the latest developments in the socialist countries” of Eastern Europe, “especially the events in Czechoslovakia and the GDR,” would be “inappropriate and ill-advised.”118 He stressed that uncensored press accounts of the crises in Eastern Europe had already “raised doubts about the ability of [Soviet] Communists to stay in power” and had induced the Soviet public to foresee “the prospect of a fundamental change in the [Soviet] political order, as has already occurred in Poland.” Kapto and other senior officials denounced the coverage in liberal periodicals like Moskovskie novosti and Ogonek as “tendentious and one-sided,” and they urged Soviet leaders to “provide political and moral support to our long-standing ‘friends’ in Eastern Europe,” rather than simply “applauding” and “succumbing to a wave of euphoria.”119

These warnings proved of little efficacy. At Yakovlev’s urging, Gorbachev not only eschewed a clampdown on the media but actually removed most of the controls that still existed. On 18 November 1989 the CPSU Politburo adopted a resolution calling for the “further expansion of glasnost” and the

118. Kapto, Na perekrestkakh zhizni, p. 337.
119. Ibid.
“elimination of all restrictions and bans [on the press] that are contrary to international law and that are not in keeping with the obligations undertaken by the Soviet Union in accordance with the all-European [human rights provisions] of the Helsinki Final Act.” This resolution essentially did away with any limits on media coverage of the upheavals in Eastern Europe and allowed the Soviet public to learn all about the dramatic changes that led to the demise of East European Communism—the very thing that Kapto had dreaded.

The unhindered coverage of events in Eastern Europe had enormous implications for political stability within the Soviet Union. When Pavel Palazhchenko, who served as an interpreter and foreign policy aide for both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze in 1985–1991, later sought to understand “why the pattern of developments in East Germany, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union was so similar [and] why it all happened almost simultaneously,” he concluded that the role of “the [Soviet] media, particularly television, [in] spreading the contagion of impatience in vivid images,” was the most crucial factor. These televised images, he recalled, had a powerful effect not only on Soviet elites but also on the Soviet public:

CNN was showing scenes of the “velvet revolution” in Prague, the end of the Berlin Wall, and the fall of Todor Zhivkov in Sofia. Soviet television was showing those scenes too. An era was ending. It was epitomized in vivid and effective television images, and this made the historic change more joyful for those who welcomed or accepted it, and more painful for those who rejected it. In the Soviet Union many people were confused [by these events]. The still powerful party apparat was scared; some quickly understood that it was their death knell too, others demanded that the collapse be stopped, and still others simply panicked and reacted with a kind of rhetorical flailing about.

The forebodings of Kapto and other officials who had warned that unrestricted media coverage of the events in Eastern Europe would destabilize the Soviet regime thus proved to be well-founded. The succession of crises in the neighboring Warsaw Pact countries in 1989 provided an example to separatist groups within the USSR—and to leading officials in the Soviet republic governments—of the political goals to which they themselves could aspire. The upheavals in Eastern Europe not only confirmed that fundamental change in

121. Palazhchenko, My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, p. 177.
122. Ibid., p. 152.
the Communist world was finally possible, but also offered a model for how the Soviet Union itself could be transformed. Many of the radical steps taken by the East European countries to end Communist rule—steps that only a year or two earlier would have been inconceivable—were soon emulated within the USSR. The importance of this “demonstration effect” was underscored in March 1990 by one of the leading advocates of democratization in the Soviet Union, Vladimir Tikhonov: “What Poland has already managed to accomplish is precisely what we [in the USSR] would like to achieve in the near future. . . . The lessons from Poland undoubtedly have been absorbed, and now we need to apply them in our own country.”

The prospect that changes in Eastern Europe would soon be replicated within the Soviet Union stirred sharply conflicting reactions among high-ranking Soviet officials. On the one hand, some worried that the whole Communist system in the Soviet Union would collapse unless they took urgent measures to contain and eliminate the threat. The hardline first secretary of the CPSU municipal committee in Moscow, Yurii Prokof’ev, told the party’s Central Committee in both February and March 1990 that if the Soviet Communists were to relinquish their “leading” position in Soviet society as the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) had done in Poland, the CPSU would soon be “in danger of disintegrating and repeating the sad experience of the PZPR.” Several months later, Prokof’ev sent a memorandum to Gorbachev warning that “mass protests, demonstrations, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience” in the Soviet Union, especially the “militant separatism in the Baltic republics,” were “being inspired by the scenarios that were first developed and tried out [in 1989] with the overthrow of Communist govern-

123. Quoted from Tikhonov’s commentary in the forum “Peisazh posle bitvy: Narodnye deputaty SSSR o vstrechakh s parlamentariyami ‘Solidarnosti,’” Moskovskie novosti (Moscow), No. 11 (18 May 1990), p. 5.

ments in the East European countries.” The deputy head of the CPSU International Department, Valerii Musatov, likewise argued that the political spillover from Eastern Europe, if left unchecked, would threaten the very existence of the Soviet Union:

The course of events in Eastern Europe has inspired destructive forces [in the Soviet Union] to wage attacks against the CPSU, repeating the scenarios devised in Eastern Europe. The disintegration of the socialist community undoubtedly has given impetus to separatist trends within the USSR. The general psychological effect [in the Soviet Union] of the collapse of our allies remains extremely ominous.

