

**Using Social Science Inquiry for Explaining Major Events in Global History: The Disintegration of the Soviet Union as a Case Study**

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**Abstract:**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a major global historical event of the 20th century that permanently changed the destiny of hundreds of millions of people around the world. It was not a revolution. It was not a transition to democracy. It was not a struggle for decolonization. No one expected a world power like the Soviet Union to disintegrate into 15 autonomous republics. Historians, social science researchers, and other observers of the Soviet Union were all surprised by the sudden collapse of a political system that was sustained for 70 years by a political ideology and which had dominated a significant portion of the global land mass, its people, cultures, and resources. How do we explain the disintegration of a super power? What theories of change may be valid in a case that has no precedent? This paper seeks to explore the causes of the disintegration of the Soviet Union through the formulation and testing of a correlative hypothesis: A strong correlation exists between the break-up of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the disintegration of the Soviet state. This hypothesis is specific, testable, verifiable, and it is supported by historical evidence and events examined in the paper.

**Key words:** social science, inquiry, history, revolution, case study, hypothesis.

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**Introduction**

In December 1991, the Soviet Union officially expired as a state. The momentous disintegration of the Soviet state into 15 autonomous nation-states was a global and indeed remarkable event that demands an explanation. What caused this historic collapse? What plausible explanation can one offer for a phenomenon which has neither parallel nor precedent in history? Where should we look for similar categories of cases in order to make generalizations or test social science

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theories of change? In this case, the predictive power of social science theories has been a huge disappointment. Theories are useful as tools for explanation when there is replication of a phenomenon, but the collapse of the Soviet Union is a case with no parallel. Looking at theories of revolutions, modernization, or regime transitions may not be useful because none of those models offer any meaningful resemblance to the Soviet case.

Other models that one may look at are perhaps those of empires and *ancien régimes*; for instance, the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions wiped out the old ruling bureaucracies and replaced them with new ones. None of those phenomena was replicated in the former Soviet Union, however. Paradoxically, in the Soviet case, the old ruling bureaucracies largely escaped unscathed and even benefited from the new free market opportunities, and yesterday's communists are today's capitalists and oligarchs. One could therefore argue that the demise of the Soviet Union cannot be compared with the demise of the *ancien régimes*.

To explain the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this paper formulates a correlative hypothesis: A strong correlation exists between the break-up of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the disintegration of the Soviet state. This hypothesis is specific, testable, verifiable, tenable, and supported by historical evidence examined in the paper.

This paper has three parts. The first part focuses on methodological problems. As the selection of a research method is a subjective decision, no method can be value-free. Solving the methodological problem becomes even more formidable when the research question is about the Soviet Union, a state that remained hidden for decades behind the Iron Curtain and offered limited access to international social science research scholars. The second part of the paper analyzes theories, perspectives, and debates on the subject of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The third part of the paper explores the possibilities of testing the correlative hypothesis through the exploratory single-case study method.

### **Theoretical Models and Research Methods**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was a massive political event. To study the "why" of this event, one needs a research method. Three research methods are commonly employed by social scientists for the study of regime change: the comparative-historical analysis, the transition to democracy model, and revolution. Comparative-historical analysis has been useful for explaining regime change. In *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore (1966) successfully and effectively applied this method to trace the origins of change in different societies, fusing theory and history to explain change. Informed by Moore's methodological

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innovation, Theda Skocpol (1979) also employed the comparative-historical analysis for comparing the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions; however, the comparative-historical method requires other comparable cases in history that do not exist in the Soviet case.

The second model, the transitions to democracy model, has been applied by Rustow (1970), O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), and Przeworski (1991), among others. These scholars used this model to explain the change from authoritarian rule to democracy in Sweden, Turkey, Latin America, and Southern and Eastern Europe. Can this model be employed effectively for the former Soviet Union? The model assumes democracy as a logical outcome—or a contingent outcome, according to Przeworski (1991)—of change from authoritarian rule. This paper, however, does not share Przeworski's assumption because it does not focus on the actual direction of change in the former Soviet Union. The singular aim of this paper is to identify one or several independent variable(s) for accidental overlapping between the processes of disintegration and transition. To make this point clear, Rustow (1970) cautioned that before the process of transition begins, there must be a "background condition" of national unity. That is to say, a nation should already have resolved its internal ethnic conflicts before it embarks upon the journey of democratic change. But in the Soviet case, the opposite is true—the dormant centrifugal movements and historical ethnic cleavages resuscitated and even intensified—so the transitions to democracy model is not applicable here.

