



## Three in One

Andrew Barnes

To cite this article: Andrew Barnes (2014) Three in One, Problems of Post-Communism, 61:5, 3-13

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216610501>



Published online: 10 Feb 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 366



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---

# Three in One

## *Unpacking the “Collapse” of the Soviet Union*

---

Andrew Barnes

The fall of the USSR can best be understood as a combination of regime change, state decline, and territorial disintegration. Doing so allows scholars to use insights from comparative politics to adjudicate among potential explanations.

MORE than twenty years after the end of the USSR, scholars are still a long way from agreeing on an explanation for how that happened. This article shows that one of the most important reasons for that lack of progress is the tendency to see the “collapse of the Soviet Union” as a single phenomenon—and a rare and overdetermined one, at that. This article, by contrast, disaggregates the event into three separate though related processes: regime change, state decline, and territorial disintegration. This approach allows scholars to reject some popular arguments and recognize the partial nature of others, which can then be combined into a more satisfying explanation for the fall.

One group of arguments sees the breakdown of the Soviet Union as an inevitable collapse, at least once the former head of state, Mikhail Gorbachev, had launched his reforms. This school of thought holds that any significant change in a major part of the system was bound to cause the breakdown of the rest of it. The first section of this article rejects those sorts of explanations.

Most of the enormous literature on the fall of the Soviet Union, however, does not fall into that category.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it includes many disparate—but convincing—explanations based on detailed evidence and clear reason.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this plethora of studies does not provide a single, obvious narrative, which raises more questions: To what extent are these varied but not obviously incorrect explanations for the end of the USSR compatible? When they contradict each other, which is correct? When they are reconcilable, how should they be combined? Can we do any better than simply saying, “all these things mattered”?

ANDREW BARNES is associate professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at Kent State University.

---

This article argues that we can best make sense of the fall of the USSR and the many works that try to explain it if we “disaggregate the dependent variable”—that is, if we understand the fall of the USSR as more than one event. In particular, it is useful to see it as a combination of regime change, state capacity transformation, and territorial disintegration. Scholars have studied all three of these phenomena in other settings (although rarely in this combination), so insights from comparative politics can help us judge the merits of existing explanations for them in the Soviet context.<sup>3</sup> Most of the article, therefore, pursues that route, providing a foundation for a better understanding of the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences and beginning to consider the implications of the Soviet case for other examples of state breakdown and vice versa.

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

Long before Gorbachev ascended to the position of general secretary, he believed that Soviet economic performance could and should be enhanced, that the Party and society needed to be reinvigorated, that better relations with the West were both possible and desirable, and that violence was not a preferred tool of governance.<sup>4</sup> Several scholars have argued the only reforms that could meet those criteria would bring down the rest of the system “like a house of cards” (Young 1992, 63–64). Two versions of this argument posit different triggers for the collapse: one points to economic deterioration and the other to the Party’s abandonment of control over ideology and communication (i.e., *glasnost*). Although there is some merit in these explanations, their failure to explain (or, often, to identify) the decay of each part of the system weakens the arguments.

One widely promulgated explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union holds that poor economic performance, which grew especially bad in 1990 and 1991, undermined the stability of the political system, eventually allowing the Soviet people to throw off their increasingly inept oppressors.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, no one should underestimate the macroeconomic imbalances in the late Soviet economy or their effects on daily life in the USSR. The reforms of *perestroika* weakened state controls over the emission of money in the Soviet system in four important ways:<sup>6</sup>

—cooperatives allowed enterprises to raise wages, which increased the circulation of cash;

—“pocket banks” funneled money from the Central Bank to their affiliated enterprises, effectively offering negative real interest rates;

—the state itself continued to lend money without restraint. The Law on State Enterprise explicitly stated that a firm that ran short of money and could not obtain loans elsewhere would receive either cash or loan guarantees from its supervising agency. Meanwhile, the direct production subsidy to agriculture stood at about 11 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by the end of the 1980s, and the subsidies to the agro-industrial complex as a whole in 1989 and 1990 were higher than the total budget deficit in those years (Brooks 1990, 35; Liefert 1993, 31). Those lending practices led both to exploding budget deficits and to the fourth major cause of overactive monetary emission; and

—debt forgiveness. In both 1989 and 1990, for example, the state wrote off approximately 70 billion rubles of bad loans in agriculture alone, essentially printing money (Brooks 1990, 34; Wegren 1992, 12).

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

Scholars need to be cautious, however, when drawing conclusions from the late Soviet Union’s miserable macroeconomic condition. Leaping from an observation about poor economic performance to an argument that the government had to collapse is questionable at best. Countless regimes—including the Bolshevik government after the 1917 revolutions, the Soviet Union during World War II, and Russia in the 1990s—have survived crushing economic downturns, including hyperinflation.<sup>7</sup> To blame economic problems for the collapse of the Soviet system is to conflate the causes of economic decline with those of political fragmentation.

