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The collapse of the Soviet Union, 1990–1991

ALEX PRAVDA

Just as the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution defined the start of the 'short' twentieth century, so the ending of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR marked its completion. The two stories should not be conflated. The demise of the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly the result of domestic factors: in the liberal climate of perestroika, ethnic nationalist movements flourished and provided effective vehicles for republican elites who were looking to gain power at the expense of a Kremlin weakened by mounting economic troubles and deepening political divisions. In this predominantly domestic process, international factors associated with the ending of the Cold War played a significant if secondary role. This chapter will consider how they helped to accentuate two outstanding features of the process of collapse: its speed and its remarkably peaceful course.

The domestic story

Before examining how external factors came into play, let us consider briefly the domestic course and dynamics of the story they affected. The Soviet collapse involved two intertwined processes: the transformation of the Communist regime and the disintegration of the highly centralised Union. Regime change came from the top: the Kremlin drove a project of radical liberalisation (perestroika, or restructuring) which by 1990 had transcended the Communist system of rule. The union was undermined from below: nationalist publics and elites pressed for greater autonomy from the centre. In the first act of the drama of collapse, in 1989–90, the pressure in the main was for sovereignty and came from smaller union republics in the Baltic region and the Caucasus. In the second act, which ran from late 1990 through the end of 1991, the larger republics – Ukraine and, crucially, Russia – declared sovereignty (see Map 3). Russian leadership gave enormous impetus to the republican cause and progressively undermined the centre's capacity to withstand

Map 3. Successor states of the USSR

the growing centrifugal tide. With the elected Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin, championing the causes of both republican nationalism and radical political change, the fight to reduce Moscow's hold over the republics merged with the struggle for power at the centre. Economic crisis and political polarisation made it increasingly difficult for Mikhail Gorbachev to steer a centrist reform course. After the failed hard-line coup of August 1991, the Soviet leader found himself unable to salvage the reformed regime or to get agreement on a looser union. Yeltsin and the radical agenda won the day: in November the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was banned, and in December the USSR was superseded by the Commonwealth of Independent States.[1]

There is no simple explanation for the Soviet collapse; 'essentialist' interpretations, which highlight the self-destructive nature of totalitarianism and the inevitability of imperial disintegration, fail to capture the complexity of the process.[2] To be sure, structural features of the system mattered a great deal. The multinational federalism of the USSR made it easier in terms of both

1 For the detailed chronology of republican declarations, see Edward W. Walker, *Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 64, 83, 140.

2 Alexander Dallin, 'Causes of the Collapse of the USSR', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 8, 4 (1992), 279–81, and Alexander Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 49–51, 67.

constitution and organisation to press for greater republican autonomy. The intertwined structures of Communist Party and state meant that moves to relax rigid centralism in the former destabilised the latter in ways the leadership failed to anticipate. But contingent factors were vitally important. It is unlikely that the process that ended in collapse would have started without the drive of an exceptional leader, Gorbachev, determined to reinvigorate the system through radical reform. And it would not have gone so fast and so far without the mobilising skills of local nationalists and the eagerness of opportunist republican elites to jump on to the nationalist bandwagon, and without the miscalculations of the Kremlin in dealing with both.[3]

The policy of glasnost (or openness) started the nationalist ball rolling in 1987–88. Kremlin reformers encouraged popular debate and agitation for change – even where this assumed nationalist forms – to help create a groundswell of support for perestroika. The new liberal climate encouraged ethnic groups to air long-standing grievances, whether against other groups, as in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, or whether against Moscow, as in the case of the Crimean Tatars' campaign for the right to return to their homeland. From mid-1988, ethnic protests became more frequent, larger, and better organised; 1989 saw the rise in Georgia and the Baltic states of powerful separatist movements. These waves of protest swelled tides of nationalism that swept over Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine.[4]

The prominence in this upsurge of nationalism of the Baltic and Caucasian republics reflected the particular resilience in these regions of ethnic identity and national ambition. Both existed, if at lower levels of intensity, throughout the USSR. Their survival was due in part to the duality of a nationality policy that had long tried to create an overarching Soviet identity while providing an institutional and cultural framework for multinationalism, in the hope of avoiding any nationalist backlash. As long as the whole Soviet political system

3 Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 8; Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 206–10; and his chapter in this volume. See also Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. 17, 47–48, 132, and Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

