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Criticism as Crisis, or Why the Soviet Union Still Collapsed

As the Soviet Union collapsed, the world order of the Cold War vanished along with it. Who in 1985 would have dared to dream that Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika would destroy the Soviet Empire and bring freedom to Europe? In his Geschichte der Sowjetunion, Manfred Hildermeier calls perestroika an event of «historic proportions», a «velvet revolution». But was it even a revolution? Historians who profess a belief in progress have given clear answers to this question. Soviet socialism promised to eradicate all human suffering once and for all, to fulfill all material wishes and usher in the apogee of world history. This promise, however, had been refuted daily by the deficiencies of the Soviet economy of scarcity. Whereas the regime openly spoke of abundance, it was in fact administrating scarcity. Although this contradiction had been obvious, all Soviet governments clung to undeliverable promises. No one took the claims of the regime seriously anymore. Due to these circumstances the Soviet regime lost its legitimacy.¹ Everybody knew, of course, that the ideological avowals that had to be recited in public were now only uttered as jokes in the private sphere. The laughter of millions thus delegitimised the rule of the few.

Historians who discuss an ending require a beginning to show how far removed the end was from the beginning. A narrative of decline establishes a link between the end and the beginning, and overlooks possible irritations caused by the normality of everyday life under a dictatorship. In this history, the Soviet Union was a country in which promises were made but not kept and in which the educated and the capable were prevented from climbing the social ladder. It was also a country in which the communist gerontocracy stymied social change, in which the autonomy of the national republics was proclaimed but not realised, in which intellectuals were prohibited from speaking their minds and in which the dark Stalinist past

had not been properly processed. Above all, it was a country that squandered its resources on costly weapons systems. It thus created a hopeless technological and civilisational gap between itself and Western nations. Against this backdrop, it was no longer possible to keep a seal on the universe of lies. The regime would have had to isolate the Soviet Union internationally in order to defend the lie. Even the old men in the Politburo were unwilling and unable to pay such a price for the sake of retaining their power. The end was thus foreseeable: whoever promises paradise on earth while merely administering scarcity will eventually lose legitimacy, and the consensus will crumble. The Soviet Union was thus in the midst of a deep-seated crisis during its final days.

In Western Europe, perestroika and the disintegration of the Soviet empire are therefore perceived as the completion of an inevitable decline and a way out of a crisis. This perception, however, rests on a model of progress in which crises are resolved by means of emancipatory reforms or revolutions. According to this model, perestroika signifies the end of a crisis and the beginning of a new era. Reinhart Koselleck spoke of an «iterative periodising concept», which historians use whenever they seek to describe change in terms of progress – for this, they need the crisis.\(^2\)

But did contemporaries perceive what some historians considered to be an accumulation of unbearable grievances as a crisis and a dramatic transformation of their sense of space and time, an insecurity that would have forced them to alter the rhythm of their lives? Why did the Soviet Union collapse in 1991 and not in 1946, when it was at its economic and military nadir, and despotism destroyed all hope for internal détente? Why did subjects endure an economy of scarcity over the course of seven decades, only to overthrow it at a point in time when it started to enable modest livelihoods? And how is one to understand the paradox that many Russians despise Gorbachev the reformer while celebrating Vladimir Putin’s «steered democracy»?

One can certainly live under a dictatorship without perceiving this life to be unbearable. The Russian publicist Kirill Gradov wrote that it was only after he had left the Soviet Union for the West in 1975 that he realised he had been living in an economy of scarcity. He then noticed that the people living in the Soviet Union aged more quickly and that one saw haggard and indifferent faces on the streets. Life had been grey and without consolation, nobody had been friendly or accommodating. But Gradov only saw his own life in light of the crisis after he had left the Soviet Union. As an émigré, he had become someone else and was no longer sure that the Soviet Union was a place worth living in. Lacking alternatives, those who

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remained there had no choice but to adapt to the life-world they had at their disposal. «The workers in Russia», he reminisced, «were much more content than the intellectuals. They possessed no such extravagant ideals. They worked so that they could afford a new place to live, a motorcycle or a pair of rubber boots for fishing. Only a very small number ever gave much thought to the Soviet system as such. Most of them simply waited for things to change and firmly believed that someday everything would be better. [...] All these people were simply optimistic and tended to see even the smallest of improvements as a sure sign of a more pleasant life. Many of the older workers still remembered the war and the devastating conditions prevalent during this period, and they compared the economic situation at the time with the present; according to their view, the current situation in the Soviet Union was really not so bad». Why should they have complained about circumstances that they themselves, when remembering their past lives, felt to be an improvement?

