The Weight of the Soviet Past in Post-1991 Russia

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Introduction

Russia’s evolution frustrated many of the hopes that Soviet and then Russian reformers as well as liberal and well-wishing Western scholars and analysts nurtured about the country’s future from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. Many does not mean all: despite all that went wrong or stayed bad, life in today’s Russia is for most people freer, more open, and more comfortable than it was in Soviet times. Yet, the Putin regime’s rapidly evolving and unpalatable ideological bundle, as well as its harsh and aggressive posture and behaviors, on both the internal and the international fronts, accounts for the bitter disappointment with Russia’s inner political evolution and foreign behavior and begs for explanations, especially in view of the high hopes raised, in the West as well as in Russia, by perestroika first and by the post-1991 reforms later on.¹

Because historians have been busy investigating earlier periods, notably Stalinism, in the years following the collapse of the USSR, the task of understanding the present has been left mainly to social scientists.² They have


2. Despite a great historiographical tradition spanning from Alexis de Tocqueville’s reflections on the presence of the ancien régime in post-revolutionary France to Benedetto Croce’s works on the consequences of the Spanish dominion in Italy, historians have dealt only rarely with the question of the
Graziosi imputed the disappointing outcomes to various causes or combinations thereof. Reviving an old, pro-Russian tradition and repeating the arguments used by anti-Western or pro-Russian scholars to account for the Cold War’s beginnings, some looked West, stressing the international context and an aggressive Western (or specifically U.S.) posture bent on improperly seeking military hegemony and market advantages and thus causing an inevitable (and understandable) reaction in Moscow. Others pointed to the difficulties of the 1990s and to the failures of Russian liberalism (a term I do not find convincing) in those years, especially but not solely in the economic field.

The transition period and its “mistakes” were thus at the center of many scholars’ attention. After the year 2000, however, Russia’s evolution toward internal authoritarianism, crony capitalism, and an increasingly assertive international posture was attributed to the person and culture of Vladimir Putin and his former associates in the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB), who willfully pushed Russia onto this illiberal and confrontational path to suit their power and wealth at the expense of Russian society. Because Putin and his friends were products of one of the Soviet regime’s most odious institutions, this hypothesis was actually a narrow version of the legacy argument. Albeit less vigorously, the old “Tsarist” heritage argument also resurfaced—to wit, the Soviet collapse brought to the surface internal cultural, social, and political forces with roots in the Russian imperial and autocratic past that went underground in Soviet times. A legacy was thus at play, but not that of Communism, this being an argument directly tied to the sophisticated hypotheses advanced in the past by prominent intellectuals and scholars as varied as Nikolai Berdyaev and Edward Keenan, with their stress on the ties between Soviet, or Communist, legacy. More attention has been devoted to this legacy in East-Central Europe and in other post-Soviet states than in Russia proper. Roy D. Laird, The Soviet Legacy (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993) was a first attempt; Edward Acton, Russia: The Tsarist and Soviet Legacy (London: Longman, 1995) is a general history of the country; Stephen Kotkin, Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001) provides a first, intelligent commentary; Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker, Communism’s Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017) focuses on a single, important issue; and Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin, eds., Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014) is the most ambitious attempt to date. See also David Lane, ed., The Legacy of State Socialism and the Future of Transformation (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Jan C. Behrends, “Legacies of Communism: Comparative Remarks,” in Juliane Fürst, Silvio Pons, and Mark Selden, eds., The Cambridge History of Communism, Vol. 3, 581–599. Also crucial is Svetlana Aleksievich, Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets (New York: Random House, 2016).

the old and the new Moscow; Richard Pipes, with his parallelism between ancient Muscovy and the USSR as patrimonial states; and Moshe Lewin, with his attempt to explain Stalinism away as agrarian despotism.³

The idea that the Soviet and Tsarist pasts continued to live, evolve, and operate in the present was thus gradually strengthened. It acquired growing importance in parallel with the post-Soviet Russian regime’s unpleasant evolution because, as Stephen Hanson has noted, “the enduring power of communist and even pre-communist institutional legacies in shaping post-communist outcomes” seems “undeniable.”⁴

In the optimistic years stretching from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, however, this power was underestimated.⁵ Western “revisionist” scholars in the 1970s and early 1980s were at least in part responsible for this. One of their major goals was to “normalize” the Soviet historical experience. Many of them maintained that it was simply another variant of modernization, and some went so far as to downplay even the Stalinist terror and to gloss over topics such as the 1931–1933 famines, World War II on the internal front, and the severe repressions in 1945–1953, including an ugly wave of murderous anti-Semitism.⁶ The distinctive features and peculiar outcomes of the Soviet experience were, therefore, greatly underrated.


These peculiar outcomes often directly descended from the socialist tenets of the original Bolshevik ruling group and produced what has been called the “neotraditional” literature.\(^7\) Despite coming under extensive criticism, Shmuel Eisenstadt’s “multiple modernities” theory thus seems to have a solid core, especially if one considers the two Western-originated but different modernities—the Soviet and the Western—that competed on a world scale after 1945.\(^8\) Even though one can sympathize with the moral position of those who find it repulsive to associate the word “socialism” with the Soviet variant, and especially with its Stalinist phase, the word is in fact appropriate for the first socialist state, which called itself the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and firmly denied that Communism had already been built (and explained why this was the case). Moreover, after 1945 the Soviet Union led the socialist camp in the ideologically loaded confrontation that shaped the second half of the twentieth century. In such a state, an elite of true believers tried to build socialism and succeeded in generating a social and economic system very different from those in the West—for instance, with a greatly underdeveloped credit system and fiscal apparatus and with segregated rural inhabitants—and was thus able, at least for a few decades, to find appreciative imitators the world over.

A realistic assessment of the nature and reality of the Soviet experience, especially in the 1917–1953 period, would thus point in a direction opposite of that deriving from the optimistic trends of the post-“totalitarian” scholarship (which nevertheless makes good points in criticizing the staleness and tautological arguments of part of the totalitarian school). Despite phenomena such as the emergence of Soviet humanism, the Soviet past could not but weight heavily on the present, with vast potential for exerting a mostly negative influence. Nonetheless, very few historians who worked extensively in the former Soviet archives ever participated in the legacy debate, in part because of their understandable focus on the pre-1991 (and for a long while the pre-1953) period.

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Yet, when speaking of legacies, and thus also of the past, historians’ contributions are apt to be valuable. The aim of this article is to draw on the knowledge, thoughts, and reflections I accumulated when writing a general history of the USSR. I will be dealing with these legacies in a somewhat schematic and assertive way, which should not be misconstrued as certitude. Rather, I merely want to highlight problems that deserve to be discussed in a non-deterministic way. Although the past certainly counts, post-1991 events and developments modified it by selecting and altering the inheritance. I do not, therefore, consider these legacies a static phenomenon. After the 1991 “macro-historical rupture,” the material and immaterial elements of continuity inherited by the new Russian state from its Soviet past formed a dynamic set that changed over time.9 These elements exerted their influence within bounds determined by their strength, by the conditions in which they operated and evolved, and by the choices, capacities (or lack thereof), and preferences of those who handled them, both in the elites and in the population at large. A satisfactory historical analysis of Soviet legacies would thus have to reconstruct the story of each one of the elements in that set after 1991, how they changed over time, which factors shaped them, and so forth.

Of course, a single article cannot do all of this. It can, however, derive from the knowledge of Soviet history a map of the problems, fault lines, weaknesses, and strengths that history handed down to post-1991 Russia. Some of the elements composing this map—Crimea and the Donbas, for example, and more generally those related to the transformation of administrative borders into political ones—were immediately visible but could lie relatively still until this or that event triggered their activation. Others, such as ways of thinking (what French historians call mentalités) and intellectual horizons, which play a crucial role in shaping the vision of what is possible to do in dealing with a reality that is often much more malleable than our minds can contemplate, were fully operational since the beginning. Yet other elements, such as the weight of Soviet education, in the broadest sense of the term, were also immediately felt and continued to reproduce themselves as years went by and new cohorts of Soviet-educated people climbed the social and political ladder. Yet others, such as those stemming from the peculiarities of Soviet modernization in the economic and legal fields (e.g., the underdevelopment of the credit system)

9. This is the expression Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin use in their “The Historical Legacies of Communism: An Empirical Agenda,” in Beissinger and Kotkin, eds., Historical Legacies, p. 11, when stressing the importance of a “significant rupture between past and present” in order to be able to speak of legacies “that straddle” it.
Graziosi had to be confronted and somehow fixed very soon, which meant doing so while relying mostly on Soviet-created or crudely imported intellectual tools.