Echoing this theme, Aleksandr Kapto claimed that Gorbachev’s “passivity and lack of resolve” in Eastern Europe had emboldened “separatist and nationalist groups” in the USSR who wanted to “undermine the socialist order” and “tear the country apart.” In contrast to those who welcomed the upheavals in Eastern Europe, Kapto insisted that “by facilitating the destruction of the Berlin Wall, we created new walls in our own union-republics.”

On the other hand, officials like Boris Yeltsin, who had been urging Gorbachev to pursue a much bolder and more rapid program of political and economic liberalization, argued that the upheavals in Eastern Europe underscored the necessity of sweeping reforms in the Soviet Union. At a session of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in mid-December 1989, Yeltsin cited “the example of what has just happened in Eastern Europe” to justify his demand that Gorbachev “move immediately ahead with democratization” rather than continuing to engage in “half-measures, indecisiveness, lame compromises, and constant fence-sitting.” Yeltsin contended that Erich Honecker’s “refusal to embark on the process of democratization” in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had led directly to the “torrent of popular demonstrations” that “swept the whole [East German Communist] regime away before [Honecker] even knew what was happening.” Yeltsin warned that “without a firm guarantee of near-term democratization” in the Soviet Union, “similar ubiquitous processes” (i.e., a wave of destabilizing political unrest) would soon “begin here.” If that were to happen, Yeltsin asked,


“can we really be sure that [expressions of public discontent] will remain limited to the civilized European methods of protest that were used in the GDR and Czechoslovakia?”129

The fundamental divergence between these two perspectives (Kapto’s versus Yeltsin’s) reflected the deep rifts among Soviet elites during the final few years of the Soviet regime—rifts that were greatly exacerbated by the upheavals in Eastern Europe. The divergence in this particular case was normative rather than empirical. Nearly all of the top officials agreed that the momentous changes in Eastern Europe would inspire similar developments in the Soviet Union. The only real point of disagreement was whether this “demonstration effect” would be salutary or deleterious. For some, the outcomes in Eastern Europe were disastrous and would be utterly catastrophic if replicated in the Soviet Union. For others, the collapse of dictatorships and the advent of democratic polities in Eastern Europe were precisely what they were hoping to achieve in the Soviet Union itself. The link between the changes in Eastern Europe and the ongoing transformation of the Soviet Union—a link that was both direct and indirect—was something that no one denied.

“Demonstration Effect” of Non-Violent Resistance

The “demonstration effect” of the changes in Eastern Europe was especially far-reaching in the three Baltic states. The separatist leaders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia regarded the non-violent mass protests in East Germany and Czechoslovakia as a model for their own republics’ path to independence. When the Baltic governments began taking much bolder steps in 1990 to break free of Soviet rule, they were careful to ensure that public protests against the Soviet regime would remain peaceful throughout. The last thing they wanted was a violent outburst “from below” that could be seized on by the Soviet authorities as an excuse for a full-scale crackdown—the sort of crackdown that the East German and Czechoslovak authorities had been hoping to implement in October and November 1989, emulating what the Chinese leaders had done a few months earlier. In March 1990, after the deputies of the newly elected Lithuanian parliament (almost all of whom were members of Šajūdis) adopted a formal declaration of independence, they followed it up a week later with a resolution calling on Lithuanians to be “friendly and polite toward [Soviet] military officers and their families” and to “avoid bothering, harassing, or fostering antagonism toward them.”130

129. Ibid.
and Sąjūdis issued many similar statements over the next several months, often referring explicitly to the way demonstrators in the GDR and Czechoslovakia in 1989 “showed great restraint in the face of provocations” and “stayed calm even when confronted by brutal force and intimidation.”

In late December 1990 and January 1991, when it became clear that the Soviet government was preparing to use violent repression in Lithuania and Latvia (under the pretext of arresting draft evaders and enforcing military conscription), the leaders of those republics did everything possible to ensure that civil resistance would be entirely non-violent. On 20 December the Lithuanian government admonished all residents to “stay calm and to avoid being provoked by the rude behavior and arrogance of [Soviet] military forces.”

Alluding again to the events in East Germany and Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1989, the Lithuanian government distributed guidelines throughout the republic urging protesters to “adhere to the principles of non-violence.” During the crackdown itself, the leaders of Sąjūdis repeatedly called on Lithuanians to “resist the provocations of the foreign [Soviet] soldiers and to refrain from any acts of physical violence that would give a pretext to the enemy to shed more blood.” The Lithuanian government broadcast messages in Russian appealing to the Soviet troops not to “shoot at unarmed civilians.” Although sixteen people were killed in Lithuania on 13 January 1991 and four were killed in Latvia a week later, the peaceful conduct of the demonstrators during both of the crackdowns helped avert a much higher death toll.

The non-violent nature of the resistance in the Baltic states proved crucial in other respects as well. Widely televised images of unarmed protesters confronted by Soviet tanks, machine guns, and riot troops elicited strong expressions of support for the Baltic peoples from Yeltsin and many other key officials in the Soviet Union and from governments and unofficial organizations around the world, especially in the Nordic countries, Eastern Europe, and the United States. Large public rallies denouncing the crackdowns were...
held in Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, Minsk, Chișinău, and other major cities in the western Soviet Union. The municipal councils and parliaments in Moscow and Leningrad and the governments of Moldova, Ukraine, and several other union-republics demanded that Gorbachev “immediately cease the illegal and anti-constitutional use of military force against unarmed civilians and legally elected governments.” Yeltsin, as head of the Russian government, called on Russian soldiers deployed in the Baltic states not to obey “those [in Moscow] who want to solve political problems” by relying on violent repression:

Before attacking civilian sites on Baltic soil, remember your native land and think about your own republic and the present and future of your own nation. Violence against justice and against the Baltic nations will cause new and severe crises in Russia itself and will worsen the plight of Russians living in other republics.