If something is not perceived as a crisis in the hearts and minds of people, then it is not a crisis. What is new is seen in relation to the old, and therefore a change in circumstances cannot be separated from the interpretation of those who experience this change. It is not the times that change, but rather the circumstances and how they are perceived. Unless we describe the context, we cannot understand whether what we consider to be a crisis was actually a crisis. Even events that appear similar at first can, in different contexts, be different events. The narrative of the inevitable decline of the Soviet Union is an attempt to endow events with a familiar meaning and fulfill the expectations of readers who cannot make do without models of progress: namely that dictatorships will invariably have to make way for democracies because people seek liberation and the opportunity to voice their opinions, that nation states are the rule and empires the exception, that fraudulent ideologies provoke resistance and that the consensus on which rule – even in a dictatorship – is based on is eroded when expectations of freedom and prosperity remain unfulfilled.

All this is utter nonsense. Perestroika was not the manifestation of a crisis – rather, it prompted the crisis. What is currently taking place in authoritarian ruled Russia and in most of the Soviet Union’s successor states only becomes intelligible when understood as an answer to a crisis created by the end of the Soviet Union.

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5 M. Pohlig, «Wandel und seine Repräsentatio-
1. Power

Even after Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union remained under the rule of a dictatorship that despised freedom of speech and the written word, censored deviant opinions and violently suppressed resistance. In June 1962 the regime used violence against workers striking in the south Russian city of Novocherkassk. The regime’s leaders were equally ruthless wherever and whenever they saw a threat to the order. To be sure, people no longer had to face being shot for espousing deviant opinions; the regime punished unruliness by putting deviants and dissidents on trial or locking them up in mental institutions. Occasionally the dictatorship would revert to old habits, such as when it placed harmless literati (who were of no threat to anyone) under surveillance and subjected them to harassment, or, as in the case of the poet Pasternak, persecuted their family members.

The constant fear and terror, however, had disappeared from everyday life. Like all dictatorships that seek to retain their power, the regime punished disobedience and rewarded compliance. But it refrained from creating fear and dread through the exercise of incalculable terror. The Stalinist dictatorship had been a reign of terror and fear. It took decades until the fear and mistrust escaped the bodies and minds of the people. But by the end of the 1950s, everyone seemed to sense that the period of death and arbitrary persecution would not return. Nikita Khrushchev broke ground when he called Stalin’s crimes by their name and admitted that the leadership had made mistakes that should never be repeated. Words were followed by actions, indicating that the leadership was serious this time. Tens of thousands of Chechens who had been deported to Kazakhstan in 1944 returned home after the general secretary’s secret speech in February 1956. Between April 1953 and January 1956 alone, 1.5 million prisoners were released from internment camps; the public prosecutor’s office set up rehabilitation commissions to process complaints from victims of terror, restoring the rights of over 715,000 persecuted individuals by 1960. Within years of his death, novels and stories began appearing that dealt critically with Stalin’s legacy: Ilya Ehrenburg’s The Thaw, Vladimir Dudintsev’s Not by Bread Alone, and later Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. All this indicated that the dictatorship was loosening the reins.

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10. See e.g. D. Kozlov, «Naming the Social Evil: The Readers of Novyi mir and Vladimir Dudintsev’s Not By Bread Alone, 1956–59 and Beyond», →
Not everyone considered the return of deportees and the release of convicts to be an act of kindness; in Georgia and Azerbaijan, students took to the streets because they could not tolerate the fact that Khrushchev had called out the crimes committed by the dictator from the Caucasus. But when, under Stalin’s rule, had the Soviet Union ever witnessed an open debate or a public demonstration that did not end with the shooting of its organisers? People from party cells all over the country discussed the secret speech sent to them by Khrushchev, without the party leadership prescribing the manner in which to proceed with regard to its contents. The regime attempted to restore the inner peace by breaking with the practise of stigmatising individuals along social and ethnic lines and then killing them as representatives of imagined collectives. Even the nationalistic Ukrainian partisans, who had fought against the Soviets in the Second World War, were allowed to return home in the 1950s and become part of the bigger whole. The regime ended the war against its own people when its leadership realised that it was possible to create compliance without coercion. De-Stalinisation under Khrushchev changed the conditions under which people encountered each other, creating trust and producing a reliability of expectations. Georgi Arbatov, who belonged to the masterminds of perestroika, later recalled the spiritual liberation that resulted from these changes. He had gone to see a film in a Moscow cinema in 1964. A newsreel preceding the screening showed Nikita Khrushchev inaugurating the commissioning of a canal in Central Asia. The portly party leader and head of government could be seen trotting down a slope to hold a speech with much gesticulation at the bottom of the canal, and struggling to climb back up the muddy slope after he had finished. The audience in the cinema broke into laughter. Who would have dared to laugh over Stalin? The Russian writer Andrei Bitov, who had seen the same newsreel when he was a young man, found the right words to describe this scene: Khrushchev had given laughter back to the Soviet citizens. The fact that people could laugh openly at the party leader marked the death of Stalinism.

