Jörg Baberowski’s brief essay, which is intended in part as a response to the final chapter of Manfred Hildermeier’s huge survey of Soviet history, is cogent in most respects. Baberowski argues that by the mid-1980s the USSR was not in a «crisis» that necessitated far-reaching political liberalisation and democratisation of the sort undertaken in the late 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev, who set out to strengthen the Communist system and the Soviet state but ultimately presided over the disintegration of both. The implication is that under a more orthodox Soviet leader, such as Viktor Grishin or Grigorii Romanov, the USSR would not have collapsed. The thrust of Baberowski’s argument is sensible and convincing. Nonetheless, in my commentary I want to challenge some of the things Baberowski says.

1. What Prompted Gorbachev to Act?

Momentous historical events like the collapse of the Soviet Union, which stemmed from multiple causes and a series of contingent circumstances, are often depicted as inevitable, and Baberowski is right to oppose such depictions. But he focuses so much on the social mood and the lack of pressure «from below» in the USSR in 1985 that he discounts the top-down, highly centralised nature of the Soviet political system, which gave Gorbachev significant lee-way to act, regardless of the mood in society. Baberowski writes: «If something is not perceived as a crisis in the hearts and minds of people, then it is not a crisis.» This notion of a crisis as a social construct is useful in understanding the Soviet public mood in 1985, but it does not take us much beyond that. The key question is not how the situation was perceived by ordinary citizens but how it was perceived by the top party elites, and especially by Gorbachev.

When Gorbachev was chosen as the new general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985, he was intent on pursuing ambi-

---

tious policies of economic modernisation. Initially, this did not entail political liberalisation.

Baberowski is wrong to say that from the beginning Gorbachev and his advisors saw economic reform as an aspect of political reform. Gorbachev did not in fact come to office intending to adopt sweeping political changes – but there is no doubt that the new Soviet leader wanted the Soviet economy to run much better. At the outset, he attempted to reinvigorate the economy through a relatively orthodox programme of *uskorenie* (acceleration), including stricter labour discipline, greater investment in heavy industry and machine-building, and a clamp-down on private activity. Only after these policies failed to produce results did Gorbachev change course, moving eventually toward bold political reforms coupled with economic restructuring. He hoped that greater political openness (glasnost) and political liberalisation would help him achieve his economic goals, but instead the relaxation opened a Pandora’s box of other problems. Baberowski rightly argues that the changes launched by Gorbachev destabilised the Soviet polity and economy and thereby created a genuine crisis in the USSR, but Baberowski does not explain why Gorbachev felt such an urgent need to act in the first place. Even though the Soviet economy was not in crisis in 1985, Gorbachev (unlike the bulk of the Soviet population) was aware that the Soviet Union was falling increasingly behind the United States and other Western countries in high technology and economic strength. The question was not whether there was a crisis but whether the Soviet Union was falling behind the West. Many indicators suggested that it was, and even though most Soviet citizens were not aware of these indicators, some of the key elites in the CPSU were dismayed by them. Gorbachev was among those who believed that the Soviet Union’s tendency to lag ever further behind «world standards» needed to be redressed as urgently as possible.

In seeking to justify and generate support for his economic proposals, Gorbachev in his first few years often tried to create a sense of crisis. In an early speech, for example, he declared: «The historic fate of the country and the position of socialism in the modern world depend to a large extent on how we proceed from here. ... We must achieve a significant acceleration of socio-economic progress. There is simply no other path.»

For a while, he had trouble convincing both the public and some within the CPSU that the situation was as desperate as he was claiming. But over time, as his policies increasingly destabilised the economy and plunged it into crisis, Gorbachev no longer needed to convince anyone that serious economic problems existed. The irony is that he himself had created the most glaring of them.

In short, even though it is true that the great majority of Soviet citizens in 1985 did not believe that their country was in crisis, Gorbachev and some of the key officials around him did sense that the Soviet economy was in a parlous state and that a failure to enact far-reaching reforms would leave the Soviet Union dangerously behind the West. Whether that perception was accurate or not, it prompted him to adopt major economic and political changes. Far from eliminating the pronounced inefficiencies and other shortcomings of the Soviet economic system, the policies implemented by Gorbachev rise to rampant shortages of staple goods, hyperinflation and a break-down of inter-firm supply relationships.