In both Lithuania and Latvia, the local police sided with the demonstrators, and public support for independence rose to 98–99 percent among ethnic Lithuanians and Latvians and to 75–80 percent among ethnic Russians. (The large Polish community in Lithuania also became much more supportive of independence.) All of these results would have been far less plausible if the resistance had been violent. To the extent that the “velvet” revolutions in East Germany and Czechoslovakia influenced the subsequent behavior of officials and protesters in Lithuania and Latvia, they greatly facilitated the Baltic states’ quest for independence.

“Demonstration Effect” of Roundtable Talks and Systemic Change

The peaceful nature of the changes in Eastern Europe (aside from Romania) provided a model not only for the Baltic states but also for most of the other

republics, including Russia, where many officials and opposition leaders in 1990 sought to emulate the “roundtable” talks that proved so crucial in Eastern Europe in 1989. The roundtable discussions in Poland in early 1989, culminating in a landmark agreement on parliamentary elections, were the first in a series of historic negotiations in Eastern Europe that facilitated the departure of Communist regimes. Talks in Hungary in the late summer and fall of 1989 resulted in the formal establishment of a multiparty system and the subsequent holding of free elections that eliminated the remaining vestiges of the Communist era. In East Germany, mass unrest in the fall of 1989 precipitated the downfall of Erich Honecker’s regime and the opening of the Berlin Wall, and these events were soon followed by negotiations between the New Forum opposition and the interim authorities, paving the way for a non-Communist political order. In Czechoslovakia the “Velvet Revolution” that swept away Miloš Jakeš’s hardline Communist regime in November 1989 led almost immediately to negotiations between the Civic Forum movement and the interim government, bringing an orderly end to Communism in that country. In Bulgaria the removal of the hardline leader Todor Zhivkov in

141. For illuminating case studies of these talks, see Elster, ed., The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism.


143. The literature on the East German upheavals and roundtable talks, including memoirs by most of the key participants, is immense and still growing. For a small sample, see Uwe Thaysen, Der Runde Tisch, oder, Wo blieb das Volk? Der Weg der DDR in die Demokratie (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990); Hannes Bahrmann and Christoph Links, eds., Wir sind das Volk: Die DDR zwischen 7. Oktober und 17. Dezember 1989—Eine Chronik (Berlin: Links, 1990); Klemens Sempter, Der Runde Tisch in der DDR (Munich: Tuduv-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992); André Hahn, Der Runde Tisch: Das Volk und die Macht—politishe Kultur im letzten Jahr der DDR (Berlin: Verlag am Park, 1998); Heinz Kallabis, Ad DDR Tagebuchblätter, 7. Oktober bis 8. Mai 1990 (Tirpitzow: Tirpitzower Verlagshaus, 1990); Elizabeth Pond, Beyond the Wall: Germany’s Path to Unification (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993); and Görritik Wevers, ed., DDR—Von der friedlichen Revolution zur deutschen Vereinigung (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990).

mid-November 1989, a few days after the Berlin Wall was breached, paved the way for roundtable talks in early January 1990 that forged agreement on a multiparty system and free elections.\textsuperscript{145} Even in Romania, where the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was violently overthrown in December 1989 and a government known as the National Salvation Front (consisting mostly of former senior officials) came to power, the new authorities held talks with nascent opposition groups in late 1989 and early 1990 to discuss the timing and procedures of new parliamentary elections (though not the shape of a new constitution). By early 1990, roundtable talks had become a crucial and nearly ubiquitous element in the transformation of Eastern Europe.

It was not surprising, therefore, that leaders of the democratic opposition in the Soviet Union began proposing the adoption of this same institution in the USSR. From early 1990 on, republic officials and opposition groups repeatedly called on the Soviet government to enter into roundtable talks that would “enable us to resolve the thorniest and most pressing tasks facing the country.”\textsuperscript{146} On 4 February 1990 hundreds of thousands of people attended an unofficial pro-democracy rally in Moscow that led to the formation of a “Civic Action” coalition, which was explicitly modeled after the New Forum in East Germany and the Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia. Like those East European groups, the Civic Action Committee was responsible for “establishing contact with the country’s leaders to set up a permanently operating Round Table.”\textsuperscript{147} The resolutions adopted at the rally proclaimed that “the value of using roundtable talks as a way out of the country’s profound crisis has been
shown by the democratic forces of Eastern Europe and by the individuals [in the East European countries] who until very recently were still in the opposition and who now, as leaders of the democratic parties that are governing there, have found the wherewithal to move beyond half-measures and take decisive action.” The organizers of the rally stressed that the “East European model of roundtable negotiations” was urgently needed in the Soviet Union:

We must form a permanently operating Round Table that includes representatives of the country's party and state leaders and of its democratic organizations. The Round Table must immediately devise a Program of Emergency Measures to prevent a looming economic catastrophe and to guarantee the actual transfer of power from party organizations to the local state councils in conditions of civil peace.