The Soviet regime was explicit about its sources of legitimacy. It claimed the right to rule because its leaders knew the path to a better future for the bulk of its society (members of the bourgeoisie and their supporters would naturally disagree, but their complaints were not worth listening to). It seems reasonable to expect, therefore, that if enough people discovered that the Party was actually failing on its own terms and that commitment to the official ideology was hollow, even among many members of the elite, the system might be severely shaken.<sup>8</sup>

A number of studies analyze how this could happen. Martin Malia (Z, 1990) contends that *glasnost* allowed citizens to see the Party’s claims for the lies they were, which eventually led to systemic collapse. Rasma Kark-

---

lins (1994) argues that the Party's monopoly over ideology and communication was the chief pillar of the system, and when it was eliminated by glasnost, the "logic . . . of system coherence" was undermined. Alexei Yurchak (2003) writes of a tipping point when enough citizens (especially youth) realized their compatriots were just going through the motions, a mass awakening that eroded support for the system from bottom to top.<sup>9</sup>

In most cases, of course, this argument comes out of a totalitarian view of the Soviet system. That approach argued that the system was built on the pillars of an official ideology, a mass party (usually led by one person), terror as a system of rule, a monopoly of communication, a planned economy, and a monopoly over the use of force.<sup>10</sup> While it certainly seems important that the leadership eventually abandoned its *raison d'être*, it is important to recognize that other "pillars" of the system had been reformed earlier without causing collapse. Most notably, while the system remained repressive, the regime did not rely on terror as a system of rule after the death of Stalin. Likewise, the Party was rarely subordinated to a single ruler after Stalin, and certainly not after Khrushchev. I have already cast doubt on the argument that economic reform caused a collapse.<sup>11</sup>

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

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

## Disaggregating the Dependent Variable

One reason for continued uncertainty about the causes of the end of the Soviet system is that "the end" is too

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

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

In this article, I separate regime type, state capacity, and territorial integrity (with state capacity separated into the economic arena and other constituent parts). The regime type of the Soviet Union is best described as a communist-party dictatorship. This avoids complicating the description with certain methods of control (e.g., terror) or economic system (e.g., command economy). This approach also fits with how we tend to describe regimes in other countries. It allows us to recognize that the regimes in China and Vietnam retain their type, despite the fact that their economies have been transformed radically in the last three decades. It also avoids the contortions that were needed to explain how the system was still totalitarian even after terror was shelved or when media controls were relaxed.<sup>12</sup>

State capacity has been an object of study in comparative politics for decades, and increasingly so in the post-communist era. Even though the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Soviet state were closely linked, it may be useful to separate them in order to ask whether the former could have been undermined while the latter remained intact. Furthermore, it is important to note that state capacity in one area, such as monitoring the economy, may be stronger or weaker than in other areas, such as the ability to punish crimes or defend borders.

---

Finally, another aspect of the system that is sometimes referred to as “the state” is the Union itself, the nominal federation of fifteen union republics that made up the USSR. To separate this issue from questions of economic monitoring and social governance, I refer to it as “territorial integrity” in this article. There is no obvious reason why a breakdown in, for example, governance capacity should lead the USSR to break up only along union-republic boundaries, so this is another aspect of the Soviet system that should be examined separately.

## Regime Change: The End of the CPSU Political Monopoly

Believing that the moribund Party and the conservatives whose political base lay there were the main obstacle to change, Gorbachev continually sought to revitalize the organization by increasing society’s influence over it and by decreasing its governing responsibilities. In 1988, he weakened the party apparatus by reforming the Central Committee Secretariat, shrinking the number of committees and reducing their power.<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, he began elections to lower-level party offices, allowed elections to state policy-making organs (legislatures), and facilitated the Party’s abandonment of its constitutionally guaranteed “leading role” in society. In addition, glasnost ensured that the Party would come under fire for its many failings and even for problems in society over which it had little control, despite Gorbachev’s efforts to keep some areas off-limits to public criticism.

In light of these developments, the literature on Soviet regime change is largely agreed: Gorbachev’s political reforms caused it.<sup>14</sup> In fact, this is almost true by definition. Gorbachev may have expected the population to offer near-universal support for a revitalized CPSU (which would have left the Party with a political monopoly), but it is hard to imagine that happening in an open political system. Once democratization was introduced, the CPSU was not going to be a monopoly party, barring a reversal of the reforms. In fact, by the last year or so, Gorbachev appeared to be hoping that it would reform into multiple parties, including a significant one that pursued essentially social democracy (White 1994, 646; Cohen 2009). Such a transformation may or may not have been possible, but it would have represented regime change in any case.<sup>15</sup>

If the loss of the CPSU’s political monopoly was the result of Gorbachev’s reforms, the specific path that process took from 1988 to 1991 was driven by elite con-

flicts, following a pattern seen in the breakdowns of other authoritarian regimes.<sup>16</sup> First, a coalition seeking to reform the system reaches power. The reformers undermine the power base of the conservatives who have long dominated the system.<sup>17</sup> Over time, however, a loose collection of “radicals,” united only in their sense that the reformers’ policies have not “gone far enough,” begins to make more and more demands. Initially, the reformers (now called “centrists”) are able to balance the other two groups against each other, but as they lose control over the radicals, the conservatives may choose to make one last stand. The result is either a successful crackdown or the defeat of the conservatives, often leading to a change of regime type that goes well beyond the plans of the initial reformers.