The third model of regime change is revolution. Can one characterize the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a revolution? Revolutions are of many types, some initiated from below as in China in 1949 and in Iran in 1979, and some initiated from above, such as the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Russian Revolution in 1917, and the German revolution in 1918. If the disintegration of the Soviet Union was indeed a revolution, then it either belongs to one category of revolutions or another. Different scholars have suggested different definitions of the term "revolution"—one person's revolution may be another person's rebellion. Kotowski (1984) identifies 23 definitions of revolution proposed by three generations of scholars reflecting contending theoretical models. To define revolution is to define one's own politics. Skocpol (1979) defines revolution as: "rapid, basic transformation of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below" (p. 4). One can identify five important characteristics in Skocpol's definition: Revolution involves transformation of state organization, social structures, state-class relations, a revolutionary impulse from the peasantry in the rural areas, and rapidity. The regime change in the Soviet Union occurred from above,

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whereas Skocpol's sociological perspective emphasizes "class-based revolt" from below. Therefore, it would be fair to say that the Soviet case does not fit Skocpol's model of revolution.

Political scientists Samuel P. Huntington (1968) and Charles Tilly (1975) have also defined revolution. Even though both scholars stress the political aspects of revolution, there is disagreement between them about the origins and outcome of the phenomenon. For Huntington (1968), a revolution is "a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity and policies" (p. 264). In Huntington's framework, revolution "begins simply with a sudden recognition by almost all the passive and active membership of the society that the state no longer exists" (p. 267). He views revolution as an aspect of modernization, arguing that revolution does not occur in either highly traditional or highly modern societies; revolution occurs in modernizing societies that have seen some economic development but have not yet developed political institutions to absorb the newly emerging social groups.

Huntington's model draws criticism from Tilly (1975), who is not convinced that modernization necessarily leads to revolution. Tilly defines revolution as "a forcible transfer of power over a state through armed struggle in the course of which at least two distinct power blocs make incompatible claims to control the state, and some significant portion of the population subject to the state's jurisdiction acquiesces in the claims of each bloc." The key elements of this definition are structural, involving: (a) armed struggle; (b) two or more power blocs; and (c) the transfer of state power. For Tilly, the hallmark of a revolutionary situation is the appearance within a given population of a "multiple sovereignty," or two or more competing polities commanding the allegiances of different sections of the population and claiming the right to be the single sovereign polity. Tilly's model revolves around Max Weber's idea of the state. According to Weber, states are autonomous institutions whose agents constantly seek to expand their control both domestically and internationally. State activities revolve around four functions: war-making, state-building, protection, and extraction, all of which depend upon the state's coercive capacity. State expansion strengthens the regime but leaves society vulnerable to revolution. Tilly (1975) argues that "revolutions have occurred especially in times of state expansion." The business of the state is to expand, and the process of expansion encourages contenders from below to revolt. In other words, revolution is "politics by other means."

Before one can apply Tilly's model to the Soviet case, one must note that there was no significant struggle in the process of disintegration—indeed, the collapse was enigmatically smooth—although the role of two or more power blocs and the transfer of state power were in play. Tilly's

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concept of “multiple sovereignty” is applicable to the situation that developed between 1986 and 1991 in Russia, where the central authority was first challenged. Two tracks of “multiple sovereignty” emerged in Russia as a result of Mikhail Gorbachev’s “liberalization” policies: One “multiple sovereignty” emerged within the CPSU of Russia, and the second emerged outside the CPSU in the minority republics, a direct consequence of the first. As Tilly’s model shows, one could argue that in the Soviet Union, competing politics commanded the allegiance of the population and claimed to be the rightful and sovereign polities. As the “center” declared independence from the super-structure, the periphery had no other alternative but to follow suit. This way, Gorbachev and the Soviet Union very quickly became illegitimate and irrelevant.

Among the definitions and models of revolution discussed here, it seems that the Soviet case is unique and unprecedented. Whereas all models of revolution stress state-building, none of them leave room for the possibility of state-dismantling. Huntington (1968) states that revolution occurs in “modernizing” societies, which is to say that the society should be in the process of moving from tradition to modernity, but the Soviet Union was a fairly modern society in that its population was literate and science and technology had progressed tremendously. Huntington’s argument on the question of newly emerging groups may have some validity: There is no doubt that Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and democratization, i.e., liberalization, had emboldened certain informal social groups outside the CPSU which openly and tenaciously criticized weaknesses of the Soviet social, political, and economic system. These groups put pressure on the *nomenklatura*, forcing them to a defensive position. In a one-party system, no official channels were available for participation of the non-party groups.