The leaders of the new Civic Action Committee and Democratic Platform (a newly-founded radical reform wing of the CPSU) expressed confidence that “a round table with Czech furniture” would be just as fruitful in the Soviet Union as it had been in Czechoslovakia.

The call for “roundtable talks based on the East European model” was taken up at a CPSU Central Committee plenum on 5 February 1990, the day after the mass rally. Members of the Democratic Platform who attended the plenum were vigorously supportive of the idea and pushed for its adoption, and even a few more mainstream party officials were willing to endorse it. Petru Lucinschi, who had been appointed first secretary of the Moldovan Communist Party in November 1989 after interethnic violence erupted in Chişinău and other Moldovan cities, told the plenum that the Soviet government should “form a kind of ‘round table’ and invite representatives of all [democratic] movements, fronts, and unions” to join “representatives of the country's leadership” for a “joint discussion of ways to foster tranquility and prevent violence and mass unrest.” The roundtable forum, Lucinschi argued, would be “a public parliament” bringing together “all forces to ensure order in society,” an approach that in his view “proved remarkably effective in the East European countries.” Proposals for “East European-style roundtable talks” also were the dominant issue at a series of highly publicized pro-

149. Ibid.
150. Ibid.
152. Ibid.
democracy rallies in dozens of Soviet cities on 24–25 February 1990. At the largest of the rallies, in Moscow, the leaders of the Civic Action Committee and the Democratic Platform warned that unless roundtable negotiations were initiated soon, “widespread unrest [shirochennye besporyadki] will engulf the whole country, as in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania.”

Despite the flurry of proposals to hold roundtable talks, Gorbachev staunchly resisted the idea. His demurral was not wholly surprising. Many of the activists calling for roundtable negotiations evidently wanted to relegate the CPSU to a much-diminished position in what they envisaged would be a multiparty political system akin to those that were taking shape in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev suspected that their real aim was to displace the CPSU altogether and to inflict on it the same degree of humiliation that the Czechoslovak Communist Party suffered after the roundtable talks in Prague. The Soviet leader was dismayed by reports from senior party officials that leaders of the pro-democracy movement were “urging young people in the [Soviet] republics to follow the example of their counterparts in Eastern Europe by doing what they could to bring about the downfall of the ‘totalitarian system’ in the USSR.” Although Gorbachev told the CPSU Central Committee in February 1990 that he was amenable to opening a “dialogue” with unofficial groups as long as they accepted the Soviet Constitution (which at that time still enshrined the “leading role” of the CPSU) and the country’s “socialist system,” he did not express a willingness to hold roundtable talks.

On the contrary, as newly declassified documents reveal, Gorbachev went out of his way to undermine the pro-democracy activists and to prevent any movement toward roundtable talks. His aversion to proposals for roundtable negotiations was partly attributable to his concern that he might lose control of the process, and it also stemmed from his desire to forestall any further recriminations from hardliners in the CPSU and security apparatus. At


Gorbachev’s behest, the CPSU Politburo and the KGB kept a close watch on the democratic opposition and took numerous steps in the first half of 1990 to combat the unofficial groups and to discredit and isolate the members of both the Democratic Platform in the CPSU and the Democratic Russia faction in the Soviet and Russian parliaments. (Democratic Russia was formed in March 1990 to support Yeltsin and other reform-minded candidates in the Russian parliamentary elections, and it subsequently evolved into the leading pro-democracy group.) At almost every session of the CPSU Politburo in the first several months of 1990, Gorbachev and his colleagues discussed ways of “thwarting the designs of the so-called democratic opposition.”157 Immediately after the pro-democracy rally in Moscow on 4 February, the Politburo instructed the official TASS news agency to send out distorted information about the number of people who attended, the intentions of the organizers, and the content of the speeches.158 The resulting dispatch, published in Pravda and other Soviet newspapers on 5 February, provoked strong complaints from the Civic Action Committee, but Soviet leaders declined to acknowledge or rectify the distortions.159

The Soviet Politburo pursued similar “prophylactic measures” in late February 1990 to ensure that the mass rallies on the 24th and 25th would not be a reprise of the demonstrations that spun out of control in the GDR and Czechoslovakia in October-November 1989. The pro-democracy groups, as one of the founders later recalled, were consciously trying to “replicate the
East German and Czechoslovak events” by “organizing a wave of street protests and galvanizing the most politically active elements in society,” whereas the Soviet authorities were just as determined to prevent any East European-style upheavals and to keep the unrest firmly under check.\textsuperscript{160}

Even after the February 1990 rallies were over, memories of the way the East European crises unfolded in 1989 continued to loom over the Soviet Politburo’s deliberations about the “growing threat” from the “vile, subversive, and basically malevolent groups that . . . are planning either to leave the CPSU and form a new, social-democratic party or to stay within the CPSU while seeking to change the party’s fundamental nature.”\textsuperscript{161} At a meeting on 12 March 1990, the Politburo approved a message to senior party and state officials emphasizing the “danger that unrest could spread like a torrent [stremitel’ nyi potok] from Eastern Europe into the USSR.” The message began on a guardedly optimistic note, claiming that “the organizers of the wave of rallies [on 24–25 February] were prevented from achieving their aims” and “were not able to follow the East European path” of “setting up so-called civic action committees” and “generating broad support for ‘roundtable’ discussions.”\textsuperscript{162} The rest of the message, however, was much less upbeat. The Politburo warned that “it would be a mistake to underestimate the scale and political significance of the recent turmoil” in the Warsaw Pact countries and the “traumatic effects” it had had on “public sentiment [in the USSR], which is now [as] radicalized” as it was in East Germany and Czechoslovakia in the latter half of 1989. “The opposition forces,” the Politburo argued, “are trying to exploit the situation by using anti-democratic means of exerting pressure on the authorities and compelling them to embark on so-called ‘roundtable’ talks that will lead to a transfer of power.” The Politburo ended its message on an ominous note: “The situation has now become so explosive that it could spark widespread convulsions” reminiscent of the events in Eastern Europe in late 1989.\textsuperscript{163}