The discussion here, proceeding in four sections, assesses the influence of these and other problems and elements on the predicament and choices of Russian political leaders, as well as of selected population strata, by taking into account intellectual, economic, social, demographic, “imperial,” national, and (broadly speaking) cultural factors.

The first section considers the proper comparative horizons of the Russian case, adding to the usual list those provided by studies of the legacy of the classic 20th century European “totalitarianisms” as well as the legacies of European colonial empires. The second section is devoted to “imperial” legacies. After signaling the strengths and weaknesses of the imperial paradigm in the Soviet/Russian case, I analyze issues such as borders, diasporas, migrations, the consequences of Stalinist repressions and other central choices, nationalities policies, and the role played by concepts such as “Near Abroad” and “Russkii mir” (“Russian world”). The third section examines the weight of received ideas and mindsets, discussing the role of the relative cultural isolation in which both the Soviet elites and the cultivated strata below them lived and operated for decades. I also take into consideration the appearance of Soviet humanism, possibly the best fruit of that isolation, and the other, more unpalatable, historical legacies of mass violence and repression that also fed humanism’s growth. I then review the unintended consequences of the attempts to create a bearable past, specifically the role of World War II in these attempts; Soviet étatism; the psychological and material roots of the appeal of conservatism among city dwellers; and, finally, the legacies of the survival strategies of life in Soviet times, of the power of Communist ideas and organizations, and the contamination of a church living for decades under strict state control.

Finally, the fourth section discusses some of the surprising outcomes of a peculiar modernization, including the neotraditional, “ancien régime” features of the society the Soviet Union bequeathed to Russia, the egregious flaws of the legal system, and the rudimentary nature of the banking and fiscal apparatuses. I also explore the consequences of the disintegration of what was consciously built as an integrated economic system; the real dimensions of the Soviet output collapse; the role played by the availability of natural resources (and therefore of hard currency); and, especially, the significance of the onerous demographic trends that Russia inherited from Soviet times and that were deepened by the Soviet collapse.

A few general remarks conclude the article, which overall finds that although the legacy was heavy, Russia in the 1990s still had at least some leeway
for choice. Unfortunately, however, partly because of the legacy of Soviet-shaped mentalities and instincts, as well as blunt intellectual tools, the new officials committed some major blunders, thereby strengthening the adverse effects. Both the legacy and the transition period thus counted. But if the authoritarian outcome was not historically determined by a slew of Soviet legacies, the illiberal choices made by political actors were conditioned by those legacies and ended up strengthening and entrenching them.¹⁰

Post-1991 Russia: Which Comparative Perspectives?

Because of the preponderant role of social and political scientists in the relevant literature, the question of the Soviet or Communist legacy has been generally dealt with in a comparative framework that usually includes the contemporary post-Soviet and East-Central European states.

The choice is understandable, yet to a historian’s eye it is perhaps not the best one for Russia, which was the creator and the core of the Soviet economic, social, and imperial system. Two other past-related comparative angles can thus help illuminate the Soviet legacy in Russia.

The first is provided by the comparison with the much-studied problem of the legacy of the other classic 20th-century “totalitarianisms,” Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, which among historians has often given rise to contentious continuity/discontinuity debates.¹¹ The second comparison is with the imperial legacy of the European colonial empires. Confirming the unique nature of the Soviet “imperial” experience, this latter comparison with Russia involves both the imperial cores after they were deprived of their dependencies and the new states born out of decolonization after 1945. This is so because Moscow and Russia indeed formed an imperial center, one in many ways similar to Paris and France or London and the United Kingdom (or, better yet, 10. See Joel M. Ostrow, The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007); and Vladimir Gel’man, Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015). Both stress the role played by the choices Russia’s rulers repeatedly made at key turning points in the 1990s at the expense of democracy.
England). However, Moscow and Russia were also victims of the Soviet regime and of Communist aspirations to world power and thus in need of liberation from the status of an “Upper Volta with missiles/Obervolta mit Raketen,” a definition variously attributed to Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand, and (the most probable source) Helmut Schmidt.

Another critical perspective is the comparison of the Soviet case with the Yugoslav, particularly of Russia with Serbia (another autonomous, para-imperial core), a comparison often made but rarely fully exploited, especially by historians. 

Although I do not explore the issue in depth, I highlight its importance in assessing the role of leaders’ choices and international intervention in the crisis of the two states and regimes.

The two comparative perspectives I have chosen do not require adherence to an uncritical use of the totalitarianism category or an uncritical reading of the Soviet experience as an imperial one. Starting with “totalitarianism”—or, more appropriately, looking at the new states begotten in Europe by the First World War—one striking difference is their longevity: 74 years (USSR), 12 years (Nazi Germany), and 21 years (Fascist Italy). The legacy’s burden was, therefore, much more substantial in the Soviet/Russian case, even though historians have devoted scant attention to it.

The totalitarian legacy was also more complicated. After Joseph Stalin’s death, the USSR entered a transitional, “post-totalitarian” era that was eventually slowed by the consequences of the 1953–1956 decision to dismantle and then denounce Stalinism’s violently repressive policies while preserving and extolling the socioeconomic system Stalin had built using those policies (i.e., the opposite of Deng Xiaoping’s choices of the late 1970s in China). The legacy of the Soviet system was thus twofold: a legacy of extreme violence and acute stress deriving from that violence; and a legacy of the “stagnation” and drift caused, especially after 1953, by the growth of the system built in the 1930s.

Unlike Germany and Italy (and largely as a consequence of the very different way the Soviet regime ended), Russia was never occupied by foreign powers determined to introduce new directions and push the country onto a different path. The Italian and German totalitarian experiences not only were


13. Élie Halévy’s “era of tyrannies” hypothesis, originally formulated in 1938, is relevant here, even though it is in need of important qualifications.
much shorter but were concluded by much more traumatic events, whose impact was reinforced by the policies imposed by the victors. After the first couple of years, such policies eased, and at least in the Italian case (not to mention Austria) “lustration” largely ceased. In 1957, for instance, Gaetano Azzariti, the former president of the Fascist, anti-Jewish Tribunale della Razza, became the president of the new republic’s Constitutional Court—something unthinkable in West Germany, where denazification dug deeper. Nonetheless, a clear break was made in Italy, as shown by the exile of the royal house and by the end of the court’s influence on the country’s destiny, not to mention the wave of destruction of Fascist symbols and the disillusionment with Fascist beliefs.

In Russia, Boris Yeltsin initially outlawed the Soviet Communist Party and then sought to prosecute it, and a few monuments were removed. However, most of the monuments, street names, symbols, uniforms, and even caps of the previous regime continued to exist and to be worn with pride, often because nothing else was available to use in their place. Even when some were phased out, it was done only gradually. The country’s anthem lost part of its text but not its music, and when the text was revised the task fell to the author of the Soviet anthem. Meanwhile, the army received back its red flag, albeit bereft of the hammer and sickle.

Western policies and interests strengthened this prolonged physical and visual continuity. Contrary to what happened with Germany and Italy, which at first were not admitted to the United Nations, the West pushed Russia to take on the role of the legal successor state to the Soviet Union to ensure that foreign loans would be repaid, that international treaties would be honored, and that stable control over the nuclear arsenal would be maintained.

Differences in the continuity of top elites are even more striking. Nazi leaders committed suicide or were put on trial and executed or left to die in prison, Benito Mussolini was summarily shot, and the House of Savoy lost the country it had helped to build. Moreover, both Germany and Italy could rely on important political and intellectual émigré communities and on the (just as important) surviving protagonists of the governments that preceded Nazism and Fascism. Discontinuity was thus assured, at least at the top of the political system, with Catholics such as Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi, Social Democrats such as Kurt Schumacher and Giuseppe Saragat, Communists such as Palmiro Togliatti, and former anti-Stalinist Communists turned Social Democrats such as Willy Brandt.

In Russia after 74 years, no similar reservoir of potential leadership existed. Even the Russian diaspora was not as influential as, for instance, the Ukrainian. Post-Soviet Russia’s top elite were entirely Soviet and often composed of former top party and state officials. The change that did take place resulted from Mikhail Gorbachev’s frantic attempts before 1991 to renew the apparatus, seeking to bring in younger and more reformist-oriented but still Soviet personnel, and from the suicides and arrests that followed the failure of the August 1991 coup attempt. At lower levels of the bureaucracy, military, and intelligentsia—all of which in Germany and even more in Italy experienced a good deal of continuity—the Russian experience was one of total continuity, a continuity destined to last for a long time. People who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s were poised to dominate the scene for decades, as Putin’s case so starkly illustrates (the only partial exception is represented by the business sector, more open to change because of its novelty).

