Over the last few years, Jörg Baberowski has introduced a new tone into the scholarly debate over Eastern Europe. In a series of well-formulated essays he has challenged some pet assumptions underlying the majority view and advanced some surprising, not to say provocative, arguments. He is, however, inclined to push his arguments to the limit in the process, and his bluntness is not to everyone’s taste. This may contribute to their dissemination, but it also carries with it the danger of considerable one-sidedness, pushing the envelope of what is verifiable. It is possible to agree with almost all of the arguments in the essay under discussion, which boils down to a brief introductory characterisation of the Soviet administrative and social order in the decades following the Second World War, including its functional mechanisms and the typical discrepancy between aspiration and reality. These arguments reflect the consensus that had developed in post-Soviet times, when there were barely any defenders to voice their opinions.¹ Only a handful of readers may refuse to go along with the sweeping tone of some of these claims and the way they are linked with alleged peculiarities of the system. One must not necessarily agree with the claim that «entitlement to goods or privileges» stood in no relation to «services rendered», and that this guaranteed the unbroken existence of the old «system of patronage», which had been particularly prominent under Stalin. Arguably this trenchant observation substantially underestimates the importance of competition – particularly in a society where career advancement depended chiefly on membership of a monopolist party whose new leaders had reopened the ranks following the death of Stalin. We might add that the rupture in 1953 was indeed deeper than is implicitly assumed by those who continue to subscribe to terms such as «totalitarian». Whoever proceeds on the basis of ideologies or models can easily overlook differentiations known to undermine the value of such

¹ But see S. F. Cohen, «Was the Soviet System Reformable?», in: Slavic Review 63 (2004), 459–488, which initiated a debate similar to the present one (489–491).
global characterisations. Indeed systems of patronage and privilege – along with corruption – persisted, but contrary to what mere perpetuation would suggest, they did not continue their existence unchanged. And their renewed consolidation in the form of what Brezhnev called «the stability of the cadres», which degenerated into a notorious «stagnation» in the second half of his term, should not primarily be described with the same terms. It was rather part of an immobile system of comprehensive checks and balances of powerful interests – corporate interests between the Party, the economy and the army, and regional interests between the republics – instead of a hierarchy centred around a person in a totalitarian dictatorship.

Similarly, one would not trip up on the claim that «only talented people» unwilling to submit to the top-down discipline of state-run societal organisations suffered under «the reality of this situation» if the «only» had been omitted and if the author had not advanced this rather loose formulation as «the reason» for the isolation of the dissident movement, which proved to be insurmountable up until the very end. The difference to Poland is striking and has often been observed. In the Soviet Union there had been no Solidarność or similar movements. Yet the causes lie deeper and have much more to do with the complete absence of a tradition of trade unions than with the «satiated and bored middle-class youths» – Baberowski falls back on a conservative cliché here. Many would also agree with the claim that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not a result of nationalist separatism, because loyalty to the Soviet Union had indeed been compatible with national sentiment. Yet they may find some exaggeration in the gripping statement that «nobody saw this as a contradiction». Of course nationalist reservations and opposition already existed (though not openly) before 1988 – as is shown retrospectively by their veritable explosion within just one or two years, precisely because the Soviet Union was befallen by the ancient paradox that the imperial state also fosters the very national elites that subsequently turn against it. Granted, one can and should advance pointed arguments. Nevertheless, scholars should take to heart the wise words of Ingeborg Bachmann: «Well said is half a lie.» Not every proviso must necessarily lead to walking on eggshells.

Yet these objections relate to matters of secondary importance, albeit symptomatic ones, because the borderline pontifications found in some formulations are echoed in the core arguments. As I read them, they are:

1. There was no crisis. «Perestroika was not the manifestation of a crisis – rather, it prompted the crisis.»

2. The Soviet Union could have continued existing as a state and a system: «it could have continued as it was.»

3. Because it could have «gone the Chinese way». The interconnection between these last two propositions is not entirely logical. If the Soviet Union had gone the
Chinese way, it could have continued to exist as a state but not as a system. Because it is well known that Deng Hsiao Ping’s famous dictum that it does not matter what colour a cat is, so long as it catches mice, unleashed a defacto capitalism (along with all social hardships) which Gorbachev certainly did not want.² I shall nevertheless briefly discuss this possibility below.