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

## Changes in Governance Capacity

Regime type is analytically separate from state capacity. Expecting a loss of CPSU monopoly to be linked to a loss of state governing capacity makes some sense, since the two organizations intentionally overlapped in important ways, but we should be wary of simply conflating the two processes. One of the tendencies in the Soviet Union, for example, was for state institutions to gain independence from their party minders over time, even as the one-party dictatorship remained intact (see, e.g., Whitfield 1993). Conversely, while the Party weakened under Gorbachev, many institutions of the state, especially those responsible for exerting coercive power, remained largely intact. This section, therefore, examines

---

the decline of state power in the USSR, including the fact that the decline was not uniform across all aspects of governance.

It is certainly true that, during the final years of its existence, the Soviet state lost a great deal of control over its economy. Decrying the overbureaucratization of the system, as had Lenin and Khrushchev before him, Gorbachev argued that enterprise managers and individual citizens should be given greater freedom in their economic activities. Over the next several years, the state's planning authority was reduced; enterprises were given increased rights of possession, use, and distribution of their assets; and individuals and legal entities were allowed to establish private businesses (Barnes 2006). In that context, strategies for peeling assets away from the state proliferated, including embezzlement, arbitrage, transfer pricing, unregulated and unmonitored loans, and individual deals for pseudo-privatization of enterprises, networks, and eventually entire ministries (Kotz and Weir 1997; Solnick 1998; Johnson 2000; Barnes 2006).

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

Second, contrary to persistent myths, although the reforms did not spark an economic turnaround and instead facilitated the breakdown of state authority, this was not because of some logical impossibility or the half-hearted nature of the reforms. They did not represent an impossible hybrid between state and private economic activity. There are many examples of state-private hybrids around the world, from Mexico and Brazil to France and Germany, Egypt and Turkey, and, perhaps most important, China and Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the reforms were not timid half-measures, nor were they blocked by conservative attitudes or actors. Gorbachev is often criticized for failing to abandon his commitment to socialism and therefore not pursuing economic reforms sufficiently radical to overcome his country's economic malaise. In reality, while Gorbachev and his supporters

couched their advocacy of reforms in the *language* of Soviet socialism, the property laws and decrees of that period represented a radical break with traditional Soviet positions on ownership. Furthermore, although his preference for raising prices administratively, rather than freeing them, contributed to macroeconomic instability and popular backlash against the regime, the Russian experience with liberalizing prices in 1992 was not much more successful.<sup>19</sup>

Instead, the economic reforms continued to undermine the party and state administrative hierarchies because of Gorbachev's response to their disappointing results and because of how the reforms played out in practice. When he was frustrated with the limited improvement of economic performance in 1985–1987, Gorbachev's inclination was to push for greater devolution of party and state authority, arguing that conservatives were blocking reforms. Several accounts follow Gorbachev's explanation for the economy's anemic response. They argue that party and state loyalists tried to strangle the new private sector, not allowing it to work its magic. In practice, managers, ministers, and others used the new freedoms for what William Baumol has called "destructive entrepreneurship"—activities that benefit only those who engage in them, rather than the economy as a whole. The new freedoms were very real, and the presumed representatives of the old system turned them to their advantage, which meant that success for an economic actor lay not in adhering to increasingly unclear planning directives but in bribery, protection, theft, or some combination thereof. The result was an accelerating loss of both wealth and power for the state.<sup>20</sup>

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

---

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the decline of state control over the economy did not represent a collapse of state capacity in all areas. Cases like Somalia and Afghanistan remind us of what real state collapse looks like. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the traditional hierarchies of state control—the police, the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the military—did not break down until the very end (Meyer 1991–92; Lepingwell 1992; Taylor 2003; Knight 2003, Bunce 1999b; Kotkin 2001, 2008). In fact, even if those hierarchies had dissolved in the late Soviet era, there was no obvious reason to expect the territorial breakdown that occurred in the USSR at the end of 1991. More likely, based on experience elsewhere in the world, would have been a civil war and perhaps a handful of new countries that combined several former union republics. The key factors in the breakup of the Soviet Union, therefore, were those with federal implications, the subject of the next section.