Huntington’s perspective is society-centered and may be of some use as a conceptual tool for analyzing and understanding the Soviet case. There is no doubt that what happened in the former Soviet Union in 1991 was a “rapid, fundamental violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structures, leadership, and government activity and policies” (Huntington, 1968, p. 264). This definition implies that these changes in a given society signify revolution, and while that may be true, one also needs to know when and where revolution begins and ends. Huntington provides half the answer, and his assertion that “when all active and passive members of the society suddenly recognize that the state no longer exists, revolution begins” makes a valid point, but when does revolution end? Revolutionary change is a process, or “politics by other means” (Tilly, 1975). That is to say, revolution is a political process involving state and violence.

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If one applies Huntington's definition of revolution as a change in "dominant values of the society," then Marxism-Leninism would no longer be the official ideology of the state and the Party, and the social, political, and economic institutions and structures would be radically changed. But the old communists were not excluded from power under the new regimes in the former Soviet Union. Huntington's model is also useful in that the new social groups that emerged in the Soviet Union pressed their views in the newly liberated news media and influenced public opinion in favor of Russian nationalism. Questions about the Russia-Soviet Union dichotomy were raised openly for the first time. These new groups identified the burdens Russia was bearing for the sake of the Union and targeted the imperial structure of the Soviet Union for all the social and economic ills Russia was facing. It was the first time that some Russian leaders in the CPSU were influenced by the argument for the unloading of the empire. These Russian groups saw their destiny as with the prosperous West. This was a powerful argument that persuaded Communist leaders such as Boris Yeltsin to fight for Russia. For these leaders, the fate of Russia was more important than the uncertain future of the Soviet Union. In short, the newly-emerging social groups and the open dialogue enabled the political elite to make rational decisions that were Russia-centric. The CPSU elites, who were predominantly ethnic Russians and political entrepreneurs, had before them two choices: (a) to support Gorbachev's policies and continue on a downward professional spiral, or (b) to enhance their personal political and economic power in Russia under the new arrangement. Most made the second choice.

From the above discussion of the existing models, it appears that no single model offers all of the answers, and one could benefit from considering all of them. There is a methodological brick wall that any researcher confronts in the Soviet case. Perhaps it is due to this uniqueness of the Soviet case that, as yet, no well-known Sovietologist has proposed a complete model for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Considering this difficulty, this paper uses the single historical-exploratory case study method. Admittedly, perhaps the use of a single case study research design does not have as much rigor and explanatory power as the comparative or multiple case study methods, but this will serve the purpose of testing the hypothesis and provide some tentative answers to questions such as why the political system in the Soviet Union ended so suddenly, the major origins of the causes of the collapse, and why the system collapsed in 1991 and not before or after.

The goals of this paper are modest, drawing mainly on data and theoretical literature for evidence and support. Although much of the work produced about the collapse of the Soviet Union was produced mostly by both "optimist" and "pessimist" Sovietologists whose views were already

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known before the actual disintegration occurred, this paper benefits from those views nonetheless. A humble attempt is made here to go beyond traditional analyses to explore one or more specific independent variables that might have led to the disintegration of the Soviet state. One of the underlying assumptions of the paper is that understanding power relations is key to the objective analysis of politics in any polity, and the Soviet Union is no exception. One must look for the source of power, identify the place where power is located and congealed, because history shows that it is the most powerful groups in society that have the most to hide.

Why should one study the disintegration of the Soviet state? Why is this a worthwhile research project? This is important because, first of all, this political phenomenon has direct implications for the 300 million peoples of Eurasia. This historical change continues to influence the social, political, and economic aspects of many peoples around the world. The international implications of this phenomenon alone warrants researching this subject. It is thus necessary to look for the independent variable(s) causing the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the disintegration being the dependent variable.

Let us begin with the assumption that the major vertical and horizontal bond in the social, national, political, and economic life of the Soviet system was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and its elite, specifically the Russian Party elite. As power and privilege was located in the Party at the elite level, it is necessary to look at the Party itself and study the effects of *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and democratization—the liberalization measures—on its legitimacy in the period between 1986 and 1991. Under Gorbachev’s leadership, the Party elite lost its traditional and central hegemony over the affairs of the state. If the disintegration involved some kind of political conflict, as all revolutionary changes do, then this conflict emerged and grew within the Party itself. Gorbachev’s structural reforms produced some unintended consequences, leading to the end of the Party’s monopoly over power and the demise of the Soviet Union.