This new reliability of expectations not only applied to the regime’s subjects; fear of detainment, denunciation and death also disappeared from within the leadership. Stalin had played the members of the Politburo off against each other, granting his favour to one while withdrawing it from another, letting one live while


P. Jones, «From the Secret Speech to the Burial of Stalin. Real and Ideal Responses to De-Stalinization», in Idem, *The Dilemmas*, 41–63. For the biography of a returnee, see F. Gorenstein’s novel *Mesto* [«The Square»] (Lausanne, 1991); there is no English translation, but there is a German one [*Der Platz* (Berlin, 1995)].


sending another to his death, expressing his suspicions and delighting in the justifications of the victims. In his world, questions of power were settled by the death of the losing party. Khrushchev had been humiliated by Stalin, and lived in fear of the despot’s cruelty. Arbatov recalls: «He too had experienced the destructive loss of human dignity resulting out of constant fear». All this now disappeared from the everyday political life within the leadership’s inner circle, where election defeats or disagreements no longer had to be paid with one’s life or the loss of freedom. Followers who had previously signed death warrants, practised torture and denounced one another now kept the peace after they decided to put an end to their deadly game. When Lazar Kaganovich, one of Stalin’s most loyal and unscrupulous followers, lost the struggle for power in 1957, he still expected the worst. He begged Khrushchev to spare his life, which he would have undoubtedly lost if he had opposed Stalin. «Comrade Khrushchev, I have known you for many years. I beg of you not to allow that I be dealt with in the manner of which accounts had been settled with people under Stalin». The «iron Lazar» merely received a mild punishment. He was removed from the Politburo in 1957 and shunted off to become a director of an asbestos factory in the Urals. Khrushchev himself was a beneficiary of this de-Stalinisation of power. When he was deposed by members of the Politburo in 1964, he was neither publicly degraded nor punished. He went into retirement, just like all the other officials who had fallen out of favour or been deposed since the late 1950s. On 13 October 1964 the deposed general secretary explained to the Steering Committee of the Politburo that he was glad that the party councils had matured as institutions and could «control any given person». On the evening after his fall from power, Khrushchev discussed the significance of the event with Anastas Mikoian. «Could anyone have even dreamed», said Khrushchev, «that we would tell Stalin that he does not suit us and suggest that he should retire? There would be nothing left of us (‘Ot nas by mokrogo mesta ne ostalos’). Now everything is different. The fear has disappeared and we converse among equals. And that is my merit». The de-Stalinisation of power also transformed the behaviour of Central Committee members and provincial proconsuls who had been terrorised and bullied by Stalin into doing the dictator’s bidding. Stalin’s successors employed a system of

14 Ibid., 69.
15 S. Parfenov, «‘Zhelezny Lazar’: Konec kar’ery», Rodina 2 (1990), 74. See also F. Chuev, Tak gosvori Kaganovich. Ispowed’ stalinskogo apostola (Moscow, 1992); F. Chuev, Sio soro besed s Molotovym (Moscow, 1991); and V. A. Tiurichenov and A. M. Leontiuk, Vokrug Stalina. Istoriko-biograficheskii spravochnik (St. Petersburg, 2000), 237–239.
bonuses and privileges that not only offered the local rulers protection from persecution and dismissal, but also enabled them to bring their friends and relatives to the levers of power. Changes in leading personnel became rare in the 1960s and 1970s; in the national republics, regions and districts, party secretaries and their entourages remained in office for fifteen years or more, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where party leaders were perceived by their subjects to rule «eternally». «Stability of the cadres» was the official term given to this form of personalised rule.

The leadership in the Kremlin could rely on the loyalty of these apparatchiks, although it came at a price. The leadership was only told what the local rulers were willing to disclose, which precluded them from controlling these regional associations. Then again, such control lost its meaning wherever loyalty ceased to depend on convictions and avowals; the members of the nomenklatura were part of an elaborate system of privileges in which entitlements were tied to one’s status within the hierarchy. These privileges alone ensured loyalty and predictability.

The stability of the cadres was also advantageous for the subjects in ways not possible through elections – this is because someone who rules for a long time has already exhausted all sources of revenue and has no need to probe for new resources. Under such circumstances, it is wise to cling to a form of rule where representatives have eaten their share. Whoever wants to move up the ladder or attain privileges is well advised to connect to those who sit at the levers of power and make decisions regarding the distribution of resources. Under the conditions of personalised, corporative power structures, a change in leadership can spell the end of reliable expectations. When Nikita Khrushchev began dividing the party into an agricultural and an industrial sector in the late 1950s, and suggested the periodic replacement of half of all leading positions, he was met with heavy resistance from functionaries who feared the loss of their privileges and the livelihoods of their clients. Elections do not harmonise with the expectations of patrons and clients bound up in a personalised order of estates, nor do they bring those who vote the kind of advantages attainable through the pulling of strings. This is why Khrushchev’s downfall was also a result of his «democratic» reforms.18 It thus comes down to looking closely before hastily criticising democratic deficits and proclaiming participatory crises.