The length and features of the Soviet experience also caused a much sharper reduction in Russia’s contacts with the world, especially with the West. Thousands of essential books were not translated and not read, and if the damage was less profound in the natural sciences (apart from some fields such as genetics), the damage in the humanities and social sciences was devastating. Even in Italy, the Fascist regime’s relative isolationism and much milder repression had a profound, negative impact on Italian academia. The problem was incomparably worse in Russia, where culture had to develop for decades on its own under severe repression, strengthening its peculiarities and its sense of uniqueness.

What happened in the economic field can also be seen in part as an accentuated version of phenomena that took place in Germany and Italy. German and Italian businesses were affected by the Nazi and Fascist experiences, autarky caused damage, and the Fascist emphasis on state power created conglomerates that dominated Italian economic life for decades after 1945. Yet, the Soviet economic legacy was incomparably more pernicious because of the systemic ideological nature of the Soviet economy. This meant that—contrary to what happened in Germany or Italy—the Soviet economic system had to be broken. The economy was the field in which the break was sharpest in Russia compared to the two other countries. Nonetheless, the Soviet economic system left huge debris in both real and cognitive terms, of which the many crippled, gigantic factories stranded in Russia as well as in other former republics were a powerful reminder after 1991.

In another crucial, and perhaps politically even more important field, that of borders and minorities, the Soviet legacy was heavier because of its radical difference from the German and the Italian cases. The 1945 defeat
meant the end, through mass deportation and expulsion, of German minorities abroad and, albeit on a much smaller scale, of Italian communities too. Borders were thus “solidified,” and the Cold War made revanche impossible. The 12.5 million Germans who were forced out of Central and Eastern Europe must, therefore, be contrasted with the tens of millions of native Russian speakers who suddenly found themselves living in post-Soviet countries that were not always receptive to them.

The new states born out of decolonization also provide useful comparisons, especially regarding the solidity and resilience of borders that one might have thought extremely fragile because they were demarcated by former imperial powers. The borders of the Soviet Union’s republics, too, were often weak. Stalin’s use of linguistic and ethnographic criteria to establish borders in the 1920s, as well as in 1939 and 1944–1945, played an important role, yet the borders were also demarcated on the basis of administrative, economic, and idiosyncratic considerations. They proved more solid than one might have expected.

Armed conflicts did arise between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in Moldova, in Georgia, and in Tajikistan, as well as in Russia’s North Caucasus, but wider and more deadly fighting did not erupt. Fear of potentially highly disruptive conflicts was a crucial difference with the post-Yugoslav case, where most regional leaders had already gone through a significant ideological shift in the direction of crude nationalism. The first post-Soviet Russian prime minister, Egor Gaidar, recalled how, in October 1991, despite the protests of people like Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi, the Russian government consciously decided to follow the British model of peaceful imperial retreat rather than the French way of fighting to preserve one’s possessions.15

Equally important was the role played by the international community’s understandable fear of revising political borders in a fluid situation. Abetting spontaneous border revisions could have had tragic outcomes, paving the way for violence much greater than that of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Yet, because of internal migration and the nature of the Soviet republics’ borders, the conscious effort not to deal—via an international conference or otherwise—with

15. Egor Gaidar, *Gibel’ imperii* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006), p. 419. Beissinger and Kotkin also impute the post-Soviet borders’ stability to what they call “parameter setting”; that is, the limits imposed “on how individuals think or behave” by the Soviet experience. They, too, openly compare the post-Soviet and the post-colonial political borders, a comparison they extend to Communism and colonialism as “defining historical experiences.” See Beissinger and Kotkin, *Historical Legacies*, pp. 3, 11. Only after submitting this article for publication was I able to read Martin Aust’s valuable paper devoted to “Imperial Legacies: Russia since 1991” (paper presented at the ASEEES 2016 Convention, Washington, DC, 17–20 November 2016).
the problems those borders hid only ensured the persistence of tensions that formed an essential part of the Soviet legacy.

As Rutskoi’s protests show, the dismantling of the empire produced in Russia, too, an outburst of nationalist and revanchist ideas and ideologies, just as it had decades earlier in other European imperial centers; for instance, in France with the Organisation de l’Armée Secrète during the Algerian crisis. Unlike most other cases, however, the Soviet collapse was a peculiar case of a self-decolonizing empire. The Russian center initially played a major role, choosing in a way to decolonize itself from the Soviet Union (Portugal in 1974 may be the only other such case). Russia even now celebrates this feat on 12 June, the anniversary of the Russian parliament’s declaration of sovereignty in 1990.

Finally, the initial programs and projects of post-Soviet elites almost everywhere “involved the copying of the institutions of the imperial West” (with the other former Soviet republics emulating both the West and Russia). This early phase, however, was soon followed by a period of indigenously developed policies that departed from those devised by first-generation, Western-educated elites. In this second phase, the “swing away from [liberal] democracy” was often “justified in the name of democracy” and of the people’s interests. Although post-1991 Russia differed markedly from former colonies in Asia and Africa, it can be fruitfully analyzed along similar lines, even though Western-oriented Soviet/Russian elites of the 1980s were a product of Soviet internal developments, not of direct Western experiences. Russia therefore was more fragile in its Westernization and more inclined to react to signals coming from local pressures than were the Western-oriented elites in former colonies.

Eventually, in both the post-colonial and the post-Soviet cases the distance between the capacity of liberal-democratic institutions and the weight of past “traditions” was measured by the political and cultural quality of the elites and by the magnitude of the pressures they faced. The result was not predetermined. Partly because of the lack of direct foreign support, the terrain was difficult to navigate. The situation demanded great political and cultural


18. Ibid.
sophistication, not just raw political talent. Russian elites had plenty of the latter but often lacked the former.

“Imperial” Legacies

The USSR had imperial features, but, as Richard Pipes, Ronald Suny, Terry Martin, Francine Hirsch, Juliette Cadiot, and Jeremy Smith, among others, have shown, the Soviet experience was not just imperial. Within the 1939 borders, it also was a non-imperial project, based on both an innovative, ethnofederal institutional structure and an innovative, if gravely flawed, social and economic vision. Starting with Vladimir Lenin’s writings and Willi Münzenberg’s propagandistic genius, the Soviet state was also for decades the official center of most modern anti-imperialist discourse. In addition, however, the Soviet Union functioned as an empire that asserted dominion over swaths of Eastern Europe—including the territories annexed in 1939–1940 and the vast territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia inherited from the Tsars. In 1989–1991, according to opinion polling and election results, many in the USSR came to view the huge state as an empire in need of dismantling. Although sentiment varied from place to place, relatively few insisted that the state had to be preserved intact.

This is why the term “imperial” needs to be qualified. Uncritical application of the term “empire” to the Soviet case, as in many chapters of the book


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edited by Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen from the proceedings of an influential 1994 conference, is misguided. As Victor Zaslavsky rightly notes in his chapter in that book—a point reinforced by special issues of the Journal of Cold War Studies explaining the demise of the USSR—the Soviet Union collapsed because of the failure of its economic, ideological, technological, and social arrangements, which in turn helped to unleash the national tensions its federal structure had previously been able to manage. The country then “constitutionally” fractured along the lines of the “national” structures the Bolsheviks had set up to overcome the Tsarist empire’s problems.

What collapsed in 1991 was therefore a peculiar state formation based on a peculiar socioeconomic system. It had undergone a defeat whose peculiar nature and quality are also attested by the lack of treaties regulating it (in much the same way that, albeit for different reasons and in a different context, Nazi Germany’s defeat was not fully regulated by a treaty). Of course, the importance of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accord must not be underestimated. As Sergey Shakhrai remarks, that agreement provided the context for a largely peaceful divorce that was sorely missed in Yugoslavia. Subsequent agreements with the United States resolved the nuclear weapons question (even though some today regret that solution). However, as in the case of borders, many of the great issues raised by the collapse of the Soviet state and its Russian component were not seriously discussed and dealt with, and the international community was involved only indirectly, mainly via the active role of the United States.