4 Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 30–36, 64–66, 186–90, 296–99. From early 1988, the Armenian majority in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region within Azerbaijan, pressed for unity with Armenia; their campaign sparked violent ethnic conflict and fuelled nationalist protest in both republics.

remained under tight control, as it did until perestroika, this dual strategy worked relatively well to contain serious centrifugal nationalism. Against this background, it is understandable that in the early years of perestroika Gorbachev did not regard nationality policy as an urgent problem. The trouble was that, as nationalist protest escalated, the Soviet leader continued to underestimate the strength of popular feeling involved. He tended to attribute the protests to economic discontent, inept local officials, and the agitation of a handful of opportunistic secessionists.[5]

The power play of local elites played a crucial role in the rapid rise of organised protest. Moscow failed to understand the extent to which opportunistic local elites helped mobilise nationalist discontent in order to strengthen their positions at home as well as enhance their role at union level. Nowhere did this drive for power matter more than in the emergence of the Russian Republic as the main challenger to federal authority. In an astute move, Yeltsin, who had broken openly with Gorbachev by mid-1990, became the champion of nationalist struggle throughout the country. Once the Russian heartland of the union threw its weight behind the campaign for greater republican powers – the Russian parliament declared sovereignty in June 1990 – the balance of the contest between centre and republics began to shift decisively in favour of the latter.

Yeltsin's adoption of the nationalist cause fused the struggle between Moscow and the republics with the fight over power at the centre. Political polarisation in Moscow and the increasingly fierce contest over the direction of change dominated and distinguished the second act of the drama of collapse. Gorbachev's efforts to hold a centrist line of reform came under ever more intense fire from both radicals and traditionalists. Yeltsin, his authority boosted by his election as Russian president in June 1991, led a coalition of nationalists and radical democrats which pressed the Kremlin to transform the regime and the federation. At the same time, Gorbachev found himself under growing pressure from conservative forces to retrench on both fronts. Beleaguered politically, the Soviet leader also found himself plagued by mounting economic problems.

Gorbachev responded to the growing economic and political crisis by veering first in a conservative direction, in the winter of 1990–91, and then back towards the radical reform course that remained close to his heart. On the republican front, a half-hearted attempt to take a tough line was followed by moves to deal

5 Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000), ix, 107, 187–88, 394.

25. Protesters from the provinces near Red Square, Moscow, 1990. As the economic crisis intensified, the number of protests increased.

with the challenge by negotiating a looser federation through a new union treaty. The impending treaty sounded the final alarm for those conservatives who had long felt that the country was heading for disaster. In August 1991, hard-liners in the party, the military, and the Soviet security and intelligence agency, the KGB, mounted a coup to displace Gorbachev and use force to establish control over radical democrats and nationalists alike. The poorly organised coup collapsed in the face of determined resistance led by Yeltsin, who rallied radical democrat and nationalist forces and considerable popular support in Moscow. In the event, the putschists managed to strengthen the very forces they had intended to defeat, and in the process hastened the collapse of what remained of Communist Party and federal power.

In the final scene of the drama in the months following the putsch, Gorbachev accepted the independence of the Baltic states, yet still attempted, against overwhelming odds, to salvage some form of confederation. With the prize of becoming presidents of independent states almost within their grasp, republican leaders were unwilling to accept any compromise. Yeltsin and his allies in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan dealt Gorbachev and the USSR a fatal blow in December 1991 by establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States.

International factors

The Soviet collapse was shaped overwhelmingly by domestic factors. External developments had a largely indirect impact on changes within the USSR, through the cumulative effects of underlying shifts in the international landscape and as a result of strategic moves that opened the Soviet Union to outside influence. Both kinds of developments made a difference by affecting the conditions in which the domestic political game was played out. Only on occasion did external factors intervene in developments more directly by influencing the behaviour of key domestic actors. Through a combination of 'conditioning' and 'intervening' effects, the international developments associated with the ending of the Cold War made a significant contribution to the process of collapse, and in particular to the speed and relatively peaceful nature of its course.

There were two areas in which underlying developments and strategic moves relating to the international position of the Soviet Union had important conditioning effects on the process of its disintegration: pressures on the economy and greater opening up to the West.