### **Perspectives on the Disintegration of the Soviet Union**

Western Sovietologists have offered competing perspectives on the disintegration of the Soviet state. Rational choice theory, neo-institutionalism, totalitarian-essentialism, transition to democracy, group theory, and neo-Marxist political economy have been proposed for analyzing the disintegration of the Soviet political system. Among these are the totalitarianism school and the neo-Marxist approach, as represented by historian Richard Pipes (1984) and Hillel Ticktin (1992), respectively; while these two schools of thought present opposite perspectives, they share some key essentialist assumptions, arguing that the Soviet Union was an unnatural

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arrangement and that its disintegration was imminent. Pipes (1984) links the disintegration to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and posits that the system was doomed from the start, as the October Revolution was an illegitimate seizure of power. Pipes seems to focus more on the cultural attributes of Russia than any other variables. As Martin Malia (1992) describes Pipes's approach, "The key to Sovietism lies in the Russian national tradition and a virtually changeless Russian political culture compounded of despotism above and servitude below, a tradition in which the country and its inhabitants are the property of the ruler, and sovereignty is confused with ownership... Pipes rides his claims of immutable Russianness to implausible lengths." The essentialist argument asserts that the Soviet Union was a continuation of Czarist Russia. According to this paradigm of Sovietology, one must study the Soviet Union in its historical perspective; the long history of the Russian people has shaped their character, values, and worldview, and change in the Russian ethos is not possible. Scholars such as Legvold (2016), Simes (1999), and Sestanovich (1994) are just a few among many who subscribe to this conceptual and ideological paradigm. This perspective has not specified the causes and conditions under which the collapse occurred. This school of thought also served as a forum for those interests in the West which aspired to see the collapse occur as soon as possible and made deliberate and material efforts towards that end.

The neo-Marxists seek to explain the disintegration of the Soviet Union from the political economy perspective. This perspective maintains that the Soviet Union was not a socialist system and no one particularly cared about the essence of Marxism-Leninism. The political elite class itself had no ideology, misusing Marxism-Leninism to perpetuate its own rule. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was not a political party in the Western sense simply because a single party cannot be a political party—a one-party system is a no-party system, a fact easily demonstrated by looking at the internal life of the CPSU. Local parties simply accepted instructions and decisions from above, and there was no real discussion, election, or criticism from below, or indeed any real function for the local party other than the reception of documents that nobody read. The party had no need to contest elections, campaign to change minds, or perform in the manner that communist parties did before 1917 or in the rest of the world. The party Congresses and Central Committee meetings were a forum for the elites, where the great bodies of the state, army, secret police, and the bureaucratic apparatus in their factionalized form could display themselves. The Plenum of the Central Committee that met February 6-8, 1990, marked a turning point for the Party, however. Article 6 of the Constitution, which enshrined the special role of the Communist Party, was slated for removal; meanwhile, the Party would become more democratic and multiparty elections were to be permitted. By this time, the

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Soviet elite preferred to rule using formal elections, assuming that their own party would obtain sufficient consent to maintain the system by continuing the status quo.

The neo-Marxists do not believe that the Soviet economy was a planned economy in the sense that planning required knowledge, consistency, and means of implementation of the directives. The Soviet system was not a mode of production like capitalism and communism; it was neither a market economy nor a planned economy. Both of these economic systems are governed by their own respective laws, but the Soviet economic system had no laws. To make the economy efficient, Gorbachev had to introduce “market socialism” reforms, but any attempts at reforming the system would have produced more chaos and disorder. The neo-Marxists argued that there were three sets of laws operating in that epoch: the laws of capitalism itself, the laws of a declining capitalism, and the laws of transition. Capitalism was on the decline and the world was in a transition to a new mode of production that had not yet been born. The disintegration of the Soviet Union was a part of that global transition and must be seen as a part of that change.

The change in the Soviet Union was not a transition to a free market economy or a liberal democracy. No one knew what lay ahead. Tickin’s (1992) neo-Marxist approach identifies the origins of the decay in the Soviet system before the collapse; perhaps this is the only theoretical framework with predictive and explanatory power, claiming that the Western Sovietologists misunderstood the Soviet system by equating it with communism when, indeed, it was not a communist system. Putting it differently, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not the collapse of communism, as some Western Sovietologists such as Pipes (1990), Malia (1992), and Mandelbaum (1991) have suggested. Alternative paradigms (rational choice and neo-institutionalism), as proposed by Seweryn Bialer (1992), did not make any predictions before the collapse but identified the sources of deep economic crises in Gorbachev’s period. Bialer’s liberal micro-economic approach focused on the industrial production aspect of the system, arguing that Gorbachev’s reforms served as a catalyst for institutional collapse. The planning/command economic system could be dismantled but not reformed. The analyses of Bialer, Pipes, and Malia have always been harsh regarding the Soviet Union and communism; one might suggest that their analyses and conclusions were tinged with Cold War ideological biases. More importantly, one could say that most of those explanations suffered from the fallacy of retrospective speculations.