## The End of the Union

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

Why, then, did the Union break up? Very broadly speaking, the literature falls into two groups, with the first emphasizing national identity and the second emphasizing institutions. There are several detailed studies that examine Soviet nationalities policy and how it actually encouraged the development of national consciousness among many groups.<sup>21</sup> Bolshevik policy came to view nationalities as objectively existing entities that needed to be dealt with. Socialist ideology might have seen them as undesirable and disappearing, but for the moment they existed, and, in any case, the best way to convert the masses was to communicate with them on their own terms. Generally, then, the policy became to recognize the existence of nationalities, grant “homelands” where practical, offer books and instruction in the national language, foster education regarding folk traditions, use quotas for promotion, and so on. Although the application of the policy varied widely in practice—unsurprising given that the recognition and cultivation of the various groups was carried out with the long-term goal of moving beyond those identities—it reinforced (or created) national ideas.

Focusing on national identity, however—whether one believes it is primordial or constructed—leaves some important questions unanswered. For example, why did national republics *within* union republics not secede? Many of the nationalities policies just mentioned were applied to those internal republics, including fostering local languages, cultural traditions, and media outlets, and several of them pressed for independence but failed to achieve it. Similarly, why did *all* union republics separate? Some of the identities, particularly in Central Asia, were less well developed than others, but all fifteen emerged as new states. Finally, what explains the *order* of the breakup (from west to east, rather than east to west)? The few studies that saw national identity as an important issue during the Soviet period usually expected pressure to come from the less developed regions, rather than the Baltics.<sup>22</sup> None expected that the final dissolution would be led by Russia (for more, see Roeder 1991; Emizet and Hesli 1995).

Several scholars, therefore, examine reforms that, intentionally or unintentionally, transferred authority from the center to the union republics. Certainly the elections of union-republic legislatures and presidents fit in this category, especially in the absence of an election for the Soviet presidency. The elections may have fueled national identification in some cases, but it seems more important that they empowered and legitimized union-republic political leaders in comparison with their union-level counterparts. This is what Rogers Brubaker refers to when he writes, “The key actors in the drama of disintegration . . . were the institutionally empowered elites of the national republics” (1994, 61; see also Bunce 1999b; Hale 2008).

In the economic realm, the reforms that mattered for the disintegration of the Union were those that devolved economic authority along union-republic lines. Decentralization of the planning bureaucracy, for example, had far-reaching consequences for the territorial integrity of the USSR. In March 1986, a decree transferred partial authority for managing the agrarian sector to regional administrations, and a March 1989 decision pushed the system much farther in that direction (Cook 1990; Litvin 1987; Chotiner 1992; Van Atta 1993, cited in Barnes 2006). Thus, far from another insignificant administrative reshuffling, this reorganization essentially eliminated the union government’s role in most of the agro-industrial complex, which in turn allowed regional leaders and farm managers to avoid making their required deliveries to the all-union food fund. The process was much more explicit and extensive in the

---

agricultural sector than in industry, but it took place in both sectors.

Fiscal control was also turned over to the union-republican governments in the final years of the Soviet Union (Remington 1989; Bahry 1992; Berkowitz and Mitchneck 1992; Solnick 1996). Self-financing (*khozraschet*), which included allowing union republics to tax and spend on their own, was touted as a solution to problems of overburdensome planning and widening budget deficits. In practice, it allowed the union republics to withhold revenue from the center.

Likewise, control over property, including the governing ministries themselves, was both given to and taken by the union-republic governments. In Russia, for example, the leadership promised lower taxes and less regulation to those “concerns” and “associations” that acknowledged Russian authority over Soviet authority (for more on this tactic, see Deliagin 1991; Sluzhakov 1991). The government still included nearly eighty ministries and state committees at the time of the August 1991 coup attempt. By the end of August, however, the Russian government claimed jurisdiction over the operations of all the union-level ministries on Russian territory; and what followed was a torrent of metamorphoses of Soviet ministries to quasi-state organizations under Russian jurisdiction (Burawoy and Krotov 1992; Fortescue 1993; Whitefield 1993; Hough 1997; Barnes 2006).

Even these institutional arguments, however, have trouble explaining why the Union broke up along union-republic lines and not others. There were elections to lower-level governments; tax authority was devolved to lower levels; and property demands were voiced at lower levels. None of those units was able to achieve independence.<sup>23</sup>

One argument that has gained currency but should be examined more closely holds that the Soviet state was federated, while the CPSU was not. Therefore, when the Party lost its political monopoly, the USSR was on a path toward dissolution along federal lines (Remington 1989; Kotkin 2001, 2008). In practice, however, the state was no more federated than the Party in the Soviet era—it was federated by the reforms and reactions discussed above. Likewise, the Party was undergoing no less of a federating process than the state. Indeed, the first overt, organized political splits in the country appeared in the Party rather than the state, and the most substantial were between the CPSU and its union-republic branches, which held their elections before the elections to state legislatures. Those branches, in turn, often facilitated nationalist movements on their territories, and where they

did not, those movements tended to be anemic (Roeder 1991).