2. Integration through Prescribed Silence

Why do the victims of Stalin’s violent rule remain silent? Why didn’t anyone lend them his or her voice, despite the terrible things that happened? One could keep things simple and say: because the victims had to remain silent and it was only perestroika that opened the valve and finally allowed them to release the built-up pressure. If that was the case, one would have to describe the late Soviet Union as a cauldron of tormented souls. There is indeed no doubt that public memory insisted that all individual memories had to submit to the standards of the Stalinist nightmare. Every memory of the dictatorship’s past was a memory from within a dictatorship that produced silence: because the victims could not speak about their experiences, because they did not find the strength to recapitulate the terrible events without inflicting damage upon themselves, because they had to forget in order to avoid madness, because they were silenced and because no one knew whether or not the violence of the regime would once more return to everyday life or whether the new peace could be trusted. And so the victims were left with no other option but to adjust to the dictatorship and the society under its rule.¹⁹

No one can bear being completely excluded when there is no end in sight to the dictatorship in which they live. Above all, however, many people could identify with the officially ordained memory, which represented the «Great Patriotic War» as the second founding myth of the Soviet Union. It justified all the suffering of the pre-war years – seemingly pointless deaths were endowed with a higher purpose, and the collective suffering of millions allowed victims and perpetrators to see themselves as members of the same community. For once in their lives, even peasants were allowed to be victors; why should they have declined the dictatorship’s offer, instead insisting on remaining the victims? The victims were given recognition and the rulers could operate within a system of identification that no longer had to extort consent with sheer force. One could lament over one’s own fate and admire Stalin at the same time. This was the reality of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, and it was possible to live in this reality because the excesses of mass destruction had ceased.²⁰

All the enactments of community staged in the post-Stalinist period were seen as opportunities to make peace and fall in line with the grand narrative of the survivors. The recently published memoirs of a former Red Army soldier, who was held as a prisoner of war by the Germans and then interned in the Stalinist camps, vividly convey the fatalism of the survivors. What for us appears to be a series of misfortunes – because we measure it by the yardstick of a democracy and life as it

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never existed in Russia – appears, from the vantage point of a person who coincidently survived the Stalinist excesses of terror, to be a list of good fortune. «I have always been extremely fortunate, particularly in the difficult periods of my life. I am lucky that my father was not arrested; that the teachers at my school were good; that I did not fight in the Finnish War; that I was never hit by a bullet; that the hardest year of my captivity I spent in Estonia; that I did not die working in the mines in Germany; that I was not shot for desertion when I was arrested by the Soviet authorities; that I was not tortured when I was interrogated; that I did not die on the convoy to the labour camp, though I weighed only 48 kilograms and was 1.8 metres tall; that I was in a Soviet labour camp when the horrors of the Gulag were already in decline. I am not bitter from my experience and have learned to accept life as it really is.»21

3. Social Security and Consumption

To accept life as it really is – this becomes easier when the material circumstances appear to be improving. In any case, this is how most Soviet citizens felt during the 1960s and 1970s. To be sure, the Soviet Union’s command economy was inefficient, failing to keep production aligned with demand and squandering valuable resources. But the Soviet citizens were not familiar with any other kind of economic model; they learned to come to terms with it, and by the late 1950s they experienced a real improvement in their living conditions. For the first time, Kolkhoz farmers received modest wages and were included in the pension scheme – they were no longer slaves devoid of rights who could be freely harassed and ransacked by the authorities. Millions of Soviet citizens spent their vacations in union hostels, sanatoriums and hotels along the Black Sea coast and in the Caucasus. Wages for workers and clerks began to increase, and the range of items available for purchase improved as the regime no longer exclusively fostered heavy industry. By the 1970s, foreign exchange revenue even allowed the government to import goods and technologies from abroad.22

No reform, however, changed the Soviet Union as much as the massive housing programme that was launched by Khrushchev, and continued into the late 1970s. Several million people left their overcrowded communal apartments and derelict houses and moved into modern apartments fitted with toilets and running water. Only those familiar with the conditions from which these people came are able to fathom how happy they must have felt. But this is not all that the possession of one’s own apartment brings about. Whoever enters and closes the door behind