To “preserve the socialist system” in the USSR and avoid the dismal fate of the East European Communist parties, Gorbachev and his colleagues

\textsuperscript{160} Viktor Sheinis, “Ukhodit li Demokraticheskaya Rossiya?” \textit{Moskovskie novosti} (Moscow), No. 34 (23 August 1992), pp. 6–7. These rallies, unlike the one on 4 February, were covered widely in the Soviet press (though not in \textit{Pravda}, with varying degrees of tendentiousness. For a reasonably even-handed account, see Vyacheslav Dolganov, “Do i posle mitingov,” \textit{Izvestiya} (Moscow), 26 February 1990, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{161} Comments by Gorbachev in “Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS 22 mara 1990 goda,” L. 223.


\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., L. 2.
approved a number of urgent steps in March 1990 to thwart the “anti-democratic and hypocritical campaign of mass rallies staged by leaders of the ‘civic action’ movement, who are seeking to force government officials to hold ‘roundtable’ talks.” The Politburo authorized a broad political counteroffensive, as well as preparations by the security forces for a full-scale crackdown if necessary. The political strategy encompassed efforts to sow dissension within Democratic Russia, to discredit the leaders of the group by disseminating kompromat (compromising material) about them to the press, to isolate the “supporters of Democratic Platform and other groups that want to provoke a split in the CPSU,” and to “use the mass media” to prevent the “would-be leaders of the ‘civic action’ opposition” from “destroying the ideology” of the CPSU and “undermining the [Soviet regime’s] authority in society.”

Preparations for the use of force against “those who are trying to seize power under the guise of holding ‘roundtable’ talks” were equally wide-ranging. The Politburo ordered “the heads of law-enforcement organs at every level” to “ensure that all rallies, marches, and demonstrations are in strict compliance with public order, that any extremist actions are promptly crushed, that anti-constitutional protests are immediately halted, . . . and that irresponsible efforts to discredit the Soviet Armed Forces and the organs of the KGB and MVD are rebuffed.” A few days later, the Politburo endorsed Kryuchkov’s proposal to set up a special unit of the KGB (the “Alpha” Group) consisting of “officers and special-purpose troops who are unwaveringly loyal to the Communist Party and the socialist motherland.” The Alpha Group was to be maintained at “permanent combat readiness so that it can take immediate action if an emergency arises.” Although the unit was intended primarily to deal with terrorist and hostage-taking incidents, it also was designed to put down any other “extreme dangers to the survival of the [Soviet] regime.” This function was important in light of Gorbachev’s belief that the

164. Ibid., L. 5.
168. Ibid.
pro-democracy groups were “pursuing their political goals by inciting civil disobedience and strikes and by calling for the overthrow of the existing state organs.”

Not until mid-1990, after Yeltsin was chosen to head the Russian parliament, did Gorbachev finally have to change course. Although the Soviet president remained deeply averse to full-fledged roundtable talks involving democratic civic organizations, he realized that he would have to open negotiations with Yeltsin and other republic leaders to forge a new Union Treaty that would redistribute power between the central authorities and the republics. Opposition groups and activists who were not invited to take part in the sessions were disappointed, but most of them were confident that Yeltsin (who had been one of the leaders of the major opposition movements and had spoken at the pro-democracy rallies) would press for sweeping democratization and drastic economic reform. Despite many setbacks and delays, including a hiatus of several months during Gorbachev’s “shift to the right” from September 1990 through April 1991, the union treaty talks did eventually produce a far-reaching treaty that was slated to be signed on 20 August 1991. The aborted coup in Moscow on 19–21 August 1991 derailed the treaty, leaving a political vacuum during the final few months of the Soviet regime.

Even during the denouement in late 1991, however, the “East European model” of roundtable talks and “pacted” transitions continued to exert its influence. When Yeltsin and the other republic leaders agreed to resume discussions with Gorbachev after the attempted coup, they knew they were doing so from a position of enormous strength. The talks were soon outpaced and rendered irrelevant by events on the ground, giving way to the much narrower negotiations at Belovezhskaya Pushcha among Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and Belarusian President Stanislaus Shushkevich that codified the end of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, throughout this process the participants sought above all to devise a solution that would avert deadly violence—an objective that was shaped crucially, albeit indirectly, by the ex-

169. “Vstupitel’noe slovo General’nogo sekretarya TsK KPSS M. S. Gorbacheva na ob’edinennom plenume TsK i TsKK 24 aprelya 1991 goda,” Pravda (Moscow), 25 April 1991, pp. 1–2. The phrasing Gorbachev used here is nearly identical to passages in a top-secret memorandum prepared for the CPSU Politburo a few months earlier by Viktor Mironenko, the deputy head of the CPSU Department for Ties with Sociopolitical Organizations, “TsK KPSS: Ob uchreditel’noi konferentsii ‘Demokraticheskogo kongresa,’” I. 1–5.