#### **The Soviet Union as an Exploratory Case Study**

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The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics, of which Russia was the dominant republic. Like an empire, the Soviet state collapsed and spun off the smaller republics from the core. A plausible explanation for the collapse warrants a closer look at the nature of social, political, economic, cultural, and historical relationships between Russia and the rest of the republics. The Soviet Union had not been able to become a nation—Russia was the core of the Soviet system around which the other republics gravitated for about 73 years and would have perhaps continued to do so. Without looking at Russia's pivotal position in the Soviet political and economic System, any explanation of the collapse would remain deficient and wanting. As Bialer (1992) pointed out, "Russia was the Soviet Union." One of the central arguments of this paper is that the major cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union was Russia itself. It was no longer in the interest of the Russian Party elite to carry the burden of the Union, so when the elite decided to remove the political linchpin, the Communist Party, the Soviet Union collapsed.

Let us discuss briefly the official role of the CPSU in the Soviet Union. Article 6 of the 1977 Constitution defines the role of the CPSU in these words:

The leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organizations and public organizations, is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The CPSU exists for the people and serves the people. The Communist Party, armed with Marxism-Leninism, determines the general perspectives of the development of society and the course of home and foreign policy of the USSR, directs the great constructive work of the Soviet people, and imparts a planned, systematic and theoretically substantiated character to their struggle for the victory of communism. All party organizations shall function within the framework of the Constitution of the USSR.

The CPSU had no rivals for power. As it was a permanent ruling party, it did not have to justify its every action before an opposition. It could—and did—ignore public opinion over the years. The CPSU justified its own existence in terms of its understanding of Marxism-Leninism, said to embody scientific truths about human society, laws of development that were universally applicable. Marxism-Leninism was described as "a universal scientific theory, which was constantly developing and being enriched by the workers' struggle for socialism in the whole Leninist principles and policies." The Party claimed to be the only genuine defender of workers' rights and that it had the exclusive right to scientific truth. In the words of Mikhail Suslov, an ideologue of the Politburo, "The policy of the CPSU is strictly scientific. It is built on a profound knowledge of the laws of social development, and it comprehensively takes into account the various conditions of the country's internal life, and also the whole system of international

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relations.” On the basis of this understanding, the Party was required to reject as false all other alternative policies, be they bourgeois, nationalist, or religious. It was thus this ideology that legitimated the Party and gave it a great deal of power in policy-making and implementation. The most important question examines the Party’s relationship with the state and the state institutions. In theoretical terms, Marxism-Leninism asserts that the state represents the domination of the bourgeois class and is, therefore, an undesirable institution. With the proletariat revolution and the establishment of communism, the state must wither away. In practice, however, the CPSU did the opposite, strengthening the state by controlling all the social, political, and economic levers.

The CPSU had the characteristics of an elite organization. First of all, the membership of the Party was restricted. The Party was a functional group that had a high status in society and played an exceptionally influential role in political and social affairs. The Party members enjoyed access to privileged information. Some students of the Soviet system argue that the 19 million members of the CPSU could not have enjoyed equal power and privilege and that because of the enormous size of the CPSU, one should not call it an elite group. But size was irrelevant since decisions were made exclusively by the Party at both micro and macro levels.

Relative to Russia, other republics were not as crucial in the early process of the collapse. This is so because the CPSU was essentially a Russian entity. Other republics simply reacted to the unfolding drama in Moscow, but the final decisions were made in Russia and it is there where one must look for answers. For some of the republics, this divorce was an unpleasant surprise: the Central Asian republics, for example, had shown little desire to become autonomous nation-states. The Union was not a real federation but a monolithic party-state, and its republics were simply administrative sub-divisions created to give a fictitious recognition to minority nationalisms while reserving all real power for Moscow.