1. Crisis

Baberowski, never dainty in his choice of words, considers all talk of crisis to be «utter nonsense», a mere figment of the imagination springing from compositional or interpretive compulsions to lend meaning to the «narrative» of socialist repression and make its end edifying – that freedom, democracy and the free market would win out in the end and that the Soviet Union was no exception to the rule, its inexorable decline proving this rule. Baberowski supplies remarkably little evidence for such a strong thesis, which may be a convincing refutation of Fukuyama’s teleological reasoning but otherwise, to put it mildly, remains a mere self construct. The evidence essentially boils down to a narrow definition of «crisis», illustrated with a few examples. A crisis is evident when it is perceived as such «in the hearts and minds of people», and that which is neither experienced nor described in this way is, accordingly, not a crisis. Aside from the short-sighted epistemic nominalism that shines through here – even crises that appear as such in retrospect are crises prior to this realisation – there is the question of types of crises under discussion and, moreover, who perceived them as such. There is no reason for exempting «crises in the upper echelons» from the concept. Even if a crisis is not perceived as such by a majority, the highest levels of the nomenklatura may see things quite differently, and the impact on the political process may be stronger, rather than weaker. Especially when the Soviet Union is seen as an oligarchic dictatorship, the primary definition of the term crisis would have to be precisely this: Above all, a crisis was that which was perceived as such by those at the top and less by those at the bottom.

Hence most of Baberowski’s examples from the 1960s and 1970s lack expressiveness in the true sense of the word. The fact that Khrushchev’s prefabricated apartment blocks seemed like a quantum leap in comparison with the communal apartments (kommunalka) and their complete lack of privacy may indeed tell us something about the comparative satisfaction of their fortunate inhabitants and the government’s increased willingness to respond to consumer demand after decades of one-sided investment in infrastructure and heavy industry; but it tells us little about the state of the system or the way political decision makers perceived crises. The same applies to the relative abundance of mass consumer goods in the

² Archie Brown rightly considers Gorbachev’s rejection of the Shatalin plan to be his greatest mistake: A. Brown, Seven Years That changed the World. Perestroika in Perspective, Oxford 2007, 328.

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first half of the 1970s, which certainly has to be viewed as the golden age of the post-war Soviet Union. After the founding of OPEC and the 1973 oil shock that drove up prices, it was possible to buy Moroccan oranges at Moscow underground stations, which would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier. But it was not long before this same Soviet Union – to the horror of some of its leaders – was forced by a bad harvest to buy grain from the class enemy in the United States (and Canada) to keep the population somewhat satisfied. Both went together: the genuine contentment with what one had as long as things were looking up or at least remained as they were, and a chronic agrarian crisis, rooted in Russia’s history, which the Soviet state had never been able to successfully tackle and which had become considerably more acute since collectivisation (with a brief respite during the first years of Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands Programme). Those in a position to see the overall picture, with access to secret information and diagrams charting changes over time, would see something completely different: a vertiginous decline.

Gorbachev had belonged to this select and initiated group since 1979 (when he joined the Politburo) and saw what most people had not yet noticed: the end of economic growth, declining productivity, the exhaustion of a wide range of growth factors (particularly the workforce), an unprecedented and ruinous rise in military spending, squandering of raw materials and a chronic agrarian plight; in short, he saw what Western economists had deduced from the limited statistical data available to them.\(^3\) It was not only this newcomer who interpreted the data as a crisis – so did everyone in the Politburo circle that had elected KBG chief Yuri Andropov as the new general secretary after Brezhnev’s death, in the hope that he was the right man to end the crisis. This same circle also realised that the crisis was now on the cusp of invading the consciousness of a (still) wider population, becoming associated with the party in the process and threatening to further undermine its authority. Baberowski’s examples are from the early 1970s and certainly apply to the period in question. But the mood had shifted by the end of the decade. Although the word «stagnation» was not used until after Brezhnev’s death, the impression was as widespread as the ubiquitous corruption. The Brezhnev clan was typical of the unholy alliance between Party leadership, economic mismanagement and socialist cronyism. What was more, Bulgarian four-fruit jams had vanished from the shops. As the costly Afghan war (which began in December 1979) dragged on, the shortages of «special» goods became more acute. How should we describe this amalgamation of contempt for the ageing leadership (the famous

joke about the crocodile with 48 teeth and four legs – and its inversion in the Politburo), head-shaking acquiescence in the ubiquitous corruption (though most people played a part in it themselves), and gradual deterioration of supply (together with excess purchasing power, since so many goods were deficitno), if not as a crisis? It is a fallacy to describe a situation as a crisis only when a «critical mass» of people revolts. The leadership certainly perceived a crisis and many people – not least the veterans of the Party, which had long become a mass organisation – felt it as well. The tide of coffins returning from Afghanistan was scarcely necessary to convince the population that something had to change.