2. Demise of the Soviet Bloc

Baberowski rightly notes that Gorbachev’s early reform programme «was not the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire. After all, the USSR could have ... used its remaining military potential to keep the Eastern European states under control.» But Baberowski then repeats the myth that as far back as 1985, Gorbachev «surprised the political leaders of East Central Europe by announcing that the Soviet Union would no longer become involved in the affairs of its neighbouring countries». There is no credible evidence to support this claim, which has been put forward before by scholars who should have known better. Although Baberowski cites no source for his assertion, others who have endorsed it have referred to comments by Anatolii Chernyaev in 1993–1994. But the problem is that in 1985 Chernyaev was not yet a foreign policy adviser to Gorbachev and was in no position to know what Gorbachev was saying (or not saying) to the leaders of the other Warsaw Pact countries. The declassified records from Gorbachev’s meetings with those leaders are available, and they put paid to the notion that Gorbachev in 1985 «surprised» them by saying that the Soviet Union would no longer take action to counter threats to Communist rule in Eastern Europe. He never said anything remotely like that in 1985, and indeed the records show that he said the opposite. Immediately after Gorbachev took office, he promised that his «first priority» in foreign policy would be «to protect and strengthen as much as possible the fraternal friendship with our closest comrades-in-arms and allies, the countries of the great socialist commonwealth». Elaborating on this theme at an important plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in April 1985, Gorbachev called for «the improvement and enrichment of co-operation among the fraternal socialist countries in every possible way, the development of comprehensive ties, the assurance of close collaboration in the political, economic, ideological, military and other spheres, and the organic merger of the national and international interests of all

---


members of the great [socialist] commonwealth». The official Soviet press agency TASS prominently highlighted these comments in its reports on the plenum.

A few days later, on 26 April, when Gorbachev and the other Eastern Bloc leaders gathered in Moscow to extend the Warsaw Pact for a further thirty years, the participants issued a joint communiqué vowing to «increase their close co-operation in international affairs» and «reinforce their efforts to strengthen the military cohesion of the alliance». Gorbachev, in his key-note speech at the meeting, praised the «unity of action» that had «thwarted the attempts of imperialism to subvert or destroy the socialist order in any of the fraternal countries» – a clear reference to the events of 1968 and 1980–1981 when challenges to Communist regimes in Eastern Europe were forcibly suppressed. Gorbachev also lauded «our joint efforts in accomplishing a task of historic importance: we have reached military and strategic parity with NATO. This was not at all easy to do.» He made clear that the Warsaw Pact must never fall behind in its ability to «wage an active fight against the military threat» from NATO: «Military and strategic parity is a vital prerequisite for the security of the socialist states. Understandably, safeguarding the military balance has required – and, if the situation does not improve, will continue to require – a great deal of resources and effort. But without this it will be impossible to defend socialist gains. This is our common affair, the success of which will depend on contributions from every socialist state.» Far from displaying any inclination to relax Soviet military and political ties with the East European states, Gorbachev strongly emphasised the need for «a unified line» and «stricter co-ordination of efforts» to «consolidate the position of socialism». His insistence that the treaty be extended by thirty years, rather than a much shorter period (of perhaps five to ten years) as some East European officials had wanted, and his determination to prevent any changes in the basic text of the treaty (or in the top-secret supplementary Provisions on the Unified Command of the Armed Forces of the Member-States of the Warsaw Pact), underscored his desire to push for greater cohesion and integration between the Soviet Union and its East European allies.