Europe’s twentieth century shows the price of hiding problems under a carpet of good words. In particular, Russian-speaking diasporas (e.g., large majorities in Crimea)—the legacy of the Tsarist empire, of the Soviet imperial

dimension, and of the Soviet social and economic project—found themselves living in newly independent states. From this perspective, the post-1991 Russian situation has less in common with the collapse of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany circa 1945 and more with the situation of Germany or Hungary after 1918, as well as with the situations in the former Yugoslavia and Hungary after 1991 (when approximately three million ethnic Hungarians were living outside the ten-million-person republic, a fact that should be taken into account when studying Budapest’s political evolution in recent years).

For the past two centuries both “Russia” and “Germany” have been locked in a definition of what they are (and were), with their imperial dimension obstructing and distorting the “search for” the nation. In the case of Russia, therefore, we are in the presence of a double, imbricated “imperial” legacy that unites and combines the Tsarist and the Soviet legacies. As Serhii Plokhih shows, this search has also been for Russia a process of differentiation from Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus, a process that since the late nineteenth century has gone through several stages, one of which is the convulsions of post-1991 Russia.  

In post-1918 Germany, as in post-1991 Russia, democrats such as Gustav Stresemann were convinced that their country’s eastern (or western in the Russian case) borders constituted “a gross violation of the principle of self-determination.” Even Prussia’s social-democratic premier, Otto Braun, worried about the situation of the 10–12 million Auslandsdeutsche. These German minorities, which showed little interest in Berlin or Vienna until Berlin and Vienna guaranteed their privileges, soon exerted pressure on their “motherland,” calling for protection.

Russian leaders (including democratic ones) started, along with a young Putin, to express their concern for “Russian minorities” abroad soon after 1991 (as did many Soviet leaders in the late 1980s). Luckily, these minorities were for a long time far less active than German diasporas in the interwar period. The moderation of many of the post-Soviet states and the European Union’s favorable policies toward them (especially in the Baltic states) exerted a positive influence. Nonetheless, the problem was there, and the minorities constituted perhaps the most important “imperial” legacy of the Soviet

past.\textsuperscript{27} Their number greatly varies according to the category of choice. The most widely adopted one includes the 25.3 million people of Russian nationality who in 1989 lived in the fourteen non-Russian republics. But already in August 1992, in response to a query from Yeltsin, Valery Tishkov, the scholar then heading the State Committee for Nationalities (Goskomnats), maintained that the figure could be expanded to include the fruits of the assimilationist trends that had prevailed in the USSR after World War II (as the 1959–1989 censuses indicate, many non-Russians living outside their republics, or in the cities, became Russified and identified themselves as Russian, as often did the offspring of mixed marriages). This meant adding another 18.7 million people of non-titular nationalities who spoke Russian as a first language and 6.5 million people of non-Russian titular nationalities who spoke Russian daily.\textsuperscript{28}

More than 50 million people living in what had just become independent republics were therefore directly attached either to Russia or to Russian culture and language. They provided the foundation on which the Russkii mir category was later built. Their numbers decreased but slowly. By 1995 about 2.5 million had moved to Russia (with a peak in 1994, when “returns,” especially from the Caucasus and Southern Central Asia, passed the 800,000 mark), and the movement continued in subsequent years, albeit at a reduced pace. However, because of births, there are today more than 15 million native Russian-speakers in post-Soviet countries other than Russia. In Ukraine, even after the Russian occupation of Crimea, as well as in Kazakhstan, Russian speakers number millions, and in Latvia and Estonia they still constitute approximately 25 percent of the population (compared to 34 and 30 percent respectively in 1991).\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} The pervasiveness of the Soviet legacy is illustrated not only in the former Soviet territories, as the case of Israel proves, but also in unexpected, “minor” phenomena such as the enhancement of mathematics programs in the United States in the wake of Soviet mathematicians’ emigration to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.


Those who moved to Russia can also be considered a Soviet legacy. Ethnic Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia and Italians from Istria and Dalmatia had significant impacts on their respective countries’ moods and ideologies in the 1950s, when they also symbolically fed nationalistic trends and authoritarian longings. Similarly, the millions who returned to a Russian “motherland” where many of them had never lived could not but have a deep influence on the mood of the country to which they “returned.”

Conversely, while the large communities originating from former Soviet republics and now living in Russia—in Moscow and other large cities, in particular—represent an important Soviet legacy, the diversity their presence brought to Russian cities ignited, in relatively large sections of the Russian population, reactions of an often ugly nature.

The fact that the Russian-speaking communities often live in territories (“borderlands”) with mixed populations aggravated the problem. Throughout Soviet history, people of different languages and origin moved or were forcibly moved around over vast tracts of land, perpetuating, changing, and at times strengthening the population, language, and religion mixes that have acted as conflict catalysts and conflict multipliers throughout European and non-European history. This specific Soviet legacy raises the question of the fragility and rigidity of post-Soviet borders, another legacy of the Soviet past requiring open discussion to defuse a dormant explosive situation that external or internal events could ignite. However, this was not done, the question was not addressed, and in Crimea as in the Donbas, for instance, long periods of apparent calm (Crimea asked to go back to Russia before the disintegration of the USSR and did so again soon after) were followed by bloody crises.

As the ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh attests, the choice not to face problems and let tensions simmer can be seen, at least in part, as a Soviet legacy. In 1988, for instance, the Soviet authorities, fearing a chain reaction throughout the country, informed Azeri and Armenian leaders that no change of borders would be allowed.

The 1991 putsch and subsequent collapse of negotiations for a new federal treaty marked a turning point that amplified the importance and the dangers represented by Russian minorities (as well as other minorities) and


by mixed borderlands. The treaty’s failure created what the Russian government soon called the “Near Abroad” (Blizhnee zarubezh’e), yet another Soviet legacy. The very use of the concept indicates one of the consequences of the 1945 victory as well as the porous cultural and political Soviet isolation that post-1991 Russian elites had known for most of their lives before the mid-1980s. Defense of their own “sphere of influence” represented the normal way of thinking and acting for European great powers or would-be great powers prior to the catastrophe of the Second World War. Painful historical, intellectual, and political processes then convinced Berlin, Paris, and Rome to abandon past attitudes and practices in favor of cooperation, integration, and respect for “small states.” In victorious and isolated Moscow, however, that principle continued and continues to act as a guiding star, much as it does in Turkey, which also did not participate in the process of reflection that occupied its neighbors to the west.\(^3^2\)

Yet another Soviet legacy, that of Stalinist repressions, also acted as an irritant in relations between Moscow and the so-called Near Abroad, as shown by the polemics surrounding the 1931–1933 famines (the Holodomor first and foremost, although the Kazakh tragedy is perhaps acquiring a new role) and the Soviet occupation of the territories Moscow reconquered by virtue of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.\(^3^3\)

The acute tensions generated by the 1943–1944 “punished peoples” (the ethnic minorities who were deported en masse by Stalin) are a reminder that some of the problems the imperial legacy produced in Moscow’s relations with the Near Abroad were also present in post-1991 Russia’s “Inner Abroad,” Chechnya in the first place. An explosive mixture was formed from the legacies of Soviet nationality policies, including korenizatsiya (promotion of indigenous minorities), and Stalin’s tenet that self-determination could not be granted to peoples living in territories not sharing a border with foreign countries; from the fruits of Soviet nation-building and “un-building” projects; from Stalinist repressions; from Soviet migration patterns and their impact on populations (religious and language); and from post-1989 Soviet and Russian choices.\(^3^4\) The impact the two Chechen wars had on the subsequent involution of the Russian political system, as well as on that of the mentalities and


\(^3^4\) On “un-building,” see Andrea Graziosi, “The Kazakh Famine, the Holodomor, and the Soviet 1930–33 Famines: Starvation and National Un-building in the Soviet Union,” paper prepared for the
practices of part of Russia’s elites and population, cannot be overestimated. For example, the wars (especially the second) granted new roles to the military and the special services, led to new practices, and fostered unsavory ties between government and criminal elements.  

In Moscow, a Soviet legacy made of imperial traditions and imperial minorities abroad, population mixes, and statist populism fueled the growth of a centralizing ideology with powerful nationalist overtones, which the Chechen wars energized. In particular, the initially isolated ultranationalist calls for a return to Soviet borders, or at least for recovering the territories inhabited by Russian minorities, have grown over time, conquering important groups of the population and penetrating large strata of the new Russian elites, in coincidence and combination with other events.