21 Quoted in Figes, Whisperers, 607–608.
him in his apartment, and is in it either alone or with his family, is no longer exposed to the gaze of strangers, snitches or informers, as was the case in the overcrowded communal apartments on a daily basis. The apartment became a place of retreat and made possible all things that were previously, unthinkable beyond one’s own four walls. It allowed for a degree of privacy that most Soviet citizens had never experienced before.23 Western standards of consumption are therefore unsuitable for measuring the way in which Soviet citizens perceived the circumstances in which they lived. While rising oil prices threatened freedom on the road for free citizens in the West, the Soviet Union was able to improve the prosperity of its citizens and secure their expectations. Never before had there been such broad availability of goods and privileges as in the 1970s, and never before had wages been so high. One could also say that the Soviet Union benefited from the crisis of the West. The export of oil from Siberia and Azerbaijan led to a significant increase in foreign exchange revenue. Moreover, the Soviet Union signed arms deals with those Arab countries that had benefited greatly from the rising oil prices, for which they paid in hard currency. This had far-reaching consequences for the government’s economic policy: it could cling to an inefficient centralised planned economy, it could import technologies from the West while waiving domestic investments, it could finance an ambitious armaments programme and it could subsidise privileges, wages and prices.24 When had the population of the Soviet Union ever been as satisfied as during this period? When had the Red Army ever been so strong militarily, and when had the Soviet Union ever been more influential on the world stage? Why should the regime have changed its strategy if prosperity was on the rise and loyalty could be attained through consumption instead of coercion?

The subsidisation of well-being from the state strengthened both elites and subjects in their belief that performance and privileges stood in no relation to each other. Nowhere was there a notion that the entitlement to goods or privileges was a reward for services rendered. The Soviet system of patronage was an expression of this reality in which personal ties were more important for the good life than performance. In a society of scarcity, resources can only be accessed via the system of giving and taking. Managers and factory directors left it up to the workers to control themselves for the sake of meeting their targets, condoning the idleness, drunkenness and inefficiency that structured everyday life in the Soviet factories. In return, the workers remained loyal towards their superiors, because access to

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24 Kotkin, Armageddon Averted, 15–19.
coveted goods and services – apartments, pharmaceuticals, medical treatments and products that could be purchased in the stores of the elite – was only possible through them. There were thus no social antagonisms between workers and managers; their relationships were based on mutual trust. Since production figures were falsified and inefficiency had to remain hidden, they resisted all outside meddling in a concerted effort, concealing the arrangements on which the relationship between patrons and clients was based. How could an appreciation for the responsibility of the individual under the rule of law have developed under such circumstances? Whatever was considered to be right in one’s own place could be denigrated outside of the network of relationships to which one belonged. In short: universal theories of virtue were unintelligible and useless in circumstances where the cultivation of personal relationships was a prerequisite for one’s income and advancement, because survival outside of this moral economy was impossible. The Soviet Union was supposed to become an egalitarian society steeped in abundance, but instead it became a hierarchical society of scarcity in which one could more or less live well during the 1970s.

Only talented people who refused to subjugate themselves to the social discipline of the hierarchical collectives suffered under this reality. This is also why dissent in the Soviet Union remained unsuccessful; it was unable to overcome its isolation and distance from life, and it criticised a reality that most people did not perceive to be an imposition. There was no rebellious student movement, no protest and no unrest in the Soviet Union. Nor were there any satiated and bored middle-class youths as in Western Europe, where people continued to admire societal models that had since become the stuff of jokes in the Soviet Union. Then why did the regime persecute dissidents anyway? Why did it place them under surveillance and lock them away in prisons and mental institutions if there was little interest for their cause? There are probably no clear answers to these questions. Indeed, dictatorships with aspirations of omnipotence constantly fear the consequences that arise when critics open up alternative sources of information and forge connections with foreign news media. The Kremlin elite knew what dissidents read and what they spoke about, not only because they placed them under surveillance, but also because they were connected to them in a variety of ways. Both here and there people read the same texts, listened to the same music and knew the same people. Those in power therefore had good reasons to be distrustful. Deviant opinions were pursued even though it was known that these opinions


26 On these political jokes, see A. Yurchak, Everything was Forever, Until it Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation (Princeton/N.J., 2005).
were shared by only a few people. One retains power in a dictatorship only by hiding any weaknesses that others can exploit to the detriment of the powerful. The powerful know that the levees can break once the first person is allowed to criticise what should not be criticised. The dictatorship cannot afford to lose face if it wants to enforce its power. The same applies today. Journalists are killed and protesters are arrested, even though everybody knows that very few people share their views and aims.27