5 Plenum Tsentral'nogo Komiteta TsK KPSS, 22–23 aprel'ja 1985 года, 22–23 April 1985 (Top Secret), Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishoi Iss- torii (RGANI), Fond (F.) 2, Opis' (Op.) 3, Delo (D.) 347, List (L.) 12. Gorbachev’s speech was published the next day as «O sozyve ocherednogo XX-VII S’ezda KPSS i zadachakh svyazannykh s ego podgotovkoi i provedeniem» from Pravda: «Military and strategic parity is a vital prerequisite for the security of the socialist states. Understandably, safeguarding the military balance has required – and, if the situation does not improve, will continue to require – a great deal of resources and effort. But without this it will be impossible to defend socialist gains. This is our common affair, the success of which will depend on contributions from every socialist state.» Far from displaying any inclination to relax Soviet military and political ties with the East European states, Gorbachev strongly emphasised the need for «a unified line» and «stricter co-ordination of efforts» to «consolidate the position of socialism». His insistence that the treaty be extended by thirty years, rather than a much shorter period (of perhaps five to ten years) as some East European officials had wanted, and his determination to prevent any changes in the basic text of the treaty (or in the top-secret supplementary Provisions on the Unified Command of the Armed Forces of the Member-States of the Warsaw Pact), underscored his desire to push for greater cohesion and integration between the Soviet Union and its East European allies.


7 The passages quoted here are from the Czech version of Gorbachev’s speech (which was of course translated from the Russian original). Vystoupení generálního tajemníka ÚV Komunistické strany Sověského svazu soudruha M. S. Gorbačo-va: Příloha IV /d, 26 April 1985, 8696/24, Český Národní Archiv (CNA), Archiv Ústředního výboru Komunistické strany Československa (Arch. UV KSC), PÚV 47/85, Listí (Ll.) 1–11.

8 Ibid., L. 2.

9 Ibid., L. 8.
This same approach, with its echoes of the policies adopted by previous Soviet leaders toward Eastern Europe, was evident during other high-level deliberations in Moscow in 1985 and 1986. At meetings of the CPSU Politburo and CPSU Secretariat, Gorbachev called for an expansion of political and military ties within the Warsaw Pact and promised to safeguard the «underlying path of development of our co-operation with the other socialist countries»[10]. The recently declassified transcripts of these meetings and of other secret high-level discussions in 1985 and 1986 further disprove the notion that Gorbachev decided at an early stage to leave the East European states to their own devices.[11] The archival evidence shows nothing of the sort. Rather than proposing to loosen Moscow’s ties with the East European countries, Gorbachev during this period was seeking to do just the opposite: he vowed that the USSR would establish «greater [Communist] party control» over Soviet-East European relations and «strengthen the unity of the socialist countries and counter any centrifugal tendencies» within the Warsaw Pact.[12] Although he said it would be pointless to treat the East European states like «little children who need to be taken to kindergarten», he was convinced that the Soviet Union’s «objective interests demand unity and cohesion among the countries of socialism» as well as «comprehensive co-ordination of all foreign policy actions». The East European governments, he argued in mid-1986, «know that any initiative they engage in must enjoy our support and must be co-ordinated with us, or else it will never get anywhere and will be doomed from the start».[13] Gorbachev assured his colleagues


[11] Notes from CPSU Politburo meetings and many other high-level discussions from 1985 to 1991 were gathered in 2003–2004 by the Gorbachev Foundation for a planned five-volume documentary collection titled Kak «delalas’» politika perestroiki (KDPP) that was originally slated to appear in 2004. Unfortunately, Gorbachev decided not to publish the volumes, which would have come to more than 3500 pages in total. Later on he permitted a much-abridged single volume to appear: A. Chernyaev et al. (eds.), V Politbyuro TsK KPSS: Po zapisym Anatoliya Chernyaeva, Vadima Medvedeva, Georgiya Shakhnazaryova, Moscow 2006 – as well as a collection of documents pertaining to Soviet policy in Germany: A. Galkin / A. Chernyaev (eds.), Mikhail Gorbachev i germanskiy vozros: Shornik dokumentov, 1966–1991, Moscow 2006. In 2010, another substantial volume was published with transcripts and materials from Gorbachev’s conversations with foreign leaders: A. S. Chernyaev / A. B. Veber (eds.), Otvechaya na vyzov vremeni: Vneshnya politika perestroiki—Dokumental’nye svidetel’stva, Moscow 2010 – but the other documents planned for the KDPP have not yet been made generally available. Fortunately, Anatoli Chernyaev, who oversaw the project and would have preferred to release all of the materials, agreed to give me access to the unpublished volumes when I was in Moscow on numerous occasions from 2005 to 2009. I am grateful to Chernyaev for the opportunity to examine all the documents.


