What was the connection between the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Was there a causal link between them? If so, what was the cause and what was the consequence? Or was it a mere coincidence of two historic events that developed each according to its own logic, more or less unrelated to the other?

Unfortunately, Jörg Baberowski’s very interesting study of the crisis in Soviet society during the period of perestroika does not pose these questions. To some extent this omission can be attributed to an understandable rejection of the hackneyed myth that the Soviet Union could not withstand the pressures of the Cold War and so threw in the towel – an acknowledgement of defeat that undermined its authority and legitimacy and became the chief cause of its collapse. There is another, even cruder version of this myth, according to which the Cold War ended with the disappearance of the USSR from the political map and its consequences. This version blatantly contradicts the actual sequence of events: neither the fall of the Berlin Wall, nor the reunification of Germany, nor the «velvet revolution» could have happened while the Cold War was still in progress. It is to Baberowski’s credit that he so clearly refuses to subscribe to such myths. But it is equally obvious that his near-exclusive concentration on the internal problems of Soviet society, and consequent neglect of the international context, leaves a gap in his analysis. This paper is an attempt to fill the gap.

1. The Cold War Contract

It is worth stressing, before going any further, that few people in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s interpreted the end of the Cold War as a defeat for the USSR and a token of the bankruptcy of the existing system. On the contrary, people were proud of the strength of their country, which had forced the «imperialists» to abandon their «aggressive plans» and agree to make peace. There was a feeling of gratitude to the leadership, which had been wise enough to retreat from
the «class struggle in the international arena» and stop helping regimes that did not enjoy the support of their own people and depended entirely on Soviet help. There was a hope that the «peace dividend» would boost the Soviet economy: once freed from a pointless arms race it would be in a position to demonstrate its full superiority over capitalist society with its burden of crises, unemployment and other problems.

In just two short years, from 1989 to 1991, all these thoughts and emotions underwent a fundamental change, and were displaced by deep disappointment with the leadership and its socio-political model. In other words, the change did not become critical until after the end of the Cold War, when it led to the collapse of the existing system and the USSR itself. More than that: in my opinion, the end of the Cold War played a decisive part in the process.¹

Baberowski, like many other historians, stresses the importance of glasnost in the delegitimising of the system. This is quite correct. Indeed, I would add that this phenomenon would not have been possible in Cold War conditions, because most people accepted that public criticism of negative aspects in one’s own country and acknowledgement of the positive aspects of Western life would only assist the enemy; it was tantamount to betraying the fatherland. I would also like to make two additional comments. First, the process of glasnost had nothing to do with objectivity or balance: it transcended notions of negativity and positivity. The picture that emerged was no less distorted than that of Soviet propaganda. Second, I would not overestimate the influence of the mass media on the turnaround in the public consciousness at the time of glasnost. After all, the shortcomings of «real socialism» were perfectly well known before that and were the source of numerous jokes. (Baberowski rightly draws attention to this fact.) Additionally, even before perestroika people in the USSR had an exaggeratedly positive notion of everything Western, owing to the jamming of Western radio broadcasts and other curbs on international communication, on the principle that forbidden fruit tastes sweetest. None of this, however, posed any threat to the regime.

The most important things were the economy, and the behaviour of the elite. What was the Soviet economy like? Everybody knows the Radio Yerevan joke: «Is there a military-industrial complex somewhere in the USSR?» Answer: «No, but the whole country is one big military-industrial complex.» And indeed the country had been a military camp where everything was subordinated to a single imperative: maximum defence capability. There were some historical justifications for this: foreign intervention (in the civil war of 1919/20), the Nazi invasion, the «nuclear diplomacy» of the US, etc. This perception of an external threat

¹ See A. Filitov, «Victory in the Postwar Era: Despite the Cold War or because of It?», in: Diplomatic History 16 (Winter 1992) 1.
was characteristic of the leadership, but also of the overwhelming majority of the population; indeed, it was even stronger among the population. Alongside the «social contract» mentioned by Baberowski («We pretend to be working and you pretend to be paying us.») there was another: «We work, you take care of defence.»