4. Nation and Empire

A number of studies on the late Soviet Union claim that the multiethnic empire had crumbled because of the explosive power of the national question. According to this argument, the institutionalisation of national sentiment by the communists had undermined the empire’s long term stability. The Bolsheviks transformed the Soviet Union into a federation of nations, adapting education and administration to their respective national languages; not only social, but also national criteria determined the categorisation and positioning of people inside the hierarchy. Indeed, a person’s privileges also depended on his or her national affiliation, and only those belonging to a titular nation could claim citizenship of a sovereign nation. Each of the Union’s republics had its own president, government, supreme court and a National Academy of Sciences. Historians who proclaim a crisis argue that national identification was able to triumph over communism because communist ideology had lost its cohesive power.28 But did anyone actually ever believe in the promises of an ideology that forced people to treat the future, the present and the past as artificial products that contradicted all events and experiences? Since everything that was happening and that had happened tapered off to an unalterable future, the past and the present could no longer be altered either. The incantation of a utopia, which made predictions that would never come true, left no option but to deny everything that was actually going on. But does one finally believe what has to be professed in public? The answer is no. Being an enthusiast for more than two weeks becomes unbearable if one has to cope with everyday life. All that can still be described as ideology after


the first stimulus is mere ritual. It helps one to deal with reality and to demonstrate obedience, but it is not necessary to believe in its contents in order for this to happen.\textsuperscript{29}

In the late Soviet Union, it was thus possible to simultaneously pay lip service to socialism and to be a member of a nation. No one saw this as a contradiction. It is beyond dispute that Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians had other experiences with the empire than their Georgian, Ukrainian or Kazakh counterparts. They had become Soviet citizens against their will and had experienced the eradication of their nations as a traumatic catastrophe. Yet most Soviet citizens did not perceive the Soviet Union as a prison of nations; the nationalisation of the empire increased the scope of decision making for the republics. The indigenous functionaries were part of an imperial network of elites and a nomenklatura, and they profited from the communist party’s system of privileges, both within and beyond their Soviet Republics. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, the 1960s and 1970s are remembered as a phase of prosperity and national opportunities even today. The reforms of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras are perceived as quantum leaps in the technical and material development of the Asiatic republics. In the 1980s the party leaders from the Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia, Heidar Aliev and Eduard Shevardnadze, were even admitted into the Politburo. Their claims that they were national dissidents at that time should thus not be believed.\textsuperscript{30} For most republics, the advantages of remaining part of the Soviet Union outweighed the disadvantages. National minorities had seen worse periods in their lives, and for most people in most of the national republics, there was no sensible reason for their nation to secede from the empire.

5. The Soviet Empire on the World Stage

No crisis? Not even in international relations? Everyone knows that the Soviet Union ultimately had to throw in the towel in the arms race. According to an anecdote from the 1980s, Helmut Schmidt had once called the Soviet Union an «Upper Volta with nuclear weapons». Mikhael Gorbachev and the reformers surrounding him were equally aware of this truth when they were given the opportunity to transform the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. Indeed, they interpreted what they could deduce of the state of their country as a deep crisis. Foreign exchange reserves dwindled as a result of plummeting oil prices in 1983 and a downturn in orders for Soviet-made armaments. The political leadership of the Soviet Union had no choice but to limit arms expenditures, reduce the size of the army and end its expensive and unsuccessful military effort in Afghanistan if it wanted to avoid jeopardising

\textsuperscript{29} V. Zubok, Zhivago’s Children. The Last Russian Intelligentsia (Cambridge/Mass., 2009), 298.
the living standards of its own population. Ultimately, this was what everything else depended on.\textsuperscript{31}

But the realisation that the Soviet Union was no longer able to compete economically and militarily on the world stage was not the beginning of the end of the Soviet Empire. After all, the Soviet Union could have continued as a middle-sized military power; it could have used its remaining military potential to keep the East Central European states under its control, and even as a second-rate military power it could have used its massive arsenal of nuclear weapons to threaten terrible destruction. The powers of the police and the apparatus of repression inside the Soviet Union were never called into question; it could have monopolised all information and nipped any sign of opposition in the bud. In short: the Soviet Union could have gone the Chinese way; it could have continued as it was. But its political leaders decided to open up the Soviet Union and transform it both economically and politically. This triggered the crisis that would lead to the end of the red empire and whose aftershocks are still felt to this day. Why did they do something for which there was no compulsion, and why did they also perceive the economic decline of the Soviet Union as a political and social crisis?