[13] The passages quoted here and in the previous sentence are from Gorbachev’s key-note speech to a closed meeting of the Soviet Foreign Ministry Collegium, 28 May 1986, declassified and published in M. S. Gorbachev, Gody trudnykh reshenii, Moscow 1993, 46–55.
on the CPSU Politburo that the Soviet Union would continue to be, as it had been under his predecessors, «the leader of the socialist world and the [military] guarantor of the security and socialist gains of the fraternal countries».

Gorbachev expressed similar views whenever he spoke with East European leaders during his first two years in office. In a series of bilateral and multilateral meetings with high-ranking East European officials in 1985 and early 1986, Gorbachev urged them to pursue closer military, political and economic integration with the Soviet Union. In 1985 alone, five separate gatherings of Warsaw Pact leaders were convened, including two in March and one in November shortly after Gorbachev returned from his first summit meeting with Ronald Reagan in Geneva. Gorbachev assured the East European officials that the Soviet Union would show «respect for [their countries’] experience and understanding of [their] national specifics» and would support their «quest to follow national paths» to socialism. But he made these pledges in the expectation that the Warsaw Pact leaders would facilitate, rather than impede, the «strengthening of our co-operation, cohesion and unity». Gorbachev left no doubt that his main aim in Eastern Europe was to «develop comprehensive co-operation in all matters with countries of the socialist commonwealth».

The new CPSU Programme that was adopted at the Twenty-Seventh Soviet Party Congress in March 1986 referred explicitly to the need for «mutual assistance» in «defending socialist gains» and the paramount importance of «socialist internationalism» to the Soviet bloc – the essence of the Brezhnev Doctrine.

In the months following the Twenty-Seventh Soviet Party Congress, Gorbachev continued to stress the need for increased discipline and cohesion in the Soviet bloc, a theme he took up both at a meeting of the Warsaw Pact’s Political Consultative Committee (PCC) in June 1986 and at the Tenth Congress of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) a few weeks later. At the PCC meeting he called for «increasingly close cooperation among the socialist countries» and highlighted the «great need for an increase in common action». At the PZPR congress, Gorbachev argued that the development of «co-operative links among the socialist countries» should be given «absolute priority» and that those links should extend to all areas – «political, economic, cultural and military». He also seemed to provide a thinly
veiled reaffirmation of the Brezhnev Doctrine when he warned that «socialist gains are irreversible» and that any attempt by internal or external forces to «wrench a country away from the socialist commonwealth would threaten not only the will of the people [in that country], but also the entire post-war order and, in the final analysis, peace». His lengthy comments supporting the Polish regime’s December 1981 crack-down on the Solidarity movement (the «internal enemies of socialist Poland») reinforced the point.

In short, the notion that Gorbachev came to office intending to abandon the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe is untenable. Baberowski is right to argue that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not inevitable; he ought to have been equally sceptical about claims that the demise of East European Communism was preordained. Gorbachev did not foresee that the changes he initiated would lead in time to the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. He originally hoped to bolster the cohesion and strength of the Warsaw Pact, and even as late as 1989 he was merely seeking to create favourable conditions in Eastern Europe for a liberalised form of Communism («socialism with a human face») that would enable the socialist commonwealth to overcome the political instability that had plagued it so often in the past. Contrary to his expectations, the process of change in Eastern Europe took on a revolutionary momentum. He declined to interrupt it or even to slow it down, but the outcome was hardly what he had initially hoped to achieve.

3. Public Restiveness

Baberowski sums up the public mood in the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev era by quoting the émigré journalist Kirill’ Gradov, who wrote in 1984:

«In Russia the workers were very much happier than the intellectuals. They didn’t have such lofty ideals. They worked so they could afford a new flat, a motorbike or a pair of gum-boots to go fishing in. They seldom gave much thought to the Soviet system as such. Most of them were just waiting for something to change, and were convinced that things really would get better some day. ... All these people were quite simply optimistic and tended to see every tiny improvement as a sure pointer to a better life. Many older workers could still remember how frightful things had been during the war; comparing the economic situation at that time with the present one, they considered that the current situation in the USSR was really not so bad.»