The partial reframing of the Near Abroad as a *Russkii mir* is telling. The former concept may have required allegiance and submission, but it recognized the otherness of the new post-Soviet states vis-à-vis Russia. The latter concept, however, especially as reframed by Putin in 2007, with its insistence on the “millions of ethnic Russians, native Russian speakers, their families and descendants,” is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, following in the steps of Germany or Italy with the Goethe Institut and the Società Dante Alighieri, the *Russkii mir* concept was purported to be a benign way of promoting Russian culture and language abroad, as well as dialogue among cultures. On the other hand (again as in the case of similar, foreign institutions in their pre-1945, nationalist vestige, such as the Deutsche Akademie and the Dante Society, which turned “democratic” without changing its name), it has become a political and cultural tool to dissect the former Soviet space along new lines, in tune with “Putin’s redefinition of Russia as a traditional patrimonial great power.” It thus opened the way to the assertion of “historical” claims to past “Russian” territories in line with old-fashioned Russian Tsarist imperialism and its precepts about East Slavic unity, Orthodoxy, and Russian language and culture.

However, the progressive “downgrading” of the discourse legitimizing Moscow’s ambitions, reflected in the switch from a universalist (Communist)


doctrinal to a “sphere of influence” creed (the “Near Abroad”) to a Russo-centric assertion of strength, attests the magnitude of the break provoked in the ideological field by the Soviet collapse. On the surface, the universalist content of the Soviet discourse left little or no legacy.

The Weight of Ideas and Mindsets

Soviet socialist modernization also produced a unique and powerful set of ideas and ways of thinking, one that was common to all former Soviet republics but perhaps purer at the system’s center. Its uniqueness was strengthened by decades of cultural isolation, a distinctive feature of the construction of that modernity that affected the capacities and the intellectual toolbox of the best part of the Soviet and therefore Russian political and intellectual elites (although things were different in mathematics, physics, and most other natural sciences).37

The meager list of Western books specially translated for top leaders, Gorbachev included, gives a sense of the narrowness and singularity of their mental horizons and outlook, fed by Soviet history and academic production, as well as by great literary works of the past (predominantly but not exclusively Russian), yet out of touch with much of the essential Western scholarly contributions to the humanities and the social, psychological, and economic sciences.

This does not mean the quality of Soviet leaders and intellectuals was subpar. In fact, the peculiar “Soviet humanism” (a term I prefer to “liberalism,” which implies knowledge of a strong Western intellectual tradition that the Bolsheviks prevented from taking root in the USSR) that Soviet thinkers were capable of producing in such difficult conditions—possibly the noblest legacy of the post-1953 attempt to exit Stalinism—underscores their talents and morality.38 Nor do I mean to downplay how international experiences, which the USSR’s superpower status afforded to a small coterie of political


38. The striking memoirs of Soviet dissidents and perestroika leaders provide the best introduction to the emergence of this Soviet humanism, which grew out of the moral and intellectual reaction to the horrors of the 1930s and of World War II, as well as to late Stalinist aberrations. See also English, Russia and the Idea of the West; and Vladislav Zubok, Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). The nature of Russian “liberalisms” is debated in Riccardo Mario Cucciolla, ed., Dimensions and Challenges of Russian Liberalism: Historical Drama and New Prospects (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2019).
and intellectual elites and cadres, shaped their changing judgments about the
system they served. Yet the insularity and poverty of these elites’ education
were a direct product of the Soviet system, as was their meager knowledge
of the world and the West in particular, where comparatively few had lived
and studied. This relative insularity constituted one of that system’s most bur-
densome heritages. For decades even the best Soviet historians, for instance,
were unable to read the most important works produced in the West and were
thus cut off from the liveliest intellectual debates. As Gorbachev’s experience
indicates, even the extremely talented group that implemented perestroika,
certainly the best the USSR was able to produce, lacked some of the intel-
lectual analytical tools (especially in economics) needed for the monumental
task of radically reforming the Soviet system.

Below the highest elites—whose small numbers relative to their Western
counterparts were yet another legacy of the Soviet experience—were much
larger circles of state officials (economic, military, civil, etc.) whose level of
education and whose knowledge of the outside world (especially the West)
were even more limited, even though this lack of knowledge was somewhat
mitigated by music, literature, and cinema. Soviet humanism penetrated these
groups with difficulty, even if from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s it was
able to exert some form of hegemony over them, at least in big cities (the Putin
of the early 1990s, working for Saint Petersburg’s reformist administration, is
in a way a symbol of this).

This hegemony, however, was unstable and superficial, the more so be-
because it was accompanied by adhesion to a form of economic liberalism that
was only partly and haphazardly implemented. In any case, the weight of the
past, the bitter failure of perestroika and of the good intentions that animated
its leaders, the difficulties and the sense of humiliation of the early 1990s, the
easily foreseeable collapse of those self-delusions, the Chechen wars, and the
struggle to reestablish some form of state authority and legitimacy strongly
pushed in the opposite direction.

The discovery after 1986 of the unbearable weight of Soviet history—
whose multi-genocidal nature is still hard to come to terms with even for the
post-Soviet republics (including Russia) that bear no responsibility for it—
made it imperative to find a “usable past.”39 Such a past was invoked to remedy

39. On the discovery of the weight of Soviet history, see Maria Ferretti, *La memoria mutilata: La Russia
ricorda* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1993); Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory
and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Kathleen E. Smith, *Myth-
making in the New Russia: Politics and Memory in the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,
2002). Historians have already begun debating the crucial issue of Soviet history and genocide. See, for
the sense of rootlessness and worthlessness, as well as the concomitant feeling of self-abasement, that the discovery of Soviet history had produced. The Russian and Soviet pasts were thus quickly, almost unconsciously, scanned in search of alternatives. The February revolution, Petr Stolypin, and Peter the Great rapidly followed each other before the choice just as rapidly fell on the unmistakably Soviet “Great Patriotic War” and the victory that concluded it. The process was already over by March 1995 when, “following the shelling of the Parliament, the Presidential Constitution, and the first Chechen war . . . Yeltsin signed a law proclaiming November 7 a Day of Russian Military Glory.” To be celebrated with a military parade in Moscow’s Red Square was not the “Great October Socialist Revolution” but the commemoration of its 24th anniversary in 1941, from which the participants went straightaway to fight the German invaders.40

The selection of victory in World War II as the foundation of post-Soviet Russia's legitimacy was probably unavoidable: the event was truly popular, and Russian leaders could build on successful Brezhnevite policies dating from 1965. The choice of 1945 was, therefore, a direct Soviet legacy. This was also true at a deeper level. As Vasilii Grossman illustrates in his masterpiece, the Soviet war had a profoundly ambivalent meaning and legacy: it was both a popular war of individual liberation against a heinous enemy and an affirmation of Moscow’s power and arrogance, of state glory and imperial expansion, as well as Stalin's personal triumph.41 The Soviet dictator’s May 1945 victory toast to the “Russian people” provides a powerful reminder of this symbiosis. Choosing war and victory in post-Soviet Russia thus also meant legitimizing Stalin, and this symbiosis is in its turn a crucial component of a Soviet legacy that, as Hugh Seton-Watson noted in 1977, also consisted of the promotion—since at least the mid-1930s—of the Russian tradition’s worst features: “uncritical submission to autocracy, military prowess, love of military glory, suspicion and hatred of foreigners.”42
The Weight of the Soviet Past in Post-1991 Russia

The Soviet exaltation of the state and of its power over external enemies, of conquest and expansion, corresponded internally to a belief in the superiority of the state over the individual, a belief that in the rhetoric and legitimation of the Soviet system went hand in hand with the idea that state superiority was in the people’s and society’s interest. The power-state should also paternalistically cater to what it thought were its people’s needs. Post-1991 Russia received this set of beliefs not only via the elites’ and the bureaucracy’s mentality but also via popular expectations that Soviet promises and propaganda had fed over decades. For this legacy to be reactivated, money was needed. Contrary to the majority of other post-Soviet states and to the totality of the Central and East-European post-socialist countries, Russia could rely—especially when international prices rose after a deep dip in the 1990s—on the income from exports of raw materials and energy. This income, moreover, was indirectly but substantially increased by the reduction in expenses tied to the loss of the Soviet Union’s superpower status, as well as by the country’s peculiar demographic structure (featuring a much reduced old-age population). This way, both Soviet state paternalism and the Soviet state governing elites’ unity, rooted in control over state means, could soon be revived, albeit with crucial changes.

Despite possessing specific features and therefore being a new historical phenomenon, Russia’s nationalist statism is therefore rooted in two specific Soviet traditions: great-power status and paternalism. This was already evident in 1993; for instance, in the rhetoric and symbols of the crowd supporting the Russian parliament against Yeltsin, among which anti-Western and “anti-cosmopolitan” feelings combined with anti-capitalist and anti-market slogans in a brew strongly reminiscent of 1945–1953 Stalinist Soviet “patriotism” and its subsequent developments.