Problems of external pressure and economic performance were connected with the process of collapse, though less centrally and directly than they appear from accounts that credit American containment strategies, especially as pursued by President Ronald Reagan, with a crucial role in bringing an end both to the Cold War and to the Soviet Union. To be sure, the arms race squeezed resources available for consumer production. And complaints about Moscow's management of the economy formed part of nationalist platforms; but, typically, they served as adjuncts to the emotional and political case for independence. The sharp deterioration in the economic state of the country in 1990–91 certainly reduced the capacity of the centre to cope with political challenges at the periphery and in Moscow itself. The economic crisis was, however, connected less with international pressure than with the failings of the command economy and the flawed attempts at its reform.[6]

It could be argued that external material pressures, military and economic, had an impact on the domestic scene by way of the strains they imposed on Moscow's imperial rule in Eastern Europe and beyond. But the growing costs of empire were a cause for concern rather than a major reason for the radical liberal turn in Moscow's stance towards the region that came with Gorbachev's accession. It was in Moscow's Third World ventures that

6 Philip Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy: An Economic History of the USSR from 1945* (London: Longmans, 2003), chs. 7–9.

symptoms of the overextension often associated with imperial decline were more visible. Yet, even in the case of Afghanistan, the economic and military costs were far from crippling and formed part of a wider political reassessment which led to the decision to withdraw troops. For those seeking greater autonomy within the USSR, the withdrawal was significant less as a sign of general imperial erosion than as a strong signal of the new priority assigned to political rather than coercive means of managing challenges.

External material pressures exercised their most powerful influence by helping to spur the critical reassessment that produced Gorbachev's doctrinal revolution ('new thinking') and perestroika. The steady and growing lag of economic performance behind that of the developed capitalist states underscored the infirmity of the Soviet system and reinforced the case for a change in direction. The results of the re-appraisal were reforms to invigorate the system and to foster co-operation with the West, in part to ease the passage of domestic re-structuring.[7]

A key feature of the strategic changes associated with perestroika was a greater openness: freer debate at home and a freer dialogue with the West. Previous decades had seen some opening up to the outside, mainly through growing engagement with the West in areas of trade and arms control. The process of détente had made possible significant transnational flows of ideas between specialists, especially in the field of foreign and security policy.[8] Eager to reap the benefits of agreements on arms, trade, and inviolability of borders, Moscow had signed up to the human rights provisions in Basket III of the Helsinki Act. In principle, this had increased the exposure to international norms of what had always been a closed fortress state.[9] But Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Iurii Andropov had kept the fortress gates under lock and key. It was only under Gorbachev that they were opened and the revolutionary thesis propounded that some values and rights, including freedom of political choice, were universally valid. Such radical doctrinal change helped legitimate the efforts of those pressing for self-determination within the USSR. And with capitalist states no longer seen as inveterate adversaries, it was more difficult to treat nationalist challenges to Moscow as threats to national security. With understanding and co-operation as watchwords of the new foreign policy, there was little justification for the barriers that had traditionally insulated the Soviet Union against foreign influence: Gorbachev moved to ease restrictions on travel and to stop the jamming of Western broadcasts.

[7] See Archie Brown's chapter in this volume.
[8] See Matthew Evangelista's chapter in this volume.
[9] See Rosemary Foot's chapter in this volume.

This opening up to the West had three kinds of effect on the process of Soviet collapse. First, the reduction of controls over channels of communication and contact gave nationalist activists freer access to diaspora groups, other non-governmental organisations, and foreign governments. Their political support and material aid encouraged nationalists to press their demands; the case they made for non-violent methods helped to make nationalist protest action remarkably peaceful.

Secondly, the greater openness of the Soviet leadership to Western counterparts gave foreign statesmen a chance to reinforce Gorbachev's predisposition to respond to nationalist challenges with political rather than coercive means. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev was prepared to discuss domestic problems with Westerners; and, as turmoil deepened, he paid more attention to their counsel of caution. The third and last way in which greater openness affected the process of collapse was through its impact on the polarisation of domestic politics which dominated the second act of the drama. Outrage at the concessions in arms agreements and the losses in Eastern Europe helped spur the conservative opposition to mount the August 1991 coup, the failure of which hastened the demise of the union it was designed to save.

If Gorbachev's foreign-policy revolution opened up domestic developments to influences from the 'far abroad' of the West, it was through the 'near abroad' of Eastern Europe that external factors arguably had their most extensive impact on the process of collapse. What happened in Eastern Europe had special significance for those within the USSR who saw Moscow exercising imperial rule over their republics. And the thick institutional connections linking East European party, state, and non-governmental networks with their Soviet counterparts ensured that developments were quickly transmitted in both directions. Awareness of the dangers of contagion had traditionally prompted the Kremlin to try and restrict contacts with Eastern Europe at times of turmoil in the outer empire. Under Gorbachev, tradition was turned on its head: the Kremlin hoped that Hungarian and Polish reformers might show what perestroika strategies could achieve and was happy to see glasnost spread the reformist message.