Amplifying these points, Baberowski claims that «There was no rebellious student movement, no protest and no unrest in the Soviet Union.» In Baberowski’s view, Soviet citizens had become so contented with life in the USSR that they never considered complaining about their circumstances.

Although Gradov’s characterisation of the public mood in Soviet Russia in the 1970s and early 1980s is largely persuasive, Baberowski goes much too far in arguing that Soviet citizens were so satisfied with their daily existence, or so apathetic or fatalistic, that they never even contemplated taking part in mass protests. His depiction of an essentially inert Soviet society in which «no protests, no unrest» occurred is not borne out by the archival evidence. Over the past two decades, a great deal of documentation has emerged about the frequent spates of civil unrest in nearly all parts of the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the 1980s. Vladimir Kozlov’s important book *Mass Uprisings in the USSR*, published in 1999, underscores the extraordinary level of violent mass protest in the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin era. Although Kozlov’s interpretations of the protests are at times deficient, the archival evidence he presents leaves no doubt that mass disturbances – demonstrations, strikes, riots and uprisings – were far more common in the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s than most Western analysts had previously assumed.

The incidence of large-scale violent disturbances diminished after the mid-1960s, but the level of organised protest actually increased overall during the Brezhnev era because of a surge in strikes and demonstrations, especially in 1980–1982. A top-secret database compiled by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the first half of the 1980s, drawing on many years’ worth of intelligence reports concerning civil unrest in the USSR from 1970 to the mid-1980s, reveals that from 1970 to 1982 at least 281 spontaneous acts of mass civil protest occurred in 99 Soviet cities, including some incidents involving tens of thousands of people. Even as the Soviet regime was methodically crushing the small dissident movement in the USSR, the frequency of wider civil unrest in the country – strikes, demonstrations, riots and political violence (assassination, sabotage and self-immolation) – was sharply increasing. The CIA’s database indicates that nearly 40 per cent of the unrest during this thirteen-year period occurred in the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics (RSFSR), nearly 25 per cent in the three Baltic republics (especially Estonia), some 14 per cent in Ukraine, and nearly all of the rest in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia. Citing these trends, US intelligence analysts in 1983 averred that «the real significance of this increase in popular unrest is its potential to disrupt political stability in the USSR».

The CIA data have been broadly borne out by documents in the former Soviet archives that were not consulted by Kozlov. (Kozlov’s study focuses almost exclu-

---

22 NIC, Dimensions of Civil Unrest, 20.
sively on the Khrushchev era.) The declassified Soviet records show that organised protests occurred in the USSR all through the 1970s and escalated precipitously in 1980–1982. In 1979 alone, according to the Soviet data, more than 300 work stoppages involving some 9,000 workers occurred in the USSR, mostly in the RSFSR. A top-secret Soviet report in October 1980 acknowledged that strikes and mass labour disputes in the Soviet Union had «sharply increased» in 1980, largely because of the crisis that had erupted in neighbouring Poland with the rise of the free trade union Solidarity (Solidarność). The report noted that the surge of popular protest in the USSR – strikes, large-scale work disruptions and other «negative incidents» – was «causing grave concern» at the highest levels of the CPSU. Hoping to prevent further unrest, in the autumn of 1980 the CPSU Politburo ordered all party and state organisations in the Soviet Union to «take urgent, immediate steps to ensure that the everyday needs and requirements of the Soviet people are more fully satisfied». The Politburo explicitly linked this directive with the «current situation in Poland». Subsequently, Soviet leaders also blocked the circulation of most Polish newspapers and periodicals in the USSR, curbed tourism to and from Poland, and ordered the central and the republics’ «press, radio and television to allocate more coverage to the role of [Communist-sponsored] trade unions in our country».