6. Perestroika

Historical analogies can only be pushed so far. Nevertheless, it is striking how the reforms, which have gone down in history under the buzzword of «perestroika», followed a similar dynamic as the great reforms of Alexander II in the mid-nineteenth century. Alexander and Gorbachev were both men of action who understood that problems were not solved by ignoring them.\textsuperscript{32} The functionaries of the old regime, however, wanted nothing of a reality that might have unsettled them. When in 1984 Aleksandr Yakovlev, director of the Institute of World Economy, was asked by the State Planning Commission to forecast the economic development of the Soviet Union up to the year 2000, he painted a merciless picture of reality. According to Yakovlev’s report, the Soviet Union would fall back to the same level as «the poorest nations of the third world» by the end of the century. The State Planning Commission was furious: it demanded that Yakovlev alter his conclusions and deliver a positive prognosis. There was no room for a reality that ran counter to the designs of the old elites.\textsuperscript{33}

Mikhail Gorbachev was carved out of different wood. He had no qualms about openly calling out economic difficulties. Once he was endowed with the authority of a general secretary, he encouraged all those critics who had previously been

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{31} A. Brown, The Gorbachev Factor (Oxford, 1997), 306.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} See, among many other works, W. B. Lincoln, The Great Reforms. Autocracy, Bureaucracy, and the Politics of Change in Imperial Russia (DeKalb/Ill., 1990), 36–60; and Idem, In the Vanguard of Reform. Russia’s Enlightened Bureaucrats 1825–1861 (DeKalb/Ill., 1982), 139–167.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{33} A. Jakovlev, Offener Schluß. Ein Reformer zieht Bilanz (Leipzig, 1992), 22–23.}
silent to speak out. Chief among these critics were members of the Institute of World Economy and the Institute for the USA, diplomats and the younger members of the central committee apparatus (Yakovlev, Shakhnazarov, Arbatov and others) who maintained a technocratic-pragmatic style and supported Gorbachev’s efforts of reforming the economic system. They had been overseas, and in the 1960s and 1970s had worked in the apparatus of the Central Committee Secretary and future head of the KGB Yuri Andropov, who allowed these young men to speak their minds in his vicinity and openly discuss every conceivable proposal. Although none of these proposals were allowed to seep outside the walls of the Central Committee’s offices, Andropov’s entourage in the inner circle of power was able to hold theoretical debates over reforms and speak more or less freely. Like Gorbachev himself, these reformers had been socialised in the years of the thaw and Khrushchev’s reforms, so they were not subjected to the atmosphere of fear and terror under Stalin. This experience set them apart from the older members of the party leadership around Brezhnev.34

Gorbachev and his followers in the Central Committee apparatus started off in the same manner as the reformers under Alexander II. They called problems by their name and brought them out into the open. Yet they made mistakes with consequences that were ultimately beyond their control. Immediately after Gorbachev took office in May 1985, the government launched a hysterical anti-alcohol campaign to counter the damaging effects of alcohol consumption on Soviet society. Drinking halls and kiosks were closed down and vineyards in the Caucasus were destroyed. In the end, a significant source of revenue for the treasury ran dry – the state’s monopoly on alcohol had been undercut by illegal vodka sales. Millions of drinkers who stood in long queues at shops were disgruntled, and the consumption of hooch reached menacing dimensions. Conservatives and women may have been pleased; men and tax officials were not.35

In 1987 the government attempted to improve the efficiency of the Soviet economy. This encompassed greater freedoms for managers and entrepreneurs as well as the decentralisation of production sequences. It failed because the law now enabled entrepreneurs to demand higher prices for goods of lesser quality, and functionaries were able to take possession of state-owned enterprises with the help of networks and relatives. Thus, a decentralisation of the state economy without a simultaneous liberalisation of prices was doomed to failure. In the 1990s the radical proponents of the free market were successful in removing price controls, yet this was precisely what paved the way for the crisis of legitimacy among the political leadership, which had not existed in the dictatorship. The majority of the popu-

35 Kotkin, Armageddon Averted.
lation could no longer afford the things that were now ubiquitously on sale. Under these circumstances, there was no alternative to the system of patronage and the collective joint liability in the factories. Former managers became capitalists, yet they appealed to the state for subsidies or attempted to strengthen ties with the workforce through informal bartering and systems of privileges.\(^{36}\)

For Gorbachev and his advisors, the economy was an aspect of political reform. They understood the pluralisation and public expression of opinions as part and parcel of decentralisation and the increase in economic efficiency. Already at the Plenum of the Central Committee in January 1987, before the proposals for economic reform were even up for debate, Gorbachev told an astonished public that no reform would win the people’s trust without «openness» and «publicity» (glasnost’). As the leader of the party and head of state spoke of «socialist pluralism» and a «pluralism of opinions», he gave critics within the apparatus, the press and the academic world a green light to put this pluralism into practice and suspend the reality of socialism. Now newspapers and television could say things that could never have been said previously. Every catastrophic event that would previously have been concealed now became a matter of public debate: the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, the earthquake in Armenia, the interethnic disputes in the South Caucasus and the catastrophic state of the economy. It seemed as though the number of catastrophes, the extent of poverty and the government’s incompetence had surpassed all boundaries. Newspapers and magazines opened up a new world in which the Soviet Union was presented as an antiquated and outlived model. Above all else, the media provided a platform for nationalist intellectuals from the republics, from which they could disseminate their version of a brave new world and win over nationalist governments. Hence it was publicity (glasnost’) that mobilised national sentiments, because secession from the Union suddenly became attractive under the circumstances of the crisis. This crisis created interethnic conflict – even bloody pogroms in the Caucasus – which the central government no longer kept in check due to its loss of legitimacy and a lack of will to power.\(^{37}\)