The demonstration effects of radical reform in neighbouring socialist states helped to nourish nationalist movements within the union, while the flow of information and advice from Eastern Europe helped inform their strategies.[10]

10 Mark Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5, 4 (Fall 2003), 204–05;

More importantly, activists pressing for greater republican independence of Moscow followed with great interest the Kremlin's response to developments in Eastern Europe as some indicator of its likely reaction to challenges at home. The fact that Moscow refrained from interfering in Poland and Hungary, even in 1989 when reforms went well beyond the perestroika agenda, gave nationalist leaders hope that Gorbachev's commitment to universal freedom of choice and the avoidance of force might constrain coercive action even within the USSR.

The Baltic struggle for independence

In any assessment of how East European influences and Western responses figured in the development of nationalist movements in the Soviet Union, the Baltic states occupy a special place. The Caucasus produced more violently disruptive nationalist protest. Strong ethnic nationalism in Azerbaijan and Georgia generated particularly forceful drives for independence which Moscow found difficult to contain. Both republics declared sovereignty in the autumn of 1989, and a year later the Georgians voted into power a radical nationalist and anti-Communist government. It was in the western republics, however, that the changes associated with the ending of the Cold War had their greatest impact on nationalist movements.

Of the western republics, the Baltic states stand out in terms of their susceptibility to external influence. They were, together with Moldova and the western regions of Ukraine, the most 'East European' of the union republics, in terms of historical and cultural affinity. And they retained a quasi-East European international status insofar as Western governments never formally recognised their incorporation into the USSR.

The most extensive impact of Eastern Europe on nationalist protest in the western republics came through demonstration effects. Activists in the Baltic region and Ukraine looked with admiration at the spectacular progress of radical popular movements in the outer empire and used their successes to mobilise support for the nationalist cause.[11] The impact of demonstration effects was reinforced by the diffusion of strategies and tactics from the 'outer' to the 'inner' empire: the revolutionary developments in Eastern

Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part II)', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 6, 4 (Fall 2004), 69–73; and Brown, *Seven Years*, ch. 8.

11 Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 194–95.

Europe helped shape the 'repertoires of contention' of nationalist movements in the western Soviet republics.[12]

Most actively engaged in direct diffusion activities were members of Solidarity, both before and after coming to power in Poland. In its trades union guise, Solidarity helped to inspire the organisation of independent labour unions by miners in the summer of 1989 which saw the radicalization of popular protest throughout western Ukraine. In the western regions of Galicia and Transcarpathia, Catholicism reinforced identity with the Poles and fed the groundswell of national feeling. More direct support for nationalist mobilization came from visits of Solidarity leaders who, much to the Kremlin's consternation, toured nationalist 'hot spots' and made contacts with 'anti-Soviet groups'.[13]

In Lithuania, smaller and more susceptible to external influence, Poland had a considerable impact. Sajudis, the organisation that set the tone for nationalist politics in Lithuania, actively sought contact with Solidarity. According to intelligence from the Soviet embassy in Warsaw, Solidarity officials used the meetings to promote their model as the most effective means of struggle and aspired to become the 'co-ordinating centre' of a new region-wide anti-Communist alliance. The actual advice Solidarity leaders offered was apparently sensible rather than militant, cautioning against haste or euphoria about self-liberation, and making the case for a cautious approach.[14] A concern to encourage caution and moderation also coloured the Polish government's public stance on Lithuanian developments. As the new post-Communist governments of Eastern Europe gained in confidence, their encouragement of Baltic and Ukrainian efforts to claim sovereignty became more open, yet remained tempered by recommendations to proceed prudently along the path to independence.[15]

12 Mark Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part III)', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 7, 1 (Winter 2005), 90–91, 94–95.

13 Gorbachev referred to such visits in these terms during his meeting with Polish Communist Party leader Mięczystaw Rakowski on 11 October 1989, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation. See also Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism (Part I)', 216–17, and Bohdan Nahaylo, *The Ukrainian Resurgence* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 208, 229, 240–41.