These measures slowed, but did not avert, a spillover from Poland, which caused a prolonged rise in the level of public unrest in the Soviet Union. The chairman of the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB), Yurii Andropov, admitted as much at a CPSU Politburo meeting on 2 April 1981 when he reported that «the Polish events» had inspired «wild demonstrations» in certain areas of the USSR. In the western Soviet republics, especially the Baltic states and Ukraine, local officials expressed «alarm and an increasing sense of urgency» over the «deleterious political and social consequences» of the Polish crisis. Even though unrest in the Soviet Union gradually abated after martial law was imposed in Poland in

---

23 Ob otdel’nykh negativnykh proyavleniyakh, svyazannykh s narusheniyami usloviy organizatsii i oplyaty truda rabochikh i sluzhashchikh, Memorandum No. 27833 (Top Secret), 15 October 1980, from I. Kapitonov and V. Dolgikh to the CPSU Secretariat, attachment to Postanovlenie Sekretariata TsK Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza: O nekotorykh negativnykh proyavleniyakh, svyazannykh s nedostatkami v organizatsii i oplyate truda rabochikh i sluzhashchikh, St-233/8s (Top Secret), 24 October 1980, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 13, D. 37, Ll. 1–12.
24 Ibid., L. 8.
25 Ibid., L. 9.
26 TsK KPSS: Informatsiya o rabote, provodimoi v Litovskoi SSR v svyazi s sobytiyami v PNR, Memorandum No. 1074s (Secret), 1 October 1980, from P. Griškivicius, first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Lietuvos Visuomenės Archyvas (LVOA), Fondas (F.) 1771, Apyrašas (Apy.) 257, Byla (B.) 193, Lapai (La.) 135.
28 See, for example, O provodimoi v Belorussii rabote v svyazi s sobytiyami v PNR, Memorandum No. 01065 (Secret), 30 September 1980, from P. Mesheros, First Secretary of the Belorussian Communist Party, RGANI, F. 5, Op. 77, D. 105, Ll. 20–27; and Informatsiya o reagirovaniy trudyashchikhsov Ukrainskoi SSR na sobytiya v Pol’she i rabote, provodimoi partiinymi organizatsiyami, Memorandum No. 3/73 (Secret), 2 October 1980, from I. Sokolov, UkrCP CC Secretary, RGANI, F. 5, Op. 77, D. 105, Ll. 49–53.
December 1981, the martial law operation itself prompted more than 100 Soviet students at Moscow State University to organise a protest demonstration, which resulted in dozens of arrests. The KGB subsequently took «preventive measures» to deter any further student «outbursts».

The surprising frequency of mass protest in the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the 1980s, especially the surge of incidents in 1980–1982, belies Baberowski’s depiction of a completely passive society in the post-Stalin era. To be sure, the Soviet regime was never in danger of losing control of the situation. Even during events like the Novocherkassk uprising in June 1962, the USSR was not remotely like East Germany in June 1953 or Hungary in October–November 1956. The great majority of mass protests in the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the mid-1980s stemmed wholly or primarily from dissatisfaction over food shortages, from a perceived decline in living standards, from ethnic tensions or from anger at everyday corruption. Although some acts of civil unrest during this period were explicitly political in nature, very few were directed against the Soviet system per se. The vast majority were «intra-system» protests that sought the redress of specific grievances or the punishment of blatant misdeeds, not the downfall of the Soviet regime. The tiny number of protests that were directed against the regime – chiefly separatist demonstrations in Lithuania in 1972, Tajikistan in 1978 and Estonia in 1980 – were swiftly crushed, and the Soviet authorities never came under serious threat.

Nonetheless, the point to be emphasised here is that even though large sections of Soviet society were tranquil during the Brezhnev era, mass unrest occurred much more frequently (albeit predominantly on a localised basis) than most observers realised. Soviet society was by no means writhing with discontent, but neither was it completely inert. Baberowski’s contention that «no protests, no unrest» occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s is clearly unsustainable. US intelligence analysts were right in 1983 when they characterised civil unrest as «a greater problem for Soviet leaders than is consistent with our prevailing images of an effectively repressed society». The restiveness in Soviet society, especially the disproportionately high level of protest in the Baltic states, became much more salient during the Gorbachev era, but the rudiments of that phenomenon were already evident from 1953 through the mid-1980s.