Gorbachev had responded to the pressure, created by a self-precipitated crisis, by making political concessions. Already in 1985 he surprised the political leaders

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of East Central Europe by announcing that the Soviet Union would no longer become involved in the affairs of its neighbouring countries as it had in the past, and he agreed to German reunification and free elections in East Central Europe. This signalled to the national republics of the Soviet Union that what had been unthinkable only a few years earlier was now possible. And it was the Baltic republics that seized the opportunity and demanded the same independence that the Soviet Union had granted Poland and Hungary.

When Gorbachev finally dismantled the rule of the Communist Party by introducing free elections, there was no remaining institution that could have braced the empire or carried the will of the centre into the provinces. In the end, even republics that never explicitly wished to secede parted with the Union. Gorbachev was a general secretary without a power base, because the introduction of elections threatened the system of privileges and thus caused the elites – who had nothing to gain from the elections – to turn on him. From the 1990s onward, he was also a President without a power base, because the elections had created new centres of power in the republics that were no longer controlled from the centre. In the end, he was a reformer without power or influence who, out of a sincere belief that the circumstances were workable, had unleashed a dynamism that he could no longer control.

Democracy has since been discredited as an idea, the West has fallen into disrepute as a model and inspiring example, the state and the economy have been distributed among the elites of the fallen empire, and the dictatorship of the intelligence services has re-entered life in Russia and many of the former Soviet republics. When in 1998 Viktor Chernomyrdin announced to the Duma that he was resigning from his post as prime minister, he succinctly summed up what he saw as the essence of perestroika: «We meant to do better, but it came out as always (khoteli kak luchshe, a poluchilos kak vsegda)».

Translated from German into English by Ivo Komljen.

39 Jakovlev, Offener Schluß, 65.
Criticism as Crisis,  
or Why the Soviet Union Still Collapsed

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika was the response to a crisis? Historians who believe in progress provided clear answers to this question: Soviet socialism was a promise aimed at eliminating all human suffering, fulfilling all material desires and making world history. However, because of the deficits of the Soviet shortage economy, this promise of salvation was neglected every day. Those who promise paradise on earth but only administer deficits lose their legitimacy, and consensus disintegrates. In the end, the Soviet Union experienced a deep crisis. But the contemporaries did not feel that way. And if people do not experience a crisis in their hearts and minds, there is no crisis. It is not so much the times that change but rather the circumstances and how they are perceived. The perestroika was not an expression of crisis. Rather, it triggered the crisis. What is currently taking place in authoritarian Russia and in most of the successor states of the former Soviet Union is only understandable if one considers it as a response to the crisis that was actually generated by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Kritik als Krise,  
oder warum die Sowjetunion trotzdem unterging


La critique comme crise ou pourquoi l’effondrement de l’Union soviétique était inévitable

La Perestroika de Mikhaïl Gorbatchev fut-elle la réponse à une crise ? Les historiens croyant au progrès apportèrent des réponses claires à cette question: le socialisme soviétique fut une promesse visant à éliminer toutes les souffrances humaines, à satisfaire tous les désirs matériels, à accomplir l’histoire universelle. Cependant, en raison des déficits de l’économie de pénurie soviétique, cette promesse de salut fut négligée quotidiennement. Celui qui promet le paradis sur terre et qui ne fait qu’administre les déficits perd sa légitimité. Le consensus se délite. Finalement, l’Union soviétique connaîtra une crise profonde! Toutefois, les contemporains n’éprou-
vèrent pas ce sentiment et, lorsque les gens ne ressentent pas de crise dans leurs cœurs et dans leurs esprits, la crise n’existe pas. Ce ne sont pas tellement les temps qui changent mais plutôt les circonstances et leur perception. La Perestroïka ne fut pas une expression de crise. Elle la déclencha plutôt. Ce qui se produit dans l’actuelle Russie, autoritairement gouvernée, et dans la plupart des États successeurs de l’Union soviétique, n’est compréhensible qu’en le considérant comme une réponse à une crise qui a été générée par la fin même de l’Union soviétique.