Later on, this new blend, which unquestionably sported some original features, slowly conquered new ground. For instance, although the extent of


43. Pop-Eleches and Tucker maintain, in Communism’s Shadow, ch. 1, that “post-communist citizens are, on average, less supportive of democracy, less supportive of markets, and more supportive of state-provided social welfare—but not more supportive of gender equality—than citizens elsewhere in the world,” and they tie these attitudes to “living through Communism” rather than to the difficult years following the collapse of the Communist regimes.

corruption in higher circles during the Brezhnevite years is well attested (even the long-serving Minister of Internal Affairs Nikolai Shchelokhov committed suicide to avoid being sentenced), as is the buying and selling of offices, priced according to the income they generated, most of the Soviet bureaucrats who went on to form the bulk of the Russian state apparatus “were not ‘bad guys,’ by any means,” even if their moral profiles widely varied. However, “they were all trained, worked, and judged in the framework of an anti-liberal system, according to totally non-liberal rules.” In their minds Russia’s international defeat was tied to the debasement of the role of the state and thus of their status. Not surprisingly, many ended up imputing both these evils to a “liberalism” that simply never existed, rather than to the unquestionable culprit: the Soviet system of which they were the products. Many thus welcomed Putin as the savior who could heal both plagues and reintroduce a “right order of things”—power of the state abroad and superiority of the state within. Although these might take new forms, they reflected the Soviet experience many had grown up with (among the features of the “right order of things” was Putin’s welcomed brush up of one of the key practices of the Soviet bureaucratic system, the nomenklatura, which after disappearing in the 1990s reappeared in the 2000s with the reintroduction of the cadres reserve system).

The lesson of the Italian experience, in which Fascism-rooted beliefs and behaviors continued to exert considerable influence in the 1950s and 1960s thanks to state officials educated in the 1920s and 1930s, before declining sharply, suggests that something similar could also happen in Russia. However, the instauration of Putin’s regime and the revival, albeit in new forms, of some of the illiberal traits of Soviet education will probably at least slow down this process.

Another legacy of Soviet modernity is that constituted by the ideologies and behaviors of large segments of the urban population. The latter has provided the bulwark of Soviet humanism but has done so only sporadically in the USSR and in Russia. Here, too, Moscow and Saint Petersburg are well above the national average in terms of heterodox voting and oppositional activity and overt dissent, and those who engage in such activity are a more substantial minority in major cities than in small towns and in the countryside.


However, such minorities proved smaller than expected, perhaps because those who lived in large Soviet cities from 1933 through 1991 were systematically filtered via the internal passport and residency permit system. The system allowed the Soviet government to control and select urban residents, who enjoyed substantial privileges (in relation to Soviet conditions overall). Not only were urban dwellers, those in the capital cities in particular, screened, but people from minor centers and the countryside were ready to withstand prolonged sacrifice in the hope of gaining access to those privileges and, once having done so, lived in fear of losing such status. Large cities’ inhabitants thus grew up identifying their well-being with the repression and marginalization of others—deviants first and foremost. Conformism, “petit bourgeois respectability,” and support for authoritarianism even among urban, educated strata who in other countries behaved differently therefore constituted yet another powerful Soviet legacy that may help explain why in post-1991 Russia (as in similar contexts, such as China) economic well-being and education also “bolstered social support for the authoritarian regimes that oversee them.”

This mass conservative mindset is also tied to the heritage of the “redistributive” nature of the Soviet system; that is, to paternalism. The decades-long “what do they give? (чего дают?)” education helped solidify consensus around the state as soon as it found the means to redistribute something. The more so after the dramatic disappointment of the self-delusion according to which it was sufficient to renounce the Soviet system and declare a switch to a “capitalist system” that barely existed and certainly was not embedded enough to be able to provide ample benefits. Therefore, in this case, too, one can find “Soviet roots” for phenomena that emerged in the 1990s and were then bolstered by post-1991 events, choices, and feelings, especially under Putin.

51. These trends can also be, and have been, attributed to the Tsarist legacy as well as that of the Soviet Union. See, for instance, Paul Castañeda Dower and Andrei Markevich, “A History of Resistance to Privatization in Russia,” Journal of Comparative Economics, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2014), pp. 855–873.
The uniqueness of the Soviet system also produced another legacy, one embodied by the Soviet non-official economic sector that Russia inherited and transformed and, above all, by the practices, mindsets, and behaviors generated and nourished by that sector for decades. The Soviet generations that became Russian in 1991 had received a solid education in the value of connections (svyazi), reciprocal favors, and private arrangements (blat); of getting things “on the side” (nalevo); and even of open corruption and a specific kind of criminality. The literature on Soviet criminal traditions and “thieves in law” is immense. Yet the word “mafia” did not become part of the Russian language until the beginning of the 1980s, at a crossroads between the Soviet investigative journalism that exposed (with Yurii Andropov’s permission) the corruption surrounding Brezhnev’s family and the dealings of Soviet trade managers, especially in Moscow food stores, and the airing of an extremely successful Italian television serial devoted to the Italian mafia (La piovra, 1984, broadcast in the USSR in 1986). More than a criminal organization or any other physical entity, the Soviet version of mafia was a set of behaviors and practices shared by vast sectors of Soviet society, a set that also generated beliefs, verging toward conspiracy theories, about how the world was run—beliefs then inherited, not created, in post-Soviet Russia.

These behaviors were exacerbated by the worsening conditions of scarcity typical of the Soviet system’s final years, conditions that themselves were the direct product of Gorbachev’s policies as well as the adoption of an anti-alcohol campaign to stem the decline in average life expectancy. Crackdowns on alcohol consumption, however, are a well-known breeder of crime, in particular of organized crime, which burgeoned after 1985, leaving Russia with an enormous burden to carry. As Alexander Yakovlev wrote in retrospect: “I expected democracy to lay bare the Soviet regime’s criminal nature, but the idea that democracy would have brought to the surface all the filth, the total thievery, and the corruption laying at the bottom of Soviet society didn’t even cross my mind.”

A specific Soviet legacy is represented by the self-proclaimed heirs to the previous political system, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which continues the Communist Party of the Russian Soviet

Federative Socialist Republic (CP RSFSR), itself established only in 1990. Unlike other Soviet republics, the RSFSR until 1990 was not allowed to have its own Communist Party or Academy of Science because their presence would have undermined the corresponding Soviet institutions. The CP RSFSR’s very creation was thus an indication of the Soviet incapacity to face and solve the Russian national question, which instead was kept in a paradoxical predicament: Great Russian pride was exalted, but Russian statehood was stunted. Post-1991 Russia itself, with its problems and contradictions, can be seen as a legacy of the Soviet failure in the national field. The intellectual misery of the CPRF’s leaders and supporters is ultimately yet another face of the general intellectual dearth caused by the Soviet system.

This dearth is also the product of “suppression” (in the psychological sense) caused by the unbearable weight of the Soviet past of violent terror and mass repression. Despite spirited debates and the efforts of historians and associations such as Memorial during the late 1980s and early 1990s, this past did not receive the public attention and reflection it warranted. Moreover, because of the privileged position Russia was given by Stalin after the mid-1930s, the specificity of the 1991 Russian “break” (compared to the German and Italian ruptures in 1945), and the post-1995 rehabilitation of Soviet glory, which Putin dramatically accelerated, the tragic past soon ceased to be a problem, and nobody was called to pay for it. A commander of Soviet execution squads in Poland in 1940 could thus claim in the early 1990s that he was still proud of having liquidated “class enemies,” and the agents and judges who persecuted and sentenced dissidents from the 1960s on could state that they had done their duty. Not even the Italians’ largely hypocritical but collective damnation of their Fascist past, which allowed many protagonists and institutions of the regime to survive but still introduced a clear break, seems to have been an option in post-Soviet Russia.