That was the «contract» or «consensus» of the Cold War, and it can be safely said that Soviet society and the Soviet economy were perfectly adapted to it. The USSR was not «defeated» in the Cold War (the concept is meaningless anyway), nor was it on the brink of defeat. There was no reason in principle why the Cold War could not have continued indefinitely. Moreover – or putting it more pointedly – if the Cold War had continued, the USSR could have gone on existing indefinitely as the socio-political incarnation of a military-industrial complex. On the contrary, the dismantling of the Cold War did not merely rob the military-industrial complex of its legitimacy; it also threatened to bring down the entire economy. Even during the Cold War the military-industrial complex turned out civilian goods (otherwise Soviet citizens could not have gone on living), but they were of abysmal quality and limited range, the leftovers from the main production lines. The Soviet military-industrial complex, which was fully competitive in armaments production, could never match Western standards in the manufacture of consumer goods. In countries where the military-industrial complex was a significant, but not the most significant, part of the economy, it could be easily converted (as in the US) or adapted to a market economy (former Eastern Bloc countries, the Baltic states, even China). In most parts of the USSR – Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus, where the military-industrial complex was most concentrated – the transition to a market-based peacetime economy was altogether more difficult. Keeping costs down and profits up was a task that «red directors» were simply unable to perform, even if they wanted to. There was no alternative managerial staff in the basic production sector that could replace them, however. It explains the one-sided development of the Russian economy in the post-Soviet time: banking, oil, gas and the lack of high-tech innovations, which used to be monopolised by the degraded military-oriented industries.

2. The Role of the Military-Industrial Complex

Why did the Soviet military-industrial complex (represented at the governmental level by the notorious nomenklatura) consent to, or even initiate, the dismantling of the Cold War – a process that not only removed its legitimacy but also threatened to bring the whole economy crashing down?

There was no real pressure from below. The dissident movement was quite marginal. There was some mass unrest in the 1950s-1970s, but it was not politically motivated and died down after a time. Baberowski himself seems aware of
this, although one may wish to challenge his near-idyllic picture of the 1970s. Except in big cities and «closed» cities (bastions of the military-industrial complex), the situation was anything but rosy. One American scholar, who basically shares Baberowski’s view, sought to give a more detailed description of the situation of the masses (or, to put it in his words, the «less informed»). The result was a very contradictory picture: «Those who were part of this low-information mass were wont to be satisfied that (1) their jobs were secure; (2) their rent was low; (3) they could afford basic goods (even if, somehow, the goods seemed increasingly hard to find); (4) they were living at a time when, despite many difficulties, living standards were «not all that bad» compared to earlier decades.»

If goods were becoming «increasingly hard to find», could the masses really have been «satisfied»? Probably not, but this fell far short of what was needed to trigger a protest. We can agree with the same scholar’s observation that «It is notable that until late in the Gorbachev era strikes were not launched to demand actual improvements in living standards; instead they were intended to protest the deterioration of the «normal» – rather grim – conditions that existed under the old, poorly implemented contract.»

But what disrupted the compliance with the old «contract», or what disrupted efforts to make its compliance more complete (or at least less incomplete) on an evolutionary path? A deeply conservative, Stalinist-oriented Russian author gives us an interesting insight into the motives of Soviet apparatchiks: they needed capitalism in order to spend what they had stolen and so obtain automobiles, properties and prostitutes. Under socialism they lived like «eunuchs in a harem»: everything was available, but they could not enjoy it, and so «they struck down the USSR and socialism at a blow». This is harsh and disillusioning. But is it enough to explain the collapse of the USSR? Paradoxically, this ultra-conservative critic simultaneously under- and overestimates the shortcomings of the system. First, there was certainly «theft», in the true sense of the word, but it was not systematic. It is better to speak in terms of privileges that the elite awarded to itself. Second, the privileges allowed by the system did not exclude ownership of automobiles, properties (state dachas) or prostitutes (disguised as dacha staff). The only problem was that these things had to be kept hidden and there was always a risk of losing the lot at the whim of a superior – and even those at the top of the pecking order could not be certain of staying there. History tells us that eunuchs had plenty of opportunities to satisfy their needs (insofar as they had them) in secret, includ-

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4 Ibid., 61–62.

5 Ju. Muchin, Ubijstvo Stalina i Berii [The murder of Stalin and Beria], Moscow 2003, 709.
ing access to the women of the harem. Sometimes the sultan would have them executed for it; sometimes the eunuchs murdered the sultan. The analogy with «real socialism» (including the Stalinist purges and the removal of Khrushchev) is obvious.