In the end, the Soviet Union splintered as it did because some of the union-republic leaders decided to dissolve it, others acquiesced, and the Soviet leadership decided not to fight for it.<sup>24</sup> Although those final decisions were made by individuals, however, the institutional arrangement of the Union made the decisions possible. In particular, since elections took place at the union-republic level, the most important competition came to be between those units and the center. While leaders of the union republics might have preferred to sustain the Union and dominate it, their second-best option was secession.<sup>25</sup> Returning to the matter of state capacity, it is important to recognize that the separation of the USSR into its fifteen constituent parts was possible only because the state coercive apparatus had *not* broken down and could be transferred in a fairly orderly manner to the governments of those territories.

Building on Bunce, some authors explain the breakup of the Union by adding the links between identity and institutions, especially how identity was part of the institution-building process. Hale (2008), in particular, emphasizes that ethnicity is a useful marker and therefore a historically reliable rallying point for political movements; he shows how leaders in the union republics, especially Ukraine, both used it and reacted to it as they tried to improve their position vis-à-vis the center. Elsewhere (Hale 2005), he shows how a “core ethnic region”—present in the USSR (and Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) but not Russia—creates incentives for a breakup.<sup>26</sup> It is these sorts of explanations for the breakup that are the most convincing, as they can account for the overt appeals to ethnic identity, the rapidity and peacefulness of the breakup, and the fact that every union republic—and no other entity—became an independent state.

## Conclusion

Seeing the end of the Soviet Union as three distinct, though related, processes clarifies our thinking in several important ways. First, it sharpens our understanding of the events of 1985–1991. We can reject, for example, a number of explanations, including economic decline, exposure of the system’s faults, and inextricable links among all major parts of the system. These explanations persist in the popular imagination, as well as in some academic studies, and we should be careful not to allow the kernels of truth in each of them to expand and crowd out better explanations. In addition, the analysis

here has shown that Soviet regime change was similar in many ways to regime change elsewhere in the world, that state decline in the economic realm was the result of a give-and-take between radical (for the time) reforms and a wide range of actors taking advantage of them, that state decline in other areas was nonetheless limited, and that the territorial disintegration of the USSR was the unintended result of an intentional redistribution of formal political power.

Second, this approach clarifies how the three processes are and are not related. That is, territorial, regime, and state reform are inextricably linked, but not in the causal fashion that is often assumed or argued. The CPSU's political monopoly (i.e., the Soviet regime type) could have been reformed or eliminated without necessarily wrecking Soviet state administrative capacity, and state capacity could have been (and indeed was) weakened in some areas without destroying it in others. In the end, however, the USSR was replaced by fifteen independent countries, and *reforms of the Soviet regime and state were rendered moot*. The underlying issues, however, did not disappear. All the problems from the late Soviet period were still on the table for the successor countries. Regarding regime type, some have become one-party or one-person dictatorships, while others have become multiparty democracies, and several continue to struggle. Russian leaders are trying to build a dominant-party regime of some kind, but its contours are still being formed. All the successor governments faced fundamental questions of economic development and state capacity; Putin's popularity rests in part on the public perception that he has handled these issues well.<sup>27</sup> Even issues of *raison d'être* or national myth—which one might expect to be less important in regimes that are no longer explicitly ideological—remained important and are still being resolved.<sup>28</sup> Thus, although it is tempting to believe that party and state reform led to territorial breakdown, the key event was actually the end of the Soviet Union itself, which made questions of reforming the regime and state irrelevant.

Third, disaggregating the processes that led to the demise of the USSR helps us think about when the dissolution became inevitable. Gorbachev's acquiescence was probably assured after the coup attempt. Likewise, any federation that persisted after the putsch would not have been led by the old union government, as the Yeltsin administration progressively took over all USSR ministerial functions on Russian territory and on November 28, 1991, issued a decree establishing the outlines of the

post-Soviet Russian executive apparatus. The decision to dissolve the Union, however, and not to create a new federation, does not seem to have been the first choice of the signatories of the Minsk Agreement until the very end (Bunce 1999b; Hale 2008).

Finally, disaggregating the dependent variable allows for more fruitful comparisons between the Soviet case and others around the world. Regime type, state capacity, and territorial integrity are separate phenomena in the comparative politics literature, and this was true for the Soviet Union as well. Recognizing that fact makes it possible to use the Soviet case to help answer more general questions than those addressed in this article. For example, how were the wrenching reforms of ISI economies similar to and different from the late Soviet reforms? How do the regime changes in the color revolutions and elsewhere compare to the Soviet process of regime change, and why? Why have Mexican or Indonesian democratization not led to territorial disintegration? As for broader comparative questions, the Soviet experience as disentangled here should allow us to address the following: What makes governance possible, and what reforms are possible without eviscerating it? Why do states break down, and what makes "impossible" outcomes look "inevitable" so quickly? How does decolonization happen, and with what effect? Again, the potential list is long, and the approach taken in this article provides a useful basis for comparison.