The Orthodox Church, too, was affected. The Soviet regime had corrupted a large swath of the Church’s top hierarchy, which after the terrible repressions of 1917–1943 had long been supervised and filtered by the regime. If many priests and some bishops refused the requests for collaboration


(apparently the KGB divided Orthodox hierarchies into three categories based on their level, or refusal, of cooperation), many others did accept—at times systematically, as was the case with a former patriarch and several metropolitans. This could not but result in a weakening of Russian religiosity. Even though the part of the Church that remembers the terrible Bolshevik and Stalinist persecutions (priests were the most targeted category in the Great Terror) and that is devoted to its martyrs grew after 1991, contributing to the church renaissance, other groups still support the rehabilitation of Stalin and see in the power of the state the primary basis for the Church. The Soviet legacy here pushes in the direction of strengthening the state authoritarian structure and sanitizing the Soviet past, including its anti-religious record.\footnote{Adriano Roccucci, \textit{Stalin e il Patriarca: Chiesa ortodossa e potere sovietico, 1917–1958} (Torino: Einaudi, 2011); Juliet Johnson, Marietta Stepaniants, and Benjamin Forest, eds., \textit{Religion and Identity in Modern Russia: The Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam} (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); and Anna Grzymala-Busse, \textit{“Historical Roots of Religious Influence on Post-Communist Democratic Politics,”} in Beissinger and Kotkin, eds., \textit{Historical Legacies}, pp. 179–201.}

\textbf{The USSR’s Different Modernity: Missing Parts and Real Presences}

As Stephen Kotkin notes, the Soviet Union “was also a comprehensive experiment in non-capitalist modernity or socialism.”\footnote{Kotkin, \textit{Armageddon Averted}, p. 6; and Michael David-Fox, \textit{Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union} (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2015).} Its social and economic system was a unique product, and even if the ideological blueprints changed over time because of reality’s reactions to Bolshevik actions, Russia and other post-Soviet states came out of an \textit{essentially} different, 74-year-long, social, economic, and juridical experience, something that does not apply to other “totalitarianisms.” The Bolsheviks’ search for a non-capitalist modernity paradoxically ended up producing a neotraditional society in which, for instance, status trumped class and gender equality was fictitious (despite claims to the contrary). Post-1991 Russia had therefore to come to terms with such ancien régime presences as a “quasi-caste” social structure and “neotraditional” gender roles (women \textit{did} work—more than men, in fact—but were kept in a subordinate position), as also illustrated in the various distribution and benefits networks the Soviet state reserved for different groups.\footnote{Jowitt, \textit{“Soviet Neo-traditionalism.”} I discuss the neotraditionalist interpretation in \textit{“A Century of 1917a.”} On what could be called the “neotraditional” values of the post-Soviet populations, see Pop-Eleches and Tucker, \textit{Communism’s Shadow}. Of particular interest are the findings relating to the lack of support for gender equality in chapter 7.}
Because of the peculiarity of the Soviet system, Russia also inherited a repressive legal system in which, until Andropov’s brief period as Communist Party General Secretary (1982–1984), the security apparatus wielded great power; commercial and business law was almost non-existent; the independence of both judges and lawyers vis-à-vis state institutions and the repressive organs was—to say the least—underdeveloped; party members enjoyed special legal privileges (yet another ancien régime feature); and calls from above (“telephone justice”) were considered normal, as was the fact that the Politburo could decide important cases. The 1960 Soviet criminal code, modified to include economic and property crimes, remained in force until 1997 (though this was a far better record than in Italy, where, despite important modifications, Alfredo Rocco’s 1930 Fascist criminal code is still in use).\(^{58}\)

More generally, as the KGB-FSB case indicates, the Russian state inherited from the past the core of Soviet bureaucracies and kept all the central offices, structures, and personnel. Although the former republic branches of the KGB were no longer under FSB control (and in some cases were abolished), Russia maintained all the basic organs and facilities of the Soviet KGB.

In yet other sectors, the essential Soviet diversity produced instead conspicuous absences that constitute another critical part of the Soviet legacy. With Stalin’s 1928–1933 war on the peasantry and crash industrialization, and the almost complete liquidation of private business, the USSR lost a fiscal system capable of monitoring private activities (taxes were either automatically regulated in intrastate payments or levied on sales).\(^{59}\) After Gaidar’s introduction of price liberalization in 1992, Russia had to build a fiscal system from scratch. The initial absence of such a system and its difficult beginnings go a long way toward explaining the weakness of the Russian state for most of the 1990s. The credit reform of 1928–1933 also eliminated what was left of the Tsarist banking system. In the USSR, there was no credit as we know it today (individuals had only saving accounts, credit cards did not exist, etc.). This hole, too, had to be filled. Given the sensitivity and subtleties of the banking sector, the pressures it creates, and the opportunities it generates, one can

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easily imagine the problems (including moral ones) that could emerge in do-
ing so, problems that greatly compounded the difficulties of the 1990s.60

In the economic field, the post-1923 “construction” of an integrated So-
viet economic system translated in 1991 into a dramatic separation of parts
that were meant to work together. This was especially the case with the enor-
mous, integrated military-industrial complex whose parts suddenly lay in
different countries. Because Soviet economic regions did not coincide with
union-republic divisions, the situation was even worse, leaving such regions
split among newly independent countries.

These problems were compounded by another trait of Soviet economic
organization: the preference for gigantic factories, often dominating entire ur-
ban centers, as in Magnitogorsk and Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg). The disinte-
gration of the network that tied these factories together left them stranded
along with the cities they dominated, and productivity problems doomed
many of them in internationally competitive markets. The Soviet model of
exploiting natural resources situated in remote and often inhospitable areas
through forced labor (and therefore entirely different from the Canadian or
the Australian model) left Russia with an even more specific kind of suffer-
ing.61 After 1991, cities such as Vorkuta saw their output and their finances
collapse and lost the younger and more dynamic part of their population. Su-
cides and abortions in these cities soared. In 2001, the Russian State Duma
committee on northern regional issues reported that northern communities,
with a total of 11 million people, including eleven cities with more than
200,000 inhabitants, were experiencing a catastrophe that could be alleviated
only by massive intervention.62

The oft-lamented output collapse was, however, less burdensome than
usually thought. Anders Åslund is not alone in pointing out that Soviet eco-
nomic statistics were far from reliable, wasteful investment was a rule, and
pripiski (padding the figures) and defective production were ubiquitous, so
that “much Soviet manufacturing was sheer value deduction.” The collapse in
output, therefore, was at least in part more apparent than real, and at times
it was even beneficial in reducing “the pursuit of goals unrelated to economic

value creation in the absence of real economic information." Moreover, the informal Soviet economy, which boomed after 1987–1988, expanded at an even greater rate after Gaidar legalized it. Its output, however, was not registered, also because of the lack of a fiscal apparatus and of a statistical system capable of recording the dealings of the private sector. In 1994, for instance, different estimates put the informal Russian economy at about 30–35 percent of gross domestic product.

Besides, the end of subsidies to other Soviet republics and Soviet satellites, together with the drastic reduction in military spending and of investments in the industrial-military complex—that is, the collapse of superpower expenditures—partly alleviated the crisis. On the other hand, formerly privileged closed cities, huge heavy industry factories, and the "company towns" or neighborhoods built around them suffered intensely from this redirection of economic activity, feeding previously privileged strata’s resentment of the "market" and "national humiliation."

Furthermore, Russia’s raw materials and energy wealth ensured that the weight of the Soviet economic failure was less severe in Russia than in other post-Soviet and post-socialist countries. The price Russian society had to pay because of Soviet economic fallacies may have been less onerous (the fact that the price was still very high underscores the magnitude of these fallacies), but the country’s relative wealth allowed some features of the Soviet system to survive in the economic field; for example, by lessening the need for reform and favoring the maintenance of state subsidies to inefficient enterprises.63

The resources generated by raw materials, by new private activities, and by Russians’ desire to improve their conditions (this, too, was a legacy of Soviet times, insofar as Soviet citizens had resorted to all means to avoid desperate penury) gave Moscow and other large cities a sense of feverish activity that struck so many visitors. This activity was real and was also fed by the concentration into clusters of the depleted demographic resources of the country. The crisis Russia inherited from the Soviet collapse thus took on a paradoxically bipolar form, with rapidly impoverishing and deserted areas in the north (e.g., Siberia) or in the countryside interspersed with bursts of urban vitality and relative well-being. The young people who drove these bursts had profited from the weakening of Soviet population control mechanisms to flee lives that the Soviet experience had made miserable before the Soviet crisis and collapse.

For example, in 1988, out of 4,000 Soviet district hospitals, 1,000 had no sewage, 2,500 no hot running water, and 700 no running water of any kind. As others have noted, “the alleged misery” of post-1991 Russia was therefore also “the delayed revelation of the true costs,” and thus of the legacy, of the previous regime.  