Baberowski recognises a social contract under Brezhnev that was backed by less violence and was in fact quite effective. Well-established local clans and «relationships of mutual trust» between workers and managers enabled a relatively unproblematic existence, both inside and outside the harem. If Gorbachev had not embarked on a «hysterical anti-alcohol campaign», given way to the demands of «radical proponents of the free market» and dismantled the «sovereignty of the Communist Party», the system could have continued to exist for a long time, or, if it had to change, could have done so according to the Chinese pattern. Unfortunately Baberowski does not ask why these «ifs» did not come to pass. The anti-alcohol campaign can be viewed as a subjective or even chance error on the part of the «Mineral Secretary». But how are we to explain the power and influence of the «radical proponents of the free market»? And what was behind the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party? Nothing other than the personal will of its president? It is significant that Baberowski does not mention the role of the Communist Party in Soviet society until the very end of his article, and then only as an aspect of nationalist politics (to which we shall return below). Its role was in fact significantly greater.

3. The Role of the CPSU

It is usually assumed that this role was restricted to controlling the masses in order to secure the position of the ruling elite. That is correct. But the Party also had another function: that of controlling the elite itself, which substantially meant self-control. The Party apparatus had to ensure that privileges were not too blatant, so as not to provoke «ordinary people». It also ensured that the necessary scapegoats were forthcoming, and were suitably punished, for the shortages and deficits of the system – again this was «in order to keep the people happy». Morally speaking, of course, this was rule by demagogy, lies and naked arbitrariness. But it was also the condition precedent for maintaining the «social contract»; it was certainly more than a «relationship of mutual trust» between managers and workers (insofar as such relationships existed on a massive scale).

If «ordinary people» were willing to adjust (more or less) to the terms of this «contract», the «top men» certainly were not. The further it went, the less willing they became to accept restrictions on their own consumption and arbitrary attacks on themselves. To borrow an image from our conservative author, the eunuchs revolted and dissolved the harem, with the far-sighted plan of turning it into a brothel. What is more, the sultan collaborated with them in the belief that the brothel staff – and clientele – would allow him to keep his privileges (if only exter-
nally), in gratitude to him for accepting the makeover. The eunuchs’ calculations proved correct; the sultan’s did not.

Such analogies may appear cynical and inappropriate. They are intended simply as an image for the unlovely process – described with tolerable accuracy by Baberowski – that turned the «managers» into «capitalists». Nevertheless, when judging the morality of the «new Russians» we should not forget that when they pursued almost unrestricted freedom for themselves, they also extended the scope of freedom for «ordinary citizens». They needed freedom to travel and freedom to turn their roubles into hard currency. They got those freedoms, but at the same time everybody else got the freedom he or she wanted and had not had under the CPSU. If we talk about people’s disappointment with the «democrats» and their regime, we should also bear in mind that people set an extraordinary value on the freedom to travel that the regime had granted them. All this despite the fact that this freedom had a rather negative effect on the economy (the FRG introduced the free conversion of the Deutschmark in 1958 i.e., after the «economic miracle», which may never have happened if capital had been free to leave the country).

4. Alternative Scenarios

A high price was paid – but worse scenarios were perfectly possible. «Real socialism» had always suffered from a serious disease: the ossification of the elite, the lack of an effective system for replenishing it, and the tendency to construct closed, autonomous clan structures. (Strangely, Baberowski seems to view this phenomenon not as a disease but as a sign that Soviet society was in robust health!) But this system did produce its own antidote: the periodic, unforeseeable dislodging of the current elite in extreme cases through purges like that of the «Great Terror» in the USSR or China’s «cultural revolution». This antidote was almost as bad as the disease, although it was generally effective. Some manifestations in the late USSR (subsequently dubbed andropovschina, though it is not at all clear what Andropov really had in mind) could easily have served as prologues to the repetition of such «therapy», or rather «surgery». Luckily, the then elite did not follow that road, fearing (and with good reason) that the «surgeons» might get out of control. (Incidentally, similar fears are hampering the currently overt struggle against corruption in today’s Russia.) It is generally known that the political terror in 1937 was preceded by a campaign against «malpractice» in the bureaucracy. Before Vyshinsky unmasked the «conspiracies» planned by «enemies of the people», he made a name for himself through his investigations of economic and administrative breaches of «socialist legality». Andropov’s successors chose not to go down this path, a path whose costs would have been even more terrible than those under Stalin, even though they would have been able to pursue it. Additionally we should not forget the other merits (no irony intended) of the erstwhile «eunuchs» now turned «democrats» (irony fully intended). They dismantled the complex of the
«Cold War», a war which, unlike any «hot war», made for a certain stability in international relations (what John Gaddis calls «a long peace»), but nevertheless carried with it the risk of destabilisation which – if only by chance – could have led to a catastrophic nuclear war. Their motives were, of course, entirely selfish; but however harshly we judge that fact, it was a bold and daring step to renounce their guaranteed privileges and plunge into the stormy seas of the free market, even if they did have privileged access to the country’s wealth and a chance to convert it into capital.