## Notes

1. Note that this is a review of Western English-language scholarship on the subject.

2. It also includes other useful surveys, such as Kalyvas 1999 and Cohen 2009, chap. 5. This review does not replace those. Instead, it offers a different way to sort through and evaluate the arguments in the literature.

3. This article thus seeks to build on Cohen (2004, 2009). In critiquing the argument that the Soviet system was unreformable, Cohen argues that the system should be disaggregated into the Party, the economy, and the Union. When exploring why the system came to an end in 1991, he focuses on the Union itself and emphasizes the roles of Gorbachev and Russian president Boris Yeltsin. The analysis here does not contradict Cohen's but rather extends his insight to include the governing capacity of the state and to place the breakdown more explicitly in the context of comparative politics.

4. For a small sampling of scholarship on the content and sources of Gorbachev's outlook, see English 2000; Kotkin 2001, 2008; and Kramer 2003.

5. Early versions of this argument include Lipton and Sachs 1990 and Aslund 1995, which used the argument as evidence that successor governments should pursue rapid marketization. More recent versions appear in Gaidar 2007 and Gaddy and Ickes 2005, both of which emphasize the role of declining oil revenues in undermining the economy. Kotkin (2001, 2008) also includes declining oil revenue among several factors in the fall. The emergence of the oil explanation, which became more popular as the field of Russian studies began to see Russia as a rentier state, is somewhat surprising, given how small a role oil played in most studies of the operation or breakdown of the Soviet

Union. There are exceptions—Dienes and Shabad 1979; Gustafson 1989; Bunce 1983; Hewett 1984—but oil is not emphasized in the totalitarian model, the modernization model, the bureaucratic politics model, or any of the other major approaches in Sovietology, which, in turn, underpinned the leading scholarly explanations for the fall of the Soviet Union.

6. The next two paragraphs draw on Barnes 2006.

7. For more on the economic crisis and the breakdown, see, e.g., Kontorovich 1993; Ellman and Kontorovich 1992; and Hewett 1995.

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

9. For similar arguments in East European contexts, see Kuran 1991; DiPalma 1991; and Schöpflin 1990.

10. This list is recognizable from Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956. Some analyses give a more central role to ideology and the control over public expression and communication (Arendt 1951; Kornai 1992).

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

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

13. For much more on this and related reforms, see Brown 2009, esp. chaps. 24–25.

14. For studies focused on this process, see Bova 1991; Connor 2005; Young 1992; Gill 1994; and White 1994. For those with broader scope that nonetheless emphasize the decline of the CPSU's political monopoly, see Kramer 1988–89; Bunce 1999b; and Kotkin 2001, 2008.

15. A similar story could, of course, be told about the regimes in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev initiated their downfall in the same way he did the Soviet regime: he removed the legal and coercive support that was necessary to sustain a one-party dictatorship. The end of the East European regimes provides an important context for the events in the USSR (there is no imaginable way in which the latter would have happened without the former), but this article does not delve into that process because the path of the Soviet decline was neither caused nor determined by the loss of the external empire. On the fall of the East European regimes and their relationship to the end of the USSR, see Bunce 1999b; Kramer 2003, 2004, 2005; Kuran 1991; Di Palma 1991; Koslowski and Kratochvil 1994.

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

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

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

19. Furthermore, in 1990, the plan adopted by the more "radical" Yeltsin government of the Russian Federation did not free prices, either.

20. This point is elaborated in Solnick 1998; Johnson 2000; Barnes 2006. For slightly different interpretations, see Kagarlitsky 1992 and Kotz and Weir 1997.

21. See, e.g., Pipes 1954; Suny 1993; Slezkine 1994; d'Encausse 1995; and

Hirsch 2005. McAuley (1992) does not focus on the formation of these identities, but she argues that the language of nationalism emerged as the most obvious way to discuss grievances after the language of Marxism was discredited.

22. Not all, however. Lapidus (1984) is an exception, although she generally thought the Union was stable.

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

24. As Lapidus (1984) anticipated early on, the strategies of ethnonational elites varied across union republics.

25. See Bunce 1999a. As she describes, the phenomenon of complete fragmentation, a second-best outcome for all the leaders in question, played out in all three federated states in the Soviet bloc: the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. The different trajectories in the three cases seem to stem from the specific preferences of those leaders: in the USSR, to resign and leave the country to fifteen successor states; in Czechoslovakia, to remain in power but let Slovakia go; and in Yugoslavia (where there was no strong leader above the republics), where the disintegration was long and bloody and eventually extended beyond the first-level republics, to fight to keep the other units in a federation with Serbia.