Another legacy of misery was that represented by the collapse in the value of pensions that followed the disintegration of the Soviet state, this being a shared experience of state downfalls (e.g., after 1943, Italian pensions were wiped out by inflation). The new Russia thus inherited a greatly impoverished older population that posed enormous social problems (“alleviated” by dramatic demographic developments such as the deterioration of male life expectancy; i.e., death) and whose presence greatly contributed to the grim image and reality of the 1990s. The crest of the suicide wave throughout the Soviet era also contributed to this image and to this reality. In 1913, the Tsarist Russian Empire’s suicide rate was 3 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 1989, the rate for the RSFSR was 42.6 per 100,000 inhabitants among men and 7.9 among women (the corresponding Soviet figures were 34.1 and 9.2 respectively, with the southern republics, such as Azerbaijan, at 4.2 and 2; for the sake of comparison, Italy in 1991 was at 7 suicides per 100,000 people). Thus, well before the breakup of the USSR, Soviet modernity had already caused a drastic increase in suicides. From that elevated level, and as a result of the collapse, which inevitably made almost everything worse for many Russians, Russia easily became the world leader in suicides. The number of suicides hit the 66 per 100,000 mark, three times more than the world average, and Russian men committed suicide six times more often than Russian women.

More generally, demographic trends were one of the most dismal legacies the Soviet experience bequeathed to Russia as well as to the other Slavic and Baltic republics. Of course, declining fertility, aging populations, and trends toward a reduction in the absolute size of populations in the absence of immigration are phenomena common to all industrialized countries. Yet Russia and the other post-Soviet republics (except the Muslim ones) inherited a particularly debilitating version of the phenomenon. Their fertility rates declined in concert with declining rates in Spain and Italy, but, unlike what happened in those southern European countries, life expectancy rates in the USSR moved


in a peculiar way. After noticeable improvements in line with those of other developed countries (Russian male life expectancy grew from 29.4 years in 1896–1897 to 40.2 in 1926–1927 to 63 in 1958–1959), this trend by the mid-1960s began to reverse. Especially for males, and largely because of alcohol, the situation started to worsen, reaching seriously worrying proportions by the late 1970s, helping to fuel the Andropov-Gorbachev reformist effort.

Then, thanks to Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign from May 1985 through late 1987, things rapidly improved only to worsen precipitously after popular resentment forced the Soviet leader to abandon the campaign. After 1988 the curve quickly moved back down to the position it would have reached had the dry policies not inverted the trend for a few years.

As with suicides, the disintegration of the USSR aggravated an already compromised demographic situation. Although signs of improvement were occasionally seen in 1995–2005, change for the better did not come until after 2005—that is, after oil prices rose, the condition of the state’s coffers improved, and the government was able to launch meaningful social policies, an evolution that helps explain Putin’s popularity. Even the sharp contraction of the Russian economy during the 2009 financial crisis did not reverse the trend.

Figure 1: Russia: Life Expectancy at Birth (Years)
Source: Institut Demografi, Vyshaya Shkola Ekonomiki (Moscow), Demoskop Weekly (demoscope.ru), multiple issues.
Figure 2: Russia: Natural Population Growth
Source: Institut Demografii, Vysshaya Shkola Ekonomiki (Moscow), Demoskop Weekly (demoscope.ru), weekly and annual issues.

For fifteen years Russia was ravaged by a particular legacy of Soviet life and Soviet malaise—namely, alcoholism—a legacy that still plagues the country, albeit in a reduced form.66 Had it not been for the “return” of Russian speakers from other republics, the Russian population’s losses would have numbered millions. Even with that migration, Russia still withstood a terrible demographic experience, with a negative balance between birth and death rates that lasted for approximately twenty years.

Again, choices were crucial, perhaps even more so given the bleak context, but that context only made it more difficult for open, intelligent choices to be made.

Concluding Remarks

Post-Soviet Russia’s first decade was dominated by negative trends that led to even more negative moods. These trends originated in the previous regime and in the failure to reform it, but naturally many Russians imputed the upheaval and disruption solely to the government in power. Although the Yeltsin government certainly made mistakes that exacerbated the situation, it did not bear the main responsibility for the hardships. The Soviet legacy was much more onerous than one might have thought, and the dream of rapidly shedding it by declaring an impossible sudden switch to the “right” system (the “market,” democracy) was just that—a dream. The Soviet past exacted—and still exacts—its price.

Given that legacy, the price was bound to be high. But the precise magnitude of the price depended on three main variables: the personal and intellectual qualities of the “new” Russian elites (quotation marks are needed because these elites were unquestionably Soviet), the relative stability of the international situation, and the level of energy prices. Wise choices, international peace, and favorable markets could and did reduce the burden. Gaidar’s price liberalization saved the country from a much feared food crisis, and the dissolution of the USSR was peacefully (albeit incompletely) negotiated. The two main, immediate dangers arising from the Soviet legacy and collapse were thus avoided, and Russia could embark upon a new road in a mostly peaceful internal setting, greatly aided by the favorable relations it established with the West (this, too, being a result of the Soviet collapse). Then, in 1999, oil prices began to rise, helping to fuel a sustained period of economic growth and giving Putin margins of choice much wider than those enjoyed by his predecessor.

Yet, the weight of the past was bound to make itself felt, and bad choices only added to the burden. Unfortunately, such choices were made. Although the situation was difficult, Soviet-created moods and mindsets were strong even within Yeltsin’s stratified and varied inner circle, and at times no alternatives appeared to be available. Yet the decision to wage war in Chechnya was not inevitable. Even if avoidance of the violent showdown with the Soviet-elected parliament is difficult to imagine, the nature of it and the presidential constitution that came out of it (which in many ways, even physical, perpetuated the Soviet system of government) were not divinely laid down. But the Soviet legacy made some choices more likely than others. In late 1990 Georgii Shakhnazarov advised Gorbachev that the best approach would be the establishment of a strong presidential administration that could benefit from the experience and efficiency of the centralized organization of the
Communist Party. The Yeltsin era and, even more, Putin’s “managed democracy” seemed to realize this version, serving as a creative re-adaptation of Lenin’s brilliant intuition that the party-state could be a tool to govern modern societies (an intuition also at the heart of the Chinese way of government under Mao Zedong and his successors), with the presidential administration substituting for the party. Yet the extreme forms this “solution” took under Yeltsin, when even the presidential automobile service was the same one used earlier by Communist Party leaders, could have been avoided. Some of the choices made by Russian would-be national-liberals, the composite group that rapidly coalesced around Yeltsin after 1988 and included former Soviet high officials, Russian nationalists, and the heirs to Soviet humanism, thus opened wounds in which some of the worst features of the Soviet past could fester and reproduce themselves, if in new garb.

Other ominous but perhaps unavoidable decisions included making the 1945 victory the legitimizing source of the new Russian state and reaching a pact with the “oligarchs” to win the 1996 elections. A new, authoritarian, potentially aggressive statist system thus started to emerge, with features (such as the powers attributed to the presidential administration or the room gained by the military from shelling the parliament) that were not predetermined in 1991 but on which the imprint of a pre-perestroika Soviet past was clearly discernible.

The relative composition of the economic mix generated at the crossroads of the emergence of the Soviet informal sectors with privatization and the remains of the Soviet state economic system was not preordained and depended on choices taken over the years. In this field, too, statist elements carrying the imprint of the Soviet past seem to have prevailed, albeit in a radically different situation and makeup. This happened because the verdict passed on the new Russia of the 1990s was a harsh one—a verdict that was unfair. Despite the many defects and unpalatable feature of the Yeltsin era, the changes of period brought most urban Russians, especially those of younger age, a significant improvement in living conditions as well as in their political freedom.

Three decades after 1991, Russia is undeniably a new historical creature, yet one heavily conditioned by its Soviet past. This past contributed to what Victor Sheinis has called the second defeat of Russia’s modernizing effort, that of 1985–1993 (the first being that of 1905–1913), a defeat that adds a new dimension to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s statement about a Russia that “lost” the

67. Georgy Shakhnazarov, quoted in de Stefano, “Moscow’s Crisis Management from the Soviet Union to Russia.”

20th century. This looks even truer if we take a long-run view of the impact of 1917 and the following 74 years on Russia’s relationships with the rest of Europe. A truly imperial “Russia,” which at the beginning of the 20th century had forcefully gained a key position in European life and culture, found itself at the end of that century a relatively isolated and increasingly authoritarian federation, and is even more so today.

Fortunately, however, as Soviet history itself attests, with its successive generations of leaders who came to repudiate Stalinism and to pursue drastic reforms of the system they presided over, the past—in spite of its power—is not a prison. Given sufficient time, even the most burdensome historical legacies transform themselves and eventually dissipate, making room for new directions to be taken, in Russia as elsewhere.

Acknowledgments

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