4. Problems with the Ethno-federal Institutions Theory

In the 1990s numerous Western analysts sought to explain the collapse of the Soviet Union by arguing that the ethno-federal structure of the country made it inherently fragile. Baberowski rightly dismisses this argument, but he does not

29 NIC, Dimensions of Civil Unrest, 7.
30 Ibid., 23.
31 R. Lukic / A. Lynch, Europe from the Balkans to the Urals: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, New York 1996; V. Bunce, Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of the
real explain why the argument is flawed. Proponents of the ethno-federal fragility theory maintain that the Bolsheviks’ decision to set up a federation that was «national in form but socialist in content» led over time to the strengthening (or formation) of ethnic identities among the national groups in the Soviet Union. According to this argument, the establishment of ethnically based republics, and the inclusion of ethnic background as the «fifth point» in passports (which had to be carried at all times), gave every Soviet citizen an immutable ethnic identity and fostered a sense of national community among members of the titular ethnic group in each of the non-Russian republics. Proponents of the ethno-federal fragility theory maintain that when the «structure of political opportunity» (i.e. the lee-way for collective political action) in the USSR expanded sharply in the late 1980s, the shared sense of ethnic identity in these republics gave rise to separatist movements that caused the Soviet state to dissolve. The ethno-federal configuration, or so the argument goes, was a «subversive institution».

Analyses that attribute the break-up of the Soviet Union to the state’s ethno-federal institutions are illuminating but flawed. For one thing, they almost invariably offer a one-dimensional depiction of the growth of ethnic identities in the Soviet republics prior to 1985. Although the federal structure of the USSR may have institutionalised ethnicity in some regions and thereby reinforced (or even created) ethnic identities among certain segments of the population, this did not automatically generate separatist movements when the opportunities for ethnic-related political action in the Soviet Union suddenly increased dramatically in the late 1980s. The federal structure of the USSR arguably had its greatest impact on ethnic identity formation in the Central Asian republics (where national identities were almost non-existent before the Soviet era), but no secessionist movements emerged in the region comparable to those elsewhere. On the contrary, sentiment in favour of preserving the USSR generally lasted much longer in the Central Asian republics (with the partial exception of Tajikistan) than anywhere else, including the RSFSR.

In other republics of the USSR, the impact of institutions on ethnicity was at least partly offset by policies adopted in the late 1950s to assimilate ethnic minorities. The assimilationist measures made greater headway than is often realised, even though they were in place for only a short period of time (less than 30 years). The extent of assimilation varied among republics and regions as well as among


O. Roy, La nouvelle Asie centrale, ou, La fabrication des nations, Paris 1997.
the minority groups (for example, those who lived outside their titular homelands or lacked a titular homeland were particularly vulnerable to assimilation, as were those who lived in large urban areas), but the results of the 1959, 1979 and 1989 censuses, as well as other demographic evidence presented by Barbara Anderson and Brian Silver, suggest that assimilation was indeed occurring in many areas. Whether measured by the increasing number of non-Russians who reidentified themselves as «Russian», the expanding number who regarded Russian as their «native language», the declining number who knew their titular language, the growing rate of intermarriage or some other commonly used indicator, a gradual trend toward assimilation was certainly evident in the Soviet Union from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s. Indeed, despite the impact of ethno-federal institutions and passport policies, there is ample evidence that many members of non-Russian ethnic groups belonged to those groups in name only. They did not regard their ethnic identity as important and they shared few if any of the group’s cultural and linguistic characteristics. They were also far more likely to marry outside their own group. During the Soviet period, children of mixed marriages overwhelmingly identified themselves as Russian. This two-generation assimilation process was beginning to have a significant demographic impact by the mid-1980s – at the very moment that Gorbachev reversed it. Had the Soviet Union remained under the direction of Brezhnevite leaders, the trend toward assimilation would likely have continued and possibly accelerated.

Although Soviet policies vis-à-vis nationalities were certainly contradictory – some were conducive to the deepening of ethnic identity, whereas others encouraged assimilation – the overall balance might ultimately have favoured assimilation if things had gone on as they were until 1985. The notion that Soviet policies and institutions in the pre-Gorbachev era uniformly consolidated the ethnic identity of nationalities in the USSR, and that this in turn was bound to spawn separatist movements once the «structure of political opportunities» expanded in the late 1980s, is too simplistic. Baberowski hints at this shortcoming, but he ought to have explained more fully why it casts doubt on the ethno-federal fragility thesis.