26. Beissinger (2002) sees national identity as more of a force in its own right, but he, too, highlights changes in the country's institutional structure that made disintegration more likely.

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

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

## References

- Adomeit, Hannes. 1995. "Russia as a 'Great Power' in World Affairs: Images and Reality." *International Affairs* 71, no. 1: 35–68.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *Origins of Totalitarianism*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Aslund, Anders. 1995. *How Russia Became a Market Economy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Baev, Pavel K. 1997. "Russia's Departure from Empire: Self-Assertiveness and a New Retreat." In *Geopolitics in Post-Wall Europe: Security, Territory, and Identity*, ed. Tunander, Baev, and Einagel, 174–96.
- Bahry, Donna. 1992. *The Evolution of Soviet Fiscal Federalism*. Boulder: Westview.
- Barnes, Andrew. 2006. *Owning Russia: The Struggle over Factories, Farms, and Power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Beissinger, Mark R. 2002. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berkowitz, Daniel, and Beth Mitchneck. 1992. "Fiscal Decentralization in the Soviet Economy." *Comparative Economic Systems* 34, no. 2: 1–18.
- Bova, Russell. 1991. "Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transition: A Comparative Perspective." *World Politics* 44, no. 1: 113–38.
- Brooks, Karen M. 1990. "Soviet Agriculture's Halting Reform." *Problems of Communism* 39, no. 2: 29–41.
- Brown, Archie. 2009. *The Rise and Fall of Communism*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Brown, Archie, ed. 2001. *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers. 1994. "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account." *Theory and Society* 23, no. 1: 47–78.
- Bunce, Valerie. 1983. "The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism." *British Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 2: 129–58.
- . 1993. "Domestic Reform and International Change: The Gorbachev Reforms in Historical Perspective." *International Organization* 47, no. 1: 107–38.
- . 1999a. "Peaceful Versus Violent State Dismemberment: A Comparison of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia." *Politics and Society* 27, no. 2: 217–37.