Another question arises: Could the general emancipation of society not have been combined with measures to curb the marauding instincts of the eunuchs-cum-managers-turned-democrats? To put it another way, would it not have been possible to combine liberalisation with democratisation in the true sense of that word, and thereby avoid escalating the economic crisis and prevent the final collapse of the USSR? My subjective answer is that it would have been – so long as the leading role was reserved for a democratised CPSU. This answer may sound strange in view of the indubitable fact that the Party exercised strict (one may say: too strict – to the point of irrationality) control over society and owed its «mass» character chiefly to the fact that many people saw membership as the sine qua non of a successful career. Doubtless this is true, but we need to remember the other side of the coin: the Party itself controlled the elite from within. As we have seen, it fulfilled this role, even if it did so in an arbitrary and somewhat irrational fashion. But why could this control not have been made more orderly and rational? Even if the overwhelming majority of Party members in the USSR were careerists, this is merely another way of describing those members of society who were dissatisfied with their position in it. In other words, they were the most active, outgoing and, in a way, creative people.

These reflections naturally derive from the personal experience of this author and the members of the Party organisation of the Historical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who had already drawn attention to themselves as far back as the 1960s when they spoke out against the central decree that put an end to «de-Stalinisation». At that time the Central Committee refrained from draconic measures; it confined itself to dividing the Institute into two parts, one devoted to the history of the USSR and the other to history in general. Such incidents were repeated with varying intensity and harshness. Reading the recently published history of the IMEMO (the Institute for World Economy and International Relations of the Academy of Sciences), a highly prestigious «think tank» with close links to the Party and the secret services, one can see that in the early 1980s this Institute was the scene of a continual struggle between conservatives and «systematic dissidents». (The term «systematic dissident» was invented by E. M. Primakov, who was an administrator of IMEMO for many years and also its director for a considerable time. He continued to hold high office in the new Russia, becoming...
head of the foreign secret service and prime minister). Even on that occasion – before *perestroika* – the conservatives beat a retreat.\(^6\)

Why were the «systematic dissidents», who resisted the system with some success – albeit with some casualties as well – not in a position to reform that system? There are many reasons. They had learned to fight more or less successfully against the overt and covert intrigues of the Party bureaucracy, but they failed to find (or in a timely manner?) an antidote to the open demagogy of the «extrasystemic dissidents». For example, there was no answer to their argument that democratising the CPSU would only lead to a regime similar to that of apartheid South Africa – a minority democracy, as it were. Yet the answer was obvious: one could not change the colour of one’s skin, but it was possible to enter the ranks of the CPSU, especially because this was made easier the further the candidate was removed from the elite. (This system had been introduced long before *perestroika* and served as evidence for the «suppression of the intelligentsia», even though this in itself was pure demagogy). On the other hand, the conservatives – i.e., the members of the clans who were satisfied with the existing regime – played a similarly ominous role. It appears as though they openly pursued a strategy predicated on the slogan «the worse [things get], the better». Most of them behaved like Walter Ulbricht in the German Democratic Republic after the declaration of the «new course» in June 1953. As reported by the Soviet diplomat Vladimir Semenov, Ulbricht organised a sort of strike in the Party apparatus, hoping that the reformist elements would change their minds and come to him to confess. On that occasion it all ended with a popular revolt and Soviet military intervention. In the USSR in 1990–1991 there were no foreign troops available to suppress a revolt (which was surely just as well). In fact there was no revolt (which is again just as well, bearing in mind what Pushkin said about the «senseless and merciless» nature of Russian revolts). The system collapsed of its own accord – and yet the consequences were not exactly positive.

Another thing that can be laid at the conservatives’ door is that their fear of democratising the Party ended by splitting it. The founding of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, chaired by an unknown provincial apparatchik by the name of Polozkov, entirely devoid of charisma and political profile, was a crushing blow against the «systemic dissidents». Moreover, it became the death sentence for the Soviet Union. I would like to emphasise this point in particular, because there is a widespread belief that the USSR disintegrated as a result of separatist movements in the republics. Baberowski appears to share this view. It is the final element in his article that I would like to discuss.