2. Continuation as an Option

It is, however, quite correct to say that in the mid-1980s the crisis was still far from being lethal. Nobody claimed the opposite. And barely anyone would doubt that the Soviet Union might still be in existence if, at that fateful meeting in March 1985, a conservative apparatchik had been elected in Gorbachev’s place. In all probability Grishin, head of the Party in Moscow, who apparently threw his hat in the ring,4 would have shrunk from further reforms. It goes without saying that the collapse of the unitary state and of «real existing socialism» was not inevitable, just as nothing in history is inevitable. Even in the early summer of 1991, it would have been possible to save both. Despite democratic mobilisation following the 1989 elections, there is no real reason why the August 1991 putsch should not have succeeded. The cost would have been high, but not without precedent in Soviet history, and a military dictatorship could of course have stabilised the country. It was the defeat of the attempted coup and the dilettantism of its protagonists that triggered a chain reaction that ultimately sealed the country’s fate. The question thus needs to be put more precisely: in what form and at what cost could the Soviet Union have survived as a socialist system with its fundamental character unchanged? This leads to the core problem of whether the radicalisation of reforms in the fateful year of 1988 was necessary, or whether Gorbachev could have stuck to the old approach and the Soviet Union gone on existing in its old form.

For it is in fact wrong to locate the beginning of the end in 1995. The Gorbachev era should not be seen as a single unit. Neither did the new Party leader announce his intention of relinquishing the Eastern European outposts (which were, after all, the most precious spoils of war) as early as 1985, nor did he set out to turn the whole state upside down from the very beginning. Rather he began as most reformers had before him. Indeed, it was not the first time that the Soviet leadership had concluded that comprehensive reforms were necessary. We need to remember that it was with the same ambition – to amend the deficiencies

of the planned economy, particularly its obvious inability to meet the basic needs of the population – that Khrushchev introduced national economic councils in 1957 that figures such as E. Liberman and W. Brus (widely reported in the West) discussed the feasibility of a «socialist market economy» in the mid-1960s; that Kosygin launched a much-heralded economic reform in 1968; that Brezhnev announced (but did not fully implement) a number of agrarian reforms; and that Andropov tried after 1982 to curb corruption and tighten discipline throughout the economic process. None of them had any success, and none penetrated to the roots of the evil: the squandering of resources, the slack discipline in the workplace and technological backwardness. These reforms had one thing in common: they took the system as it was and made no attempt to change the two basic principles of the Stalinist planned economy – the lack of private entrepreneurship based on private property and the central allocation of resources. Gorbachev’s early measures also belonged to this type of reform. At their core, the «acceleration» campaign (uskorenie) and the battle against alcoholism («Mineral Secretary») were simply continuations of what he had already set in motion as Andropov’s right-hand man. He permitted the creation of small private enterprises in the form of artisanal co-operatives but they were so smothered by state regulation of everything and everybody that they remained tentative and isolated, promoting scams rather than better services or improvements in supply in the fashion of kolkhoz markets.

It was at this juncture that Gorbachev and his advisers dared to try something new. They attributed the failure of preceding reforms (which could be traced right back to Stalin’s battles for production) to their reluctance in pushing the envelope and accepting the ineluctable symbiosis: that economic efficiency cannot be achieved without at least a modicum of freedom to act in the social and public sphere; homo oeconomicus cannot exist without homo politicus, and the entrepreneurial spirit, the prerequisite for economic efficiency, cannot exist without extensive freedom of action in the political and public sphere. This was the conceptual birth of glasnost, of a new pluralistic public sphere and, above all, of the new Congress of People’s Deputies, which for the first time was to be chosen through free elections among alternative candidates (albeit only half of it). It was this decision – to resolutely continue on the path of reform despite the failure of old solutions and try something qualitatively new – that triggered the cascade of reactions that three years later led to the putsch and the collapse of the unitary state. Nationalists in the regions exploited the election campaigns to form separatist movements; there had doubtlessly been some sympathy for such movements before, but they had remained under cover or appeared only sporadically and were easily suppressed. The fate of the single Party, which could hardly claim uniformity with over 19 million members, was self-evident: it split up into several factions (the «informals»), but remained conservative at its core and as such ceased to be a solid
power base, so that Gorbachev sought to form a new one in the guise of his upgraded presidential post. The economy stalled because economic reforms, being the most controversial, were constantly being postponed and eventually fell by the wayside. This was the preeminent issue upon which the fate of the old system rested; it was here that Gorbachev ought to have taken a stand. But at this point he began to fear his own courage. He was, in the end, too enmeshed in the old regime to give it the coup de grâce; he wanted to reform it rather than do away with it. Without the underpinning of the Party, which he had dismantled (formally by revoking its monopoly status from the Constitution in March 1990), without a capable army – which was still suffering from the Afghanistan trauma and was, after all, the instrument of a unitary empire – and faced with powerful nationalist separatist movements joined by pragmatic forces that seemed to flee from an anarchic state, there was nobody left to defend the Union.