170. To an extent, however, Gorbachev’s move did succeed in fissuring the pro-democracy movements—fissures that would become far wider and more acrimonious after the Soviet Union collapsed. The main (though not sole) point of contention from the outset was whether Democratic Russia should be primarily a bastion of support for Yeltsin or the nucleus of a broader opposition not tied to any one leader. See Yitzhak M. Brudny, “The Dynamics of ‘Democratic Russia,’ 1990–1993,” Post-Soviet Affairs, Vol. 9, No. 2 (April–June 1993), pp. 141–170.
ample set in Eastern Europe. Shushkevich later recalled that “when I went to Belovezhskaya Pushcha in late 1991 I had in mind the people like Havel and Wałęsa in Czechoslovakia and Poland who sat down in 1989 and negotiated a way out of their own internal crises. I hoped we could be as civilized in dismantling the USSR.”

“Demonstration Effect” of Democratization and Market Reform

The “demonstration effect” of the changes in Eastern Europe was discernible in specific as well as general ways. In particular, the advent of free, multiparty elections in Eastern Europe had an important influence on electoral reforms in the Soviet Union. Since early 1918, when the Bolsheviks disbanded the newly-elected Constituent Assembly (after having failed to gain a majority of seats in it), popular elections in the Soviet Union had been purely ritualistic. Not until the end of the 1980s did voting in the USSR acquire any practical meaning. In March 1989 Gorbachev introduced partly free elections on a limited basis for the newly created USSR Congress of People’s Deputies—an innovation that proved crucial not only in the Russian Republic, where Yeltsin staged a dramatic political comeback, but also in the Baltic states, where candidates supporting far-reaching democratization and national autonomy gained an overwhelming share of the contested seats. (In Lithuania, for example, Sąjūdis-backed candidates won 36 of the 42 competitive races.) These initial results in the Soviet Union were followed by parliamentary elections in Poland in June 1989 that soon led to the formation of a non-Communist government. This momentous breakthrough in Poland, combined with the subsequent downfall of hardline Communist regimes elsewhere in Eastern Europe, helped speed up the inception of genuinely free elections in the USSR. Local elections in Estonia and Latvia in December 1989, amid the euphoria generated by events in Eastern Europe, marked the first time in the Soviet Union that non-Communist candidates were allowed to run for public office.

The electoral spillover into the Soviet Union escalated in the first half of 1990 when voters throughout Eastern Europe took part in free, multiparty elections for national parliaments. The East European elections in almost all

171. Interview with Stanislaus Shushkevich, by the author, in Cambridge, MA, 17 April 2000. During this interview, Shushkevich provided a wealth of interesting first-hand observations about the events leading up to the talks at Belovezhskaya Pushcha and the talks themselves. A tape of the interview is on file at the Harvard Cold War Studies Project offices.

cases resulted in decisive victories for non-Communist candidates, including numerous well-known dissidents who only recently had been in prison or in danger of being arrested. The emergence of elected non-Communist governments in Eastern Europe—governments committed to the consolidation of liberal democratic polities, the establishment of market economies, and the prompt withdrawal of Soviet troops from their territory—dispelled any lingering doubts among opposition groups in the Soviet Union about the immense leeway that had opened for fundamental political change. When republic-wide parliamentary elections were held in the Baltic states in February–March 1990, pro-independence candidates won overwhelmingly. In Lithuania, for example, Sąjūdis gained 106 of 114 seats in the new parliament and quickly formed a government that promulgated a declaration of independence. Over the next several months, voters went to the polls in all the other Soviet republics, including Russia, where the newly elected parliament chose Yeltsin to be its chair in June 1990, enabling him to pose a more direct challenge to Gorbachev. The last of the republic-wide elections occurred in Soviet Georgia in October 1990, the first truly multiparty contest ever held in the USSR. The Georgian election brought to power the Round Table Bloc headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a prominent dissident and human rights activist in the 1970s and 1980s who ran for office in 1990 on an ardently pro-independence platform.

Many other political and economic changes in the Soviet Union in 1990–1991 were also inspired (or at least greatly influenced) by the changes in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev later recalled that his decision to create a presidency of the USSR in March 1990 was stimulated in part by the example of Czechoslovakia, where the post of president was conferred on the celebrated dissident Václav Havel at the end of 1989. During a contentious debate in the CPSU Politburo on 7 March 1990 about the pending law and constitutional amendment to establish a Soviet presidency, Gorbachev noted that the issue had come up when he met with President Havel in Moscow in late February: “When I spoke with Havel about creating a presidency in the Soviet Union [like the one in Czechoslovakia], he said ‘I welcome this, I welcome

175. Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev, by the author, at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 11 November 2002.
Important as the Czechoslovak model may have been, it is questionable whether Gorbachev helped his case by giving such emphasis to Havel’s comments. For one thing, although it was not yet clear that the state presidency in Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic) would end up being much less important than the post of prime minister, the Czechoslovak presidency even at this early stage did not seem to be as powerful an institution as the post that Gorbachev was hoping to establish in the Soviet Union. Moreover, Gorbachev’s rivals on the Soviet Politburo were unlikely to be impressed by the views of Havel, whom they until recently had derogated as a “counter-revolutionary,” an “anti-Communist,” and a “class enemy.” Nonetheless, the very fact that Gorbachev boasted of Havel’s endorsement suggests that he believed it would lend his own proposal greater legitimacy.