The economic infrastructure developed over a period of 75 years or more left the non-Russians as dependent peoples. Sultan Nazarbaev, the president of Kazakhstan, commented that he could not imagine being independent of the Union and moved very quickly to propose the idea of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It was the irony of history that nationhood intruded on those who did not seek it. In fact, most of the republics had never existed before in the form of nations or countries; entities such as Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan were Soviet administrative creations. By no means does this suggest that nationalist and centrifugal forces did not operate in the Soviet Union. Indeed, deeply entrenched nationalist factions operated at the Soviet and local levels in almost all republics. Groups such as the Tartars, Azeris, Chechens,

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Georgians, and others had always been suspicious of the Russians, but there was hardly any evidence of armed struggle for independence from the Union except in the Baltics. The final decision for the independence of these future nations was made in Russia and not by the individual Communist Parties in the minority Republics.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was controlled and run by Russians. Russians made up 55 percent of the Soviet population but 75 percent of the Presidium and Secretariat. The CPSU suffered from internal ethnic tensions, and Russians and non-Russians were divided on many economic and national questions. Party elites in Central Asia and Transcaucasia controlled the republics as their fiefdoms and paid lip service to the center; non-Russian Party elites in other republics amassed private wealth and businesses, which worried the central command of the Party. But in spite of the widespread corruption and abuse of power by the Party and bureaucratic *nomenklatura*, the system was still stable for a long time. To put it differently, the system had problems with effectiveness but its survival was not in question. No one living in the country could foresee the prospects of a total disintegration of the Soviet state. Perhaps the system would have continued if it been left alone.

Mikhail Gorbachev was a committed communist who sought to modernize the Soviet Union. His vision was to make the economy more efficient and the Party more democratic, although he was not a Jeffersonian democrat and did not believe in a multiparty system. But he knew that the system he inherited was defective to the core. On the one hand, the Soviet Union claimed to be a superpower, spending a large portion of its scarce resources on the military; on the other hand, the technology it used for manufacturing consumer goods was obsolete. The standard of living of its people had declined, the bread lines were getting longer. Gorbachev had traveled to the West and the newly industrialized nations of the Far East, and he observed that the technological world had changed. He was not satisfied with the obsolete technology in the Soviet Union. In his view, the political and economic system needed reformation. If the Soviet Union would compete in the global economy, it needed the latest technology and a more responsive political system. Gorbachev was a man with a different worldview than his predecessors or the hard core conservative Party leaders around him—his goal was to modernize the country by integrating into the capitalist world economy. As the disintegration of the Soviet Union occurred on Gorbachev's watch, it is necessary to look at those five or six years and examine the policies he intended to implement, how and why he planned to implement them, and his constituency and power-base.

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Gorbachev's reforms involved compromises, maneuvering, resistance, defections, the breakup of the Party, the August 1991 coup, his own downfall, and finally, the collapse of the Soviet state itself. His policy of *glasnost* (openness and transparency) relaxed bureaucratic controls on information, broadening the parameters of permitted discussion and thereby enabling the people of the Soviet Union to say more, hear more, and learn more about their past and present. Gorbachev's purpose had been to enlist the intelligentsia in his campaign to revitalize the country and to generate popular pressure on the party apparatus, which had resisted the changes he was trying to make. He wanted to encourage criticism of his predecessor, Leonid Brezhnev, and to resume former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's campaign against Stalin. But *glasnost* did not stop there—Gorbachev himself could not escape criticism. The democratization program was Gorbachev's weapon in his battle against the Party apparatchiks. Free elections in 1989 and 1990 showed that the people had contempt for the Communist Party of Soviet Union. Democratization also created the opportunity for the beginnings of an alternative to the Party elite to emerge.

Gorbachev, who had risen through the ranks of the Party, was selected for his energy and personal spark to advance the communist cause. A longstanding member of the Party but not of its inner core, he was ideally suited to reform the ossified apparatus. He soon learned that he had inherited a tottering structure, no part of which could be repaired without fixing the other parts, too. For instance, the achievement of his economic goals, he said, would depend primarily on technological modernization which would be bought by shunting investment into civilian production. Since it would take some time for state-of-the-art machinery to be available, the government would have to make efficient use of existing human and material resources.