14 'Informatsiia posol'stva v Respublike Pol'sha v Mezhdunarodnyi otdel TsK KPSS, "O kontaktakh 'Solidarnosti' s 'nezavisymi' politicheskimi dvizhenyiami vostochnoevropeiskikh stran"', 15 February 1990, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, *fond* 89, reel 1.990, *opis'* 8, file 63.

15 Nahaylo, *The Ukrainian Resurgence*, 306, 324.

A similar combination of strategic encouragement and tactical restraint emerges when one considers the pattern of influences from émigré organisations, publics, and governments in Western Europe and the United States. Émigré organisations were the strongest source of support for a radical nationalist agenda. Members of the Lithuanian diaspora were especially active in encouraging compatriots to set their sights firmly on nothing short of independence. Non-governmental organisations in the United States and Western Europe were also a source of support and publicity for the nationalist cause. For over a year after the Lithuanian declaration of independence, weekly demonstrations of solidarity held in Sweden provided a platform for Baltic nationalists to convey their message to a wider Western audience.[16] The general growth in foreign coverage helped the nationalist campaign in three ways. First, the end of jamming of Western broadcasts meant it was easier for news of the Baltic struggle to reach the region and penetrate other republics, so adding to the mobilising effects of domestic glasnost. Secondly, foreign coverage had a re-assuring effect for nationalist leaders who saw it as a kind of security cushion against a military crackdown.[17] And, lastly, the overwhelmingly positive nature of Western media comment increased domestic pressure on Western governments to support Baltic demands.

The bold strategies adopted by nationalist leaders owed a good deal to optimism about getting Western government support, especially from Washington. Sajudis cherished the hope that, if they managed to win political power and declare independence, they would receive US recognition. To their disappointment, the Americans made clear that recognition did not follow automatically from political declarations, but hinged on demonstrated control over state territory.[18]

This position formed part of a generally cautious Western response to the rapidly emerging nationalist tide. There was a basic duality in the stance of the West. Governments sympathised with calls for greater republican autonomy within a more genuinely federal structure. At the same time, they had a concern, which weighed more heavily and urgently, to minimise the kind of instability that might undermine Gorbachev and put in jeopardy his liberal and co-operative foreign policies. Western leaders were anxious to discourage

16 Kristian Gerner and Stefan Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 149.

17 Bronislav Kuzmickas, *Issivadavimas: uzseinio politikos epizoodai 1988–1991* [Liberation: Foreign Policy Episodes 1988–1991] (Vilnius: Apostrofa, 2006), 16.

18 Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), 325–26, 227–32, 266–67.

Baltic and Ukrainian nationalist leaders from taking precipitate action lest it trigger a forceful response from Moscow. These fears lay behind the circumspect tone of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech in Kiev in June 1990 and the still more careful stance President George H. W. Bush took on Ukraine's pursuit of independence when speaking there a year later.[19]

What impact did the Western line of cautious encouragement have on nationalist policies? The degree to which Western advice affected their strategies was limited, though under certain conditions it proved far from insignificant. Two episodes from the Lithuanian story are particularly telling. The first involved the timing of the declaration of independence in March 1990. Consulted by nationalist leaders, American officials advised caution and at the very least postponement of the declaration; their advice was ignored. What seems to explain the lack of influence in this case is the weak engagement on the American side and an excess of mistrustful defiance on the part of nationalist leaders.[20]

In the event, the Lithuanians proceeded with their declaration, which triggered increased pressure from Moscow in the form of a partial economic blockade. This was the setting for the second episode, in which the West intervened far more effectively to help reduce tensions. Washington, Paris, and Bonn pressed Vilnius temporarily to suspend the declaration in order to open the way to a negotiated resolution to the confrontation. Soon afterwards, the Lithuanians announced a hundred-day moratorium on action to implement the declaration of independence; and Moscow lifted the blockade.[21] Bilateral talks about talks got underway in October 1990. The explanation for the impact of external influence in this episode is the greater readiness in the West to become involved combined with the increased sway in Vilnius of more moderate politicians, such as Kazimiera Prunskiene, who were ready to listen to outside advice.[22] By helping to moderate the Lithuanian stance, the

19 Nahaylo, *The Ukrainian Resurgence*, 276–77; Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, 565–67, 569–70. For a very good analysis of the West's role, see Kristina S. Readman, 'Between Political Rhetoric and *Realpolitik* Calculations: Western Diplomacy and the Baltic Independence Struggle in the Cold War Endgame', *Cold War History*, 6, 1 (2006), 1–42.