Gorbachev eventually won approval from the Politburo for the establishment of a presidency to which he would be appointed without competition, but he did not foresee that this very step would end up strengthening union-republic leaders like Yeltsin at the central government’s expense. The newly-created Soviet post was cited as a precedent by leaders like Yeltsin in Russia and Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan when they set up their own republic presidencies. Indeed, Nazarbaev, who was a strong supporter of Gorbachev, made clear in a speech at the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in mid-March 1990 that the reason he was so enthusiastic about the new Soviet presidency (which had just been awarded to Gorbachev by the parliament) is that it opened the way for a similar post to be created in Kazakhstan. Yeltsin and Nazarbaev would have found it a good deal harder to establish presidencies in their republics if Gorbachev had not given them a precedent to which they could point. To the extent that Gorbachev’s initial decision to create a new post was influenced by the changes in Eastern Europe, the spillover followed an intricate course. Events in Eastern Europe helped shape the Soviet government’s actions, which in turn influenced the

177. Gorbachev acknowledges in his memoirs that he was caught by surprise when the republic leaders decided to follow his example by setting up their own presidencies. See Gorbachev, Zhizni i reformy, Vol. 1, p. 485.
178. It should be noted that Yeltsin was willing to stand for popular election to the new Russian presidency, an election he easily won. By contrast, neither Gorbachev nor Nazarbaev was willing to stand for election.
policies adopted by the republics. The net result was a weakening of the central authorities’ position.

The Soviet Union also experienced reverberations from the sweeping economic reforms in Eastern Europe. Beginning with Poland, which launched a crash program of free-market reforms in January 1990, all the East European countries in 1990–1991 embarked—to varying degrees—on the path toward market economies. This process resulted in considerable disruption and hardship before the benefits of reform could become fully evident. The Polish and Hungarian governments stuck with their reforms even during the difficult early phase, whereas some of the other governments, especially the Bulgarian and Romanian, pursued reforms more slowly (and ineptly) and continually postponed many desperately needed steps. Because Gorbachev from mid-1989 on had been talking about the need to “shift to a mixed economy” in the Soviet Union (and later even began proposing a full-fledged “market economy”), officials in Moscow watched the economic reforms in Eastern Europe with great interest. Although the “lessons” they drew often had more to do with their own policy preferences than with the reality of market reforms in Eastern Europe, the “demonstration effect” of the economic changes in the region helped shape Soviet policies and high-level debates. Even one of the most orthodox CPSU departments sent its staff to “learn first-hand from the experience of the East European Communist parties how to adapt to the circumstances of a market economy.”

Soviet officials who were wary of undertaking market reforms—for either practical or ideological reasons—focused on the particular phenomena in Eastern Europe that would bear out their misgivings. Some, for example, emphasized that price liberalization in Poland had resulted in sharply higher prices for consumer goods, but they neglected to point out that the freeing of prices had also brought an immediate end to the pervasive shortages and queues that had plagued Poland’s centrally-planned economy. At a Soviet Po-


181. See “ТК КПСС: О командировании в ФРГ группы советских специалистов для изучения опыта SDPG в условиях рыночной экономики,” Memorandum No. 03–14/959 (Top Secret), 4 October 1990, from A. Vlasov, head of the CPSU Socioeconomic Department, to the CPSU Secretariat, in RGANI, F. 4, Op. 43, D. 7, Ll. 71–74. The memorandum was formally approved by the Secretariat on 10 October 1990.
litburo meeting in late January 1991, one of the main opponents of economic reform in the USSR, Islam Karimov, claimed that “in moving toward a market economy, we will have to adopt extremely unpopular measures, which will take their toll on ordinary people and cause them to resent the officials who instigated and spearheaded the process.” Karimov acknowledged that the Polish government had been able to weather the first year of its drastic reform program with a good deal of success and had encountered only a smattering of protests, but he insisted that the Soviet Union faced much less propitious circumstances:

In Poland, as they say, a national consensus exists. But in our country the population is riven by huge contradictions among different strata. In the absence of a national consensus, a market economy generally cannot be established anywhere. This is particularly true for a country as enormous as ours.

Karimov argued that limited economic reforms in the Soviet Union had already provoked controversy and that “the most unpopular measure of all—the raising of prices—is still ahead.” He claimed that “no matter what sort of compensation is provided [to workers], a drop in living standards is bound to occur,” and he warned that in the USSR, far more than in Poland, “the opposition, our adversaries, will be able to foment a backlash against us.”

Other Soviet officials who were averse to rapid economic reform cited the experience of Eastern Europe to highlight the pitfalls of large-scale privatization (i.e., the transfer of large and medium state-owned enterprises to private ownership). Programs of mass large-scale privatization were devised with much fanfare in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the former East Germany in 1990–1991. Although implementation of the Czechoslovak and Polish programs was not slated to begin until 1992 (and did not actually begin in Poland until several years later at a reduced level), a memorandum prepared by the CPSU International Department for the CPSU Secretariat in early April 1991 noted that “the preliminary experience of [large-scale] privatiza-