Gorbachev wanted to "put things in order." The aim was to crack down on sloppiness and complacency in personnel. This was reflected in May 1985 decrees curbing the sales of alcohol. In April 1985, he launched *Perestroika* (restructuring of the economic mechanism). The economic crisis was in fact created by the political system, and the system was run by the Party, of which he was the General Secretary. For the economic reforms to succeed, Gorbachev wanted to mobilize the Party apparatus. *Perestroika* was not popular among the Party elite, the conservative *nomenklatura*, and they opposed reforms. Frustrated by this resistance, Gorbachev decided to invoke popular support. He shifted the center of gravity from Party to state, depriving the Party of its monopoly status as the country's only legitimate political organization, reduced the Politburo to impotence, and stripped the Party of the bulk of its revenues. His dilemma was that he could not find a way, as Lenin did, to break the economic decline without weakening the Party. He could not part with the Leninist tradition of saving the Party by making tactical

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adjustments, and he could not make tactical adjustments without endangering the Party. In *The August Coup*, Gorbachev (1991) described this dilemma:

From the very beginning of the crisis brought about by the radical transformation of our society, I tried not to allow an explosive resolution of the contradictions to take place. I wanted to gain time by making tactical moves, so as to allow the democratic process to acquire sufficient stability to ease out the old ways and to strengthen people's attachments to the new values. In short I wanted to bring the country in a stage where any such attempt to seize power would be doomed to failure. My principal objective was, despite all the difficulties, to continue along the course of reform and however painful it might be, to keep the process moving on political and in constitutional lines. (p. 13)

This is another way of saying that he started out by thinking that he could manage reforms with the cadres and within the traditions of the old Party. He soon found that even his tentative reforms were anathema to the "neo-Stalinists," as he called them. In order to maintain the unity of the Party, he adopted a policy of maneuvering and compromise. In effect, the residual Leninism of Party loyalty enabled the neo-Stalinists to hold on and dig in.

Gorbachev's program can be described as political liberalization within a strong one-party system, with economic reform remaining within a socialist framework. The great historical question which Gorbachev took upon himself to answer was whether political liberalization was compatible with a one-party system, and economic reform with what passed for socialism in the Soviet Union. Yet Gorbachev came to recognize that he had to loosen the dead hand of the Party in order to move forward. His first move was to try to substitute the state machinery for the Party apparatus. It was not enough because the Party permeated the state as it did all other institutions in the country. The Party directed and controlled the state because every state official was put there by the Party to carry out the Party line.

By 1990-1991, a serious vertical conflict on generational lines had developed in the Party between the conservative (right-wing) old guard and the supporters (left-wing) of reforms. The conservatives insisted on keeping the system and the status quo intact while their opponents demanded a radical market-oriented economic change. A dramatic change was the emergence of legitimate anti-communist forces in the Russian republic, the RSFSR, with a freely elected leader who had his own structural base of support. These radical counterweights—Boris Yeltsin, Democratic Russia, the separatist movements—made Gorbachev's centrist strategy more and more untenable. Gorbachev juggled between the left and the right for support of his centrist

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position. He tried to please all sides, but he could not long continue this oscillation. A revolutionary process was setting in.

The emergence of cleavage in authoritarian regimes has been discussed in the work of “transition” theorists such as Przeworski (1991) and O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986). According to the “transitional process model,” the emergence of a difference of opinion between hardliners and soft-liners is the beginning of the process of change. The two opposing groups see and interpret events from incompatible perspectives. In the Soviet case, the two groups squeezing Gorbachev from ideologically opposite sides had one goal in common: the political and economic self-sufficiency of Russia. The first group, a conservative alliance of neo-Stalinists, National Bolsheviks, and conservative Russian nationalists, wanted to boost Marxism-Leninism fused with Russian imperial nationalism. In addition, this conservative alliance wanted the same institutions, such as a Russian Communist party, that were enjoyed by the minority republics. Their plan included the preservation of the Soviet Union at any cost. Moreover, Russia should use force if necessary to keep the minority republics within the Soviet Union. Another group, “democrats” and sworn opponents of the conservatives, also emerged for the cause of Russian economic self-sufficiency. This coalition wanted the RSFSR to be politically and economically sovereign and separate from the Soviet Union, with the Soviet Union as a confederation with lesser authority. Throughout his period of rule, Gorbachev attempted to counter the agendas of these two powerful coalitions. Gorbachev wanted to preserve the Russian-USSR linkup in the minds of ethnic Russians. Contrary to the goal of narrowing the structural asymmetries between Russia and minority republics, he struggled to maintain the Soviet Union as a unitary state. At every step, Gorbachev resisted the proposition for Russian autarchy. The democrats argued that the population of RSFSR was 140 million people (about 10.6 million Communist Party members), deserving of special treatment. Despite Gorbachev’s objections, the democrats succeeded in organizing their own Russian Communist Party in 1990.