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\(^{6}\) P. Cherkasov, *IMEMO. Portret na fone epochi* [IMEMO. A portrait in the perspective of its time], Moscow 2004.
5. Soviet Union and Separatism

I shall start with this observation: There can be no doubt that such separatist movements existed. Baberowski is also quite right to argue that such movements should not be seen as reactions to the «oppression» of local populations (including elites) by the centre, or to «Russian violence» or anything of that sort. One can debate Baberowski’s use of the term «empire» in reference to the USSR, but his choice of words is not the main problem. However we describe the Soviet Union – as «a historically new community of mankind» or an «empire» – it was certainly not an «evil empire» but rather a supranational state organisation that enabled its constituent parts to live a relatively comfortable life, particularly the «titular nations» of the republics. Everyone in Soviet times, taking the train from Sochi to Sukhumi or vice versa, would have been struck by the contrast: It was the same Black Sea coast, except that on the Russian side the buildings were, to put it mildly, modest, whereas the Abkhazian (or, as it was then, Georgian) side was strewn with luxury villas made of stone.

«The Russian man’s burden»: it is almost Kiplingesque. The Russian people paid a high price to keep the RSFSR in its place as «first among equals» in terms of territory, population and, not least, influence on the political life of the Soviet state and the other republics (in all of which except one – Armenia – the post of second secretary of the Central Committee was held by an emissary of Moscow – not necessarily from the capital itself, but from the Russian section of the USSR). The price was recognition of the need to ensure that representatives of the national periphery enjoyed better living conditions and greater privileges. Equally striking was the situation of Russian communists: they had no special organisation within their own republic. Ukraine, Belarus, etc. had their own communist parties, but there was no Communist Party of Russia, nor could there be if the Soviet Union was to remain a union. The Russians (not necessarily of Russian nationality) were a kind of cement that held the Soviet state edifice together. Endowing Russia with its own communist party would have created a situation in which there was no edifice, but only a heap of cement on one side and a heap of bricks on the other.

We might well ask why Russian communism did not resist this entire turn of events. Because of a democracy deficit? A fiat from above? Based on my own experience, I can say that the transformation of the CPSU in the 1980s/early 1990s actually happened faster than the transformation of society as a whole. Discussion was not merely tolerated but encouraged. The basic organisations were given the right to retain half the members’ contributions, instead of the lot going to the «centre», as was previously the case. Considering that the allocation of income had its political aspects, we can say that the Party was undergoing an internal «diffusion of power». I cannot of course speak for the whole of Russia, but in our division of Moscow (Cheremyshkin), at least, we held a Party referendum on the question of whether it was worth setting up a Communist Party of the Russian
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Federation. We followed proper democratic procedures and found that the majority was in favour: in other words, even the communists of the most «progressive» districts, most of whom belonged to the technical and philosophical intelligentsia, were not immune to demagogic nationalist slogans like «Why can’t we Russians have what the Ukrainians have got?» Once again, one could argue that the result was not inevitable. An active information campaign and the organisation of an inclusive debate might have made a significant difference in the outcome. But the leading figures did not want that: the formal enactment of a democratic procedure yielded a result that was in their own best interest. Here, incidentally, we can agree with Baberowski’s somewhat skeptical attitude towards such instruments of «free election».

How are we to explain the susceptibility of the majority to naked demagogy and manipulation on the part of both conservatives and self-styled «democrats»? The famous English historian and philosopher Arnold J. Toynbee described nationalism, in one of his last works, as one of the most powerful and dangerous ideologies of the twentieth century (he also thought that it accounted for about 90 per cent of the two others, capitalism and communism). One could read the fall of the USSR as a confirmation of this theory – only adding that in the last days of the USSR, nationalism constituted 100 per cent of communism and in fact absorbed it. Unfortunately the same is true of the current CPRF, not to mention other parties in today’s Russia. Toynbee himself saw mixed marriages as the only cure for the malign influence of nationalism. Such marriages were frequent in the USSR, but they could not prevent the triumph of nationalism. Indeed, these families were the greatest casualties of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Being a «Eurosceptic», Toynbee overlooked the best way of overcoming nationalistic ideas: through integration and the construction of a supranational Europe that respected national characteristics. The Soviet Union was a variant of such integration – and not the worst imaginable. It now belongs to the past. But in my opinion, integration remains the only possible guarantee of free and auspicious development for the successor states. What form will they take? We would need to know more about the accumulated experiences of Europe. Perhaps this journal will serve as a suitable platform for such exchanges.

Translated from German by Rosemary Williams.

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