- . 1999b. *Subversive Institutions: The Design and Destruction of Socialism and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burawoy, Michael, and Pavel Krotov. 1992. "The Soviet Transition from Socialism to Capitalism: Worker Control and Economic Bargaining in the Wood Industry." *American Sociological Review* 57, no. 1: 16–38.
- Cohen, Stephen F. 2004. "Was the Soviet System Reformable?" *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3: 459–88.
- . 2009. *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Connor, W. 2005. "Builder and Destroyer: Thoughts on Gorbachev's Soviet Revolutions, 1985–1991." *Demokratizatsiya* 13, no. 2: 173–91.
- Crossman, R.H.S., ed. 1950. *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism*. London: Hamilton.
- Dallin, Alexander, and Gail W. Lapidus, eds. 1995. *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse*. Boulder: Westview.
- D'Encausse, Hélène Carrère. 1995. *The Nationality Question in the Soviet Union and Russia*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Dienes, Leslie, and Theodore Shabad. 1979. *The Soviet Energy System: Resource Use and Policies*. Washington, DC: V.H. Winston.
- Di Palma, Giuseppe. 1991. "Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society: Politico-Cultural Change in Eastern Europe." *World Politics* 44, no. 1: 49–80.
- Ellman, Michael, and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds. 1992. *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System*. London: Routledge.
- Emizet, Kisangani N., and Vicki L. Hesli. 1995. "The Disposition to Secede: An Analysis of the Soviet Case." *Comparative Political Studies* 27, no. 4: 493–536.
- English, Robert. 2000. *Gorbachev and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fortescue, Stephen. 1993. "Organization in Russian Industry: Beyond Decentralization." *RFE/RL Research Report* 50, no. 2 (December 17): 35–39.
- Friedrich, Carl J., and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski. 1956. *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gaddy, Clifford G., and Barry Ickes. 2005. "Resource Rents and the Russian Economy." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, no. 8 (2005): 559–83.
- Gaidar, Yegor. 2007. *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Gill, Graeme J. 1994. *The Collapse of a Single-Party System: The Disintegration of the CPSU*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gustafson, Thane. 1989. *Crisis amid Plenty: The Politics of Soviet Energy Under Brezhnev and Gorbachev*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hale, Henry E. 2005. "The Makeup and Breakup of Ethnofederal States: Why Russia Survives Where the USSR Fell." *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 1: 55–70.
- . 2008. *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanson, Stephen E. 1997. *Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- . 2010. *Post-Imperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hewett, Ed A. 1984. *Energy, Economics, and Foreign Policy in the Soviet Union*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- . 1995. "Is the Soviet System Reformable?" In *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse*, ed. Dallin and Lapidus, 311–22.
- Hirsch, Francine. 2005. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hopf, Ted. 2002. *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow 1955 and 1999*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hough, Jerry F. 1997. *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Huang Yasheng. 1994. "Information, Bureaucracy, and Economic Reforms in China and the Soviet Union." *World Politics* 47, no. 1: 102–34.
- Janos, Andrew C. 1991. "Social Science, Communism, and the Dynamics of Political Change." *World Politics* 44, no. 1: 81–112.
- Johnson, Juliet. 1994. "Should Russia Adopt the Chinese Model of Economic Reform?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 27, no. 1: 59–75.
- . 2000. *A Fistful of Rubles: The Rise and Fall of the Russian Banking System*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jowitt, Kenneth. 1992. *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kagarlitsky, Boris. 1992. *The Disintegration of the Monolith*, trans. Renfrey Clarke. London: Verso, 1992.
- Kalyvas, Stahis N. 1999. "The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 2 (1999): 323–43.
- Karklins, Rasma. 1994. "Explaining Regime Change in the Soviet Union." *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 1: 29–45.
- Knight, Amy. 2003. "The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1: 67–93.
- Kontorovich, Vladimir. 1993. "The Economic Fallacy." *The National Interest*, no. 31 (Spring): 35–45.
- Kornai, Janos. 1992. *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Koslowski, Ray, and Friedrich V. Kratochwil. 1994. "Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System." *International Organization* 48, no. 2: 215–47.
- Kotkin, Stephen. 1995. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2001, rev. 2008. *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kotz, David M., with Fred Weir. 1997. *Revolution from Above: The Demise of the Soviet System*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Kramer, Mark. 1989–90. "Beyond the Brezhnev Doctrine: A New Era in Soviet–East European Relations?" *International Security* 14, no. 3: 25–67.
- . 2003. "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions Within the Soviet Union (Part 1)." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4: 178–256.
- . 2004. "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 4: 3–64.
- . 2005. "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3)." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 1: 3–96.
- Kuran, Timur. 1991. "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics* 44, no. 1: 7–48.
- Lapidus, Gail Warshofsky. 1984. "Ethnonationalism and Political Stability: The Soviet Case." *World Politics* 36, no. 4: 555–80.
- Lepingwell, John W.R. 1992. "Soviet Civil–Military Relations and the August Coup." *World Politics* 44, no. 4: 539–72.
- Liefert, William M. 1993. "The Food Problem in the Republics of the Former USSR." In *The "Farmer Threat": The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Don Van Atta. Boulder: Westview.
- Light, Margot. 2001. "Post-Soviet Russian Foreign Policy: The First Decade." In *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, ed. Brown, 419–28.
- Lipton, David and Jeffrey Sachs. 1990. "Creating a Market Economy in Eastern Europe: The Case of Poland." *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, no. 1: 75–133.
- McAuley, Mary. 1992. *Soviet Politics, 1917–1991*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, Stephen M. 1991–92. "How the Threat (and the Coup) Collapsed: The Politicization of the Soviet Military." *International Security* 16, no. 3: 5–38.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo, and Philippe C. Schmitter. 1986. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Pipes, Richard. 1954. *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Remington, Thomas F. 1989. "Renegotiating Soviet Federalism: Glasnost and Regional Autonomy." *Publius* 19, no. 3: 145–65.
- Roeder, Philip G. 1991. "Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization." *World Politics* 43, No. 2: 196–232.
- Schöpllin, George. 1990. "The End of Communism in Eastern Europe." *International Affairs* 66, no. 1: 3–16.
- Slezkine, Yuri. 1994. "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2: 414–52.
- Solnick, Steven L. 1996. "The Breakdown of Hierarchies in the Soviet Union and

- 
- China: A Neoinstitutional Perspective.” *World Politics* 48, no. 2: 209–38.
- . 1998. *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sun Yan. 1999. “Reform, State, and Corruption: Is Corruption Less Destructive in China Than in Russia?” *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 1: 1–20.
- Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1993. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Taylor, Brian. 2003. “The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1: 17–66.
- Tunander, Ola, Pavel Baev, and Victoria Ingrid Einagel, eds. 1997. *Geopolitics in Post-Wall Europe: Security, Territory, and Identity*. Oslo: PRIO.
- Wegren, Stephen K. 1992. “Dilemmas of Agrarian Reform in the Soviet Union.” *Soviet Studies* 44, no. 1: 3–36.
- White, Stephen. 1994. “Communists and Their Party in the Late Soviet Period.” *Slavonic and East European Review* 72, no. 4: 644–63.
- Whitefield, Stephen. 1993. *Industrial Power and the Soviet State*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Young, Christopher. 1992. “The Strategy of Political Liberalization: A Comparative View of Gorbachev’s Reforms.” *World Politics* 45, no. 1: 47–65.
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2003. “Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 3 (2003): 480–510.
- Z (Martin Malia). 1990. “To the Stalin Mausoleum.” *Daedalus* 119, no. 1: 295–344.

<p>To order reprints, call 1-800-352-2210; outside the United States, call 717-632-3535.</p>
--