That year, Boris Yeltsin was elected to the chairmanship of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet. Yeltsin quickly declared the republic’s sovereignty and established, for the first time, Russia’s foreign ministry, radio and television station, newspaper, and a separate KGB. To counter Yeltsin’s bold moves for self-sufficiency, Gorbachev tried to weaken his opponent by dividing the RSFSR in several separate autonomous economic regions, but Gorbachev’s efforts did not succeed. One Yeltsin supporter described Gorbachev’s action thusly: “Gorbachev would have earned a place in Russian history as a great reformer had he not made his principal error, the error of tearing Russia

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apart. Russia does not forgive such transgressions, for Gorbachev bears a great political blame for the anti-Russian direction of his politics.”

At this stage, Yeltsin emerged as a more powerful and dominating figure in Russian politics, having shown personal courage, political savvy, and a determination for change. In 1991, Yeltsin’s election as president of the RSFSR catapulted him to a comparable political position with Gorbachev, if not higher. Now Yeltsin enjoyed the legitimacy in the Russian republic that Gorbachev lacked. He began his struggle against the center for the rights of Russia. He took bold steps by signing treaties and economic agreements with other republics without seeking Moscow’s blessing; for instance, in 1990 he signed a treaty with Ukraine in which both sides recognized each other as sovereign states.

Yeltsin and other democrats had limited their demands to the so-called legitimate rights of Russia within a confederation framework of the USSR. At the public level, no significant movement had yet emerged for a complete breaking of ties with the Union, as extreme separatist impulses simply were not popular in Russia at that time. But a rapid change of opinion was occurring among the public. For example, in a 1989 poll, the results of which were published in the weekly magazine *Ogonek*, 63.4 percent of the RSFSR citizens contacted gave a high priority to preserving “the unity and cohesion of the USSR,” but a poll taken in September 1990 showed strong public support for Yeltsin’s policies of pursuing sovereignty for the Russian republic and of offering a broad degree of self-rule to the autonomous formations within the RSFSR. If the entire Gorbachev period witnessed a rapid succession of dramatic events, then high drama continued in the RSFSR in the second half of 1991. In June, the republic’s bid for full sovereignty received a significant boost when Yeltsin was elected President of RSFSR with 57.3 percent of the vote.

After months of bitter rivalry, Yeltsin and Gorbachev succeeded in coming to a rough agreement concerning the political and economic shape of a future Union of Sovereign States. The scheduled signing of the union treaty, scheduled for August 20, 1991, precipitated the failed coup of August 18-21. The coup proved to be an earthquake for the Soviet state. As a consequence of the coup, President Boris Yeltsin made radical decisions including outlawing the Communist Party, disassembling the KGB, and side-stepping the de jure authority of the Soviet Union. In addition to Yeltsin’s rebellion, on December 1, the Ukrainian parliament also voted for full independence from the Soviet Union.

The tumultuous processes resulting from Gorbachev’s accession and his programs of *glasnost* and democratization had, for the first time in 73 years, required ethnic Russians to consciously

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define their relationship to the Soviet empire. It seems that during the last two years of the Soviet Union, the Russian elite faced the choice between “empire-saving” and “nation-building.” Polls show that Russians were unwilling to use force for preserving the Union. The legitimacy of the CPSU had eroded. Surveys conducted in July 1990 indicate that the number of citizens who fully trusted the CPSU had declined to 14 percent. Criticism of Gorbachev’s leadership intensified from all sides. The plotters of the August coup were Gorbachev’s closest advisers who believed in the use of force, although it was unpopular among Russians. (This reluctance to use force may have been a result of the massive loss of life in the war in Afghanistan during the 1980s; according to one estimate, over 20,000 Russian men were killed in the war.)

### **Conclusion**

The causes of disintegration of the Soviet state may be several. But one must search for answers in RSFSR in general and the Russian elite of the CPSU in particular. Moreover, because the Soviet state was a political edifice, one needs to analyze in detail the structural relations between the units. The central linchpin of the structure was the CPSU, which functioned quite efficiently for half a century and had, undoubtedly, a number of social and economic achievements to its credit. But during the last two decades, it lost interest in the welfare of the workers it was supposed to lead. In theory, it was the Party’s responsibility to interpret Marxism-Leninism according to the changing global environment, but it failed to respond adequately to the emerging changes in the capitalist world economy. The CPSU remained rigid and stuck to stale slogans and ideas. The *nomenklatura* enjoyed privileges and behaved like aristocrats while the quality of life declined for the general public. These are just a few of the many contradictions the Party suffered. In short, the CPSU was no longer the vanguard party it was meant to be. It had lost credibility, legitimacy, and purpose. Once this linchpin snapped, the structure fell apart, for there was nothing to sustain it from below.

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