In addition, Baberowski ought to have pointed out that scholars who pin everything on ethno-federal institutions have almost all focused on the rise of separatist sentiment in the outlying Soviet republics, thus glossing over how the USSR actually ended. After the abortive coup attempt in August 1991, the Russian government promptly recognised the Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia as independent countries. The loss of those republics was not tantamount to the demise of the USSR. What actually drove the final disintegration was the challenges posed by Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin exploited the union-republic configuration of the USSR to try to eclipse the Soviet regime and establish Russia as the dominant centre of authority. In the context of the far-reaching liberalisation introduced by Gorbachev, the federal structure of the Soviet Union proved inimical to the Soviet regime insofar as it enabled the preponderant republic (the RSFSR) to wage a battle against the central government. In the pre-Gorbachev era no such challenge would have been possible, but in 1990–1991 the situation was remarkably fluid, and Russia’s bid for ascendancy posed a mortal danger to the Soviet regime. The greatly disproportionate size and importance of Russia in the Soviet state made it hard for Gorbachev to fend off this challenge. If the union-republics had been of roughly equal size and strength, Gorbachev might have been able to play them off against one another. But the dominance of Russia in the Soviet federation enabled Yeltsin to confront the Soviet government and, increasingly, to overshadow it.

The danger that Russia posed, however, was to the Soviet regime, not to the Soviet state per se. The ascendancy of the RSFSR over the Soviet government need not have meant the dissolution of the USSR. Yeltsin was willing to support independence for the Baltic republics, Georgia and Moldova, but by all indications he was hoping to preserve the rest of the union, especially the link with Ukraine and Belarus. The disintegration of the Soviet Union ultimately was driven mainly by Ukraine’s bid for independence after the aborted August 1991 coup. Until Soviet hard-liners staged their coup attempt on 19–21 August, proponents of separatism in Ukraine had made little headway, especially in the central and eastern provinces of the republic. Aside from unrest among coal miners in the Donetsk Basin and Chervonohrad, Ukraine had seemed a veritable island of stability in a sea of turmoil. When the Soviet government held a country-wide referendum in March 1991, nearly three-quarters of voters in Ukraine cast ballots in favour of «preserving the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation».

---


37 See the detailed, province-by-province tabulations in Radyans’ka Ukraina (23 March 1991), 1.
in the aftermath of the failed coup, many in Ukraine (including key elites) feared that the Soviet hard-liners would seek to regroup and seize power, reimposing harsh control over Ukraine and the other republics. Hence, three days after the coup collapsed, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a declaration of independence and scheduled a popular referendum for 1 December 1991 to ratify the declaration. This sudden flurry of events gave unstoppable momentum to the independence movement in Ukraine.

Initially, Yeltsin did not fully grasp how much the coup had changed the prevailing sentiment in Ukraine, and he sought to discourage Ukrainians from voting for independence and to work out new arrangements for a Slavic union (to include Central Asia). He and other Russian officials had always felt that to retain only the Central Asian republics (where no serious independence movements existed) along with Russia in the Soviet Union was insufficient and that if Ukraine broke away from the union, the union would no longer be worth maintaining. When the popular referendum in Ukraine on 1 December resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence, Yeltsin had to change course and abandon further attempts to preserve the union. The result was the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords that formally dissolved the Soviet state.

In that sense, Ukraine, through its bid for independence, and Russia, through its capacity to eclipse the Soviet regime, were the key republics involved in the break-up of the Soviet Union. The independence movements in outlying republics contributed to the general sense of turmoil in the Soviet Union and fuelled a perception among many Russians that the demise of the Soviet state was bound to occur and was therefore not worth resisting. But these independence movements were not what actually brought an end to the Soviet Union. What brought an end to the USSR was the stance taken by Russia in response to events in Ukraine.

---

Mark Kramer
Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies
Harvard University
1730 Cambridge Street
USA-Cambridge, MA 02138
e-mail: mkramer@fas.harvard.edu