In short: if one were to look for a point of no return in a reform process that ultimately changed the system, the best choice would be the Nineteenth Party Conference in June 1988, which approved the convocation of the Congress of People’s Deputies; one cannot go as far back as the proclamation of glasnost (although it arose from the same spirit), and certainly not the election of Gorbachev. And if one were to search for the «final causes» of the «de-railing» of perestroika and the collapse, we must first look at this political decision rather than the secessionist fever in the republics or the dire economic crisis of 1990, both of which were merely consequences of the previous change in direction. Yet this entire second and consequential phase of the reform, with its wholly unintended outcome, can be understood only against the backdrop of the permanent crisis of the Soviet system and of numerous, invariably unsuccessful, attempts to resolve it. The crisis was primarily an economic one, and this fact alone turned it into an existential threat. We should certainly agree with Baberowski when he claims that Soviet dissent remained an isolated phenomenon among intellectuals and could never really have toppled the regime (just as KOR could not have brought about the 1989 regime change without its alliance with Solidarność). But it is important not to underestimate the influence of the dissidents against the background of the permanent crisis: they articulated what many saw, put grievances into words, and so contributed substantially to the delegitimisation of a system that had, among its essential pillars, a monopolistic claim of the truth of its ideology and the promise of a better future. The implicit «compromise of power» from earlier days basically remained valid: If there was any justification for the dictatorship of the Party, it had to lie in its ability to deliver the believable prospect of the Golden Age Khrushchev had promised. Sakharov and his fellow dissidents may have been unknown to many, perhaps even the majority of people in outlying regions of the USSR. Nevertheless, more and more people became aware of their arguments and saw them confirmed. As is well known, every revolution in history was preceded by the
«desertion of the intellectuals», and this, too, was part of a crisis that could not have threatened the existing order if it had not consisted of a congruence and synchronicity of many problems, deficiencies and weaknesses.

3. The Chinese Way

The «Chinese way» is of course one conceivable alternative to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has seldom been reflected upon, because the thought is usually bound up with a certain sorrow over the decline of «applied» socialism, whose unexpectedly rapid implosion – amounting to an admission of failure – found few mourners (or at least few who would have dared to shed a tear in public). Whether or not the Chinese way would have been a desirable development, historians are bound to ask whether it would have even been possible. A great many doubts remain. Despite the dominance of the state in the Russian historical tradition – which Putin so obviously falls back on – its Soviet variants were just as inseparable from the socialist ideal as an organising principle for society and the economy as the pre-revolutionary autocracy was from the aristocratically dominated estate-based society. It is true that the two were not so closely interconnected in the first decade of Soviet rule, when there was a relatively free agricultural market and some room for privately owned small businesses; on the other hand, the state did not loosen its grip on what Lenin called «the commanding heights», not even during the «New Economic Policy» of the 1920s. But a symbiosis that could not be dissolved without destroying the system in its entirety had solidified since Stalin. In this respect, the distinction between Soviet state and Soviet system seems rather abstract and hypothetical to me: a capitalist Soviet Union would no longer have been a unitary state, only a «community of independent states» at most, because central control could hardly have been maintained. This would have been probable, if only because after the introduction of Brezhnev’s policy of détente at the latest, the Soviet Union could no longer be sealed off from the West and the rest of the world – as it had been under Stalin. It was no longer a world unto itself, as China was and still is. From this we may conclude that the Chinese way would have been no less dangerous to the Soviet Union than perestroika – quite apart from the fact that the country lacked the necessary unified leadership. Even though one (and historians in particular) should remain sceptical towards historical arguments, a glance at the history of the regime may be helpful at this point. Chinese communism owed its victory to its leadership in the decades of national struggle against Japanese invasion; it was as much (or more) a national liberation movement as it was a social one. It was the keystone of a restored national sovereignty. The Soviet regime, on the other hand, was the first attempt to embody socialist ideology in an organisation that was at once governmental, social, cultural and economic, and to make that organisation the basis of its identity. And from this came the particular understanding and implementation of socialism in the world’s
first socialist state: the planned economy, the rule of the Party, and the «mono-
organisational Society» (T. H. Rigby). This ideology may have dwindled progres-
sively into lip service, but it was not a garment to be lightly cast aside; it was an
indivisible part of the whole. The «Chinese way» would not have strengthened the
Soviet Union – through a new organ, so to speak – but would have killed it.

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