20 Confidence was reportedly buoyed by assurances from émigré sources that, if push came to shove, Washington would back Vilnius; see Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 235.

21 V. Stanley Vardys and Judith B. Sedatis, *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 171–72; Alfred Erich Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 103–14.

22 Kazimiera Prunskiene, *Gintarines ledi Ispazintis* [Confessions of the Amber Lady] (Vilnius: Politika, 1991), 45–48, and Vardys and Sedatis, *Lithuania*, 169–71.

West was able to contribute to a temporary reduction in tension between Vilnius and Moscow.

The West and Soviet policy in the Baltic region

The cautious approach taken by Western leaders probably increased their capacity to exercise some influence on Baltic developments through engagement with the Kremlin. While Gorbachev remained very uneasy about outside intervention in Baltic affairs and thought the Americans needed careful watching, he apparently did not think that they were out to destabilise the situation.[23] Still, Western influence on the Kremlin remained limited. On the general stance taken by Moscow towards nationalist challenges, the West's contribution was minimal. Arguments made by foreign leaders for a more liberal attitude to the rising tide of nationalism, in line with the principles of 'new thinking', fell on deaf ears. Suggestions that the Baltic republics were exceptional and might be given the freedom to decide on their own status were greeted with stony silence or outrage.[24]

Behind Gorbachev's response lay a general wariness which persisted in this area to a greater extent than the remarkable growth in overall levels of trust in other arenas might have led one to expect. At the Malta summit, which for many marked the end of the Cold War, the Soviet leader remonstrated that the Americans failed to appreciate the sensitivity of the situation: this was an 'extraordinarily delicate' area where any outside encouragement of separatist trends could ruin the entire perestroika project.[25] If any republic were allowed to secede, Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze warned in May 1990, civil war could follow; territorial integrity was of greater importance than good relations with Washington.[26] But it was clearly in the Kremlin's interests to avoid having to make a choice between the two. Keeping the West on board was vital to the successful neutralization of nationalist problems in the wake of the East European collapse. While warning Washington about the dangers of poking around in the 'ant-hill' of the multinational union, Soviet leaders were not averse on occasion to asking for Western help to temper the

23 See M. Gorbachev's comments to W. Jaruzelski in Moscow, 13 April 1990, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation.

24 James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 248; M. Gorbachev meeting with M. Thatcher, 8 June 1990, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation.

25 Malta summit, 3 December 1989, M. Gorbachev meeting with G. Bush; and plenary session, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation.

26 Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, 379.

nationalist movements.[27] The possible usefulness of Western involvement opened up an avenue for the exercise of a modicum of influence.

The other way in which the West managed to exert some influence was through a combination of leverage and reassurance. In the spring and early summer of 1990, Washington tried to pressure Gorbachev to lift economic sanctions by linking a return to dialogue with the Balts with an agreement on trade which Moscow badly wanted. When this proved unsuccessful, a more effective, softer approach was taken, with looser linkages cushioned by assurances from both American and West European leaders about their commitment to perestroika, something by which a domestically beleaguered Gorbachev set increasing store.[28]

The use of force

Such assurances also accompanied the tougher line taken by Western leaders on the issue at the core of their concerns: the use of force. Moscow's sparing use of coercion, and the low general incidence of violence, was perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Soviet collapse. In examining external influences on the Kremlin's attitude towards the use of force, we should distinguish between the considerable conditioning influence of developments in the East European arena on the one hand, and, on the other, the limited yet significant impact of direct efforts by Western leaders to buttress the case against coercion.

A powerful formative influence on the Gorbachev team's attitude to force was their highly critical assessment of the historical record of Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe.[29] Gorbachev rejected force as an instrument of policy and adhered to this position in all his East European dealings. And, significantly, he saw the principled renunciation of coercion in foreign policy as strengthening the case against its use to deal with problems within the Soviet Union.[30] Consistency and international reputation were factors that

27 *Ibid*., 322–24, 328–29; Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 240–42; M. Gorbachev meeting with Senator Edward Kennedy, 26 March 1990, Archives of the Gorbachev Foundation.

28 Chernyaev, *My Six Years*, 267–68; George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 284–86, 289.

29 The 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia seems to have had a particularly powerful influence; see Chernyaev, *My Six Years*, 264, 323.