183. Ibid., Ll. 9–10.
184. Ibid., L. 10.
tion in a number of East European countries has already revealed many complicated and acute problems in the sociopolitical sphere.”186 The transfer of enterprises, according to the memorandum, would benefit only “those with a lot of money to spend” and would leave the “large bulk of the population on the sidelines.” The authors of the memorandum claimed that “privatization programs in Eastern Europe have come under fierce criticism from leftist forces (Communists, social-democrats, and former Communists)” and “have also been sharply attacked by trade unions.” These objections, the memorandum added, had prompted many observers in Eastern Europe to “call for a more guarded approach to [large-scale] privatization so that it will not cause the sociopolitical situation to deteriorate and instability to increase.” On an ominous note, the memorandum stressed that “in federated states—Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia—privatization has exacerbated tensions and recriminations between the republics and the center.”187 This point was especially worrisome for an ethnofederal state like the Soviet Union, which, as Kryuchkov warned Gorbachev, had been experiencing “acute centrifugal pressures” since the late 1980s.188 The authors of the memorandum concluded that “the experience of [large-scale] privatization in the East European countries”—an experience they presented in a distinctly negative light—“deserves close attention and study when evaluating proposals for moving ahead with a similarly broad denationalization of property in our own country.”189

Other Soviet officials and analysts who scrutinized the economic changes in Eastern Europe were far more willing to highlight the benefits of far-reaching reform and to discern positive lessons for the USSR. They rebuked the opponents of reform for having derived sweeping conclusions from events that were still in flux:

> We have always regarded the East European countries as fraternal allies and felt especially close to them, and it would be dishonest to pretend that we are not interested in the changes under way there or in their fates. But we would not be justified in making definitive judgments about situations that are still developing and that are highly complex, much less draw premature conclusions that fit

188. “Dokladnaya zapiska: O politicheskoi obstanovke v strane” (cited in fn. 35 supra), L. 3.
Free-market economists like Egor Gaidar, Boris Fedorov, and Grigorii Yavlinskii, who found the results in Eastern Europe highly encouraging and hoped to follow a similar path in the USSR, helped balance the Soviet media’s depiction of economic reforms in the region but were generally unable to convert their recommendations into concrete policies before the attempted coup d’état in Moscow. After the Soviet Union was dissolved, the experience in Eastern Europe did help guide the economic reforms in a number of former Soviet republics, especially the Baltic states and Russia (e.g., with Estonia’s embrace of a Polish-style austerity and liberalization program and Russia’s adoption of the Czech coupon privatization scheme), but during the final two years of the Soviet era the ability of anti-reformist officials in Moscow to play up the “hardships” in Eastern Europe (no matter how misleading their portrayal may have been) induced Gorbachev and the Soviet government to be more cautious about market reform than they otherwise might have been.

Because this outcome inhibited much-needed changes in the Soviet economy at a time when the breakdown of central planning had left an economic vacuum in the USSR, it accentuated the disruption and privations of the remaining months of Gorbachev’s tenure. Although radical economic measures might well have been derailed in the Soviet Union even if the opponents of market reform had not been so adept at emphasizing tendentious “lessons” from Eastern Europe, the promotion of those lessons complicated an already difficult task.

Even before the East European regimes collapsed for good in late 1989 and 1990, many Soviet officials anticipated that the onset of drastic changes in the region would produce a “demonstration effect” in the USSR. Some of Gorbachev’s key advisers were actually hoping, at least initially, that this sort of phenomenon would occur. When Aleksandr Yakovlev was asked in mid-November 1989 whether the developments in Hungary, Poland, and East Germany were a “threat” to the Soviet Union, he responded that “the changes [in Eastern Europe] pose a threat to no one, except, perhaps, to the countries [in the Communist world] that have not yet gone through the process of de-
His remarks were directed not only at the hardline regimes in Czechoslovakia and Romania, but also at officials within the Soviet Union who were trying to thwart Gorbachev’s internal reforms. The irony, however, is that at least a few of the Soviet officials who opposed far-reaching reforms both at home and in Eastern Europe were able to foresee, better than Yakovlev could, how important the “demonstration effect” of the changes in Eastern Europe would prove to be. As early as June 1989 a senior party official, Vladimir Konotop, warned the Soviet Politburo that “if you look at the ‘experience’ of Poland you can see where our own country is heading”—namely, “toward disaster.” Konotop feared that it was “already too late” to rein in “democratization and glasnost, which in their current form are causing our misfortunes” in Eastern Europe as well as in the USSR. Rather than seeing the events in Poland and Hungary as a model to emulate, Konotop and others who shared his views regarded the changes there as precisely the type of thing they wanted to avoid at all costs.

These contrasting views underscored the dual nature of the spillover from Eastern Europe—the “demonstration effect” and what might be called the “anti-demonstration effect” of developments in the region. On the one hand, the example of Eastern Europe inspired key officials and activists in the USSR to challenge the Soviet regime. On the other hand, it deepened the growing fissures within the CPSU and the Soviet government. The resulting instability and polarization contributed to the decline and collapse of the Soviet state.

Editor’s Note: The final part of this three-part article, covering the high-level debate and recriminations in Moscow in 1990–1991 about the “loss” of Eastern Europe and the theoretical implications of the article as a whole, will appear in the next issue of the journal.

193. Ibid. Some twenty months later, in early February 1991, Kryuchkov used almost identical language and voiced many of the same concerns that Konotop raised in mid-1989 about “the depth of the crisis [in the USSR] and the likelihood that circumstances will continue to deteriorate rapidly.” See Kryuchkov’s top-secret memorandum to Gorbachev, “Dokladnaya zapiska: O politicheskoj obstanovke v strane,” Ll. 1–7.