30 M. Gorbachev's remarks to the Politburo on 11 May 1989; see Anatolii Cherniaev et al. (eds.), *V Politbiuro Ts KPSS: po zapisam Anatoliia Cherniaeva, Vadima Medvedeva, Georgiia Shakhnazarova (1985–1991)* [Inside the Politburo: From the Notes of Anatolii Cherniaev, Vadim Medvedev, and Georgii Shakhnazarov (1985–1991)] (Moscow: Alpina, 2006), 480.

also helped consolidate Gorbachev's own position on this issue. There seems little doubt that he was personally convinced that force was morally objectionable and offered no solutions to political problems. He accepted its use only where, as in Baku in January 1990, there were no other ways of preventing bloodshed.[31]

If Gorbachev was in fact more firmly opposed to the use of force than many Western leaders assumed, there were still some grounds for concern. While averse to the use of force, Gorbachev seemed at times willing to contemplate various forms of coercive intimidation to prevent nationalists in the Baltic region and elsewhere pursuing what he saw as their unacceptable goal of secession. This kind of thinking exposed Gorbachev to the dangers of a slippery slope that could easily lead to sanctioning the use of force.[32] The Soviet leadership teetered on the edge of such a slope in March 1990, when plans were approved for a forcible take-over in Vilnius. Western warnings against considering force, however much they irritated Gorbachev, echoed misgivings among his own advisers who worried that any slide towards the use of coercion could undermine perestroika.[33]

In the event, military muscles were flexed throughout the Baltic region, and Lithuania found itself under a partial economic blockade rather than under the coercive emergency rule for which the hard-liners had pressed. With Gorbachev's political 'turn to the Right' in the autumn of 1990, disquiet grew once again about force being used to halt the onward march of Baltic nationalism. The attempt to do so came with the military crackdown in Vilnius in January 1991. The evidence suggests that the Soviet leader had no direct hand in the decision, but failed to take sufficient steps to prevent those who had long advocated a forceful solution from proceeding with their plans.[34]

What bearing did relations with the West have on the Vilnius events and their aftermath? In the period leading up to January, American warnings apparently made little impact on a Soviet leader who assumed that his

31 Mikhail Gorbachev and Zdeněk Mlynář, *Conversations with Gorbachev: On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 127–32. The evidence suggests that Gorbachev played no part in the decision to use force to quell nationalist protest in Tbilisi in April 1991; see Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism (Part II)', 28–31.

32 Gorbachev later acknowledged that he gave in to pressure and approved the temporary deployment of military patrols in Moscow in March 1991; see Gorbachev and Mlynář, *Conversations*, 130.

33 Chernyaev, *My Six Years*, 264–65.

34 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 280–83; Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure*, 128; and Chernyaev, *My Six Years*, 317–30.

unprecedented support for US policy in the Gulf would assure continued co-operation, even under difficult domestic circumstances.[35] The strength of Western reaction to the January events, and clear signals that further crackdowns could seriously undermine co-operation and jeopardise economic aid, probably strengthened Gorbachev's determination to guard against any recurrence of attempts by hard-liners to leverage him into a policy of coercion.[36] The Soviet leader finally dissociated himself from what had happened in Vilnius, and there were no subsequent attempts to use force on such a scale to stem the rising tide of nationalist separatism.

The second act: the KGB and military reaction

Frustrated by what they saw as Gorbachev's pusillanimity and his shift back to a course of liberalising reform, hard-liners in the party, the KGB, and the military began to use more drastic methods to pressure the Soviet leader. From the spring of 1991, Communist officials, including some from inner Kremlin circles, became ever more troubled by Gorbachev's moves to negotiate with the republics a treaty along genuinely federal lines. The desire to prevent the signature of the union treaty determined the timing of the August 1991 coup by which the putschists sought to reverse the tide of liberalisation and devolution.[37]

Developments associated with the ending of the Cold War figured importantly in the events leading to the coup. The fall of the Berlin Wall and its aftermath turned what had begun as a trickle of public sniping at Gorbachev's foreign policy into a torrent of criticism from conservatives within the party, the KGB, and, especially, the military. The Gorbachev team came under repeated fire for having 'lost' Eastern Europe and undermining Soviet security.[38]

35 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 280–83; Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure*, 128; and Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, 450–52.

36 Chernyaev, *My Six Years*, 327–29, and Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, 68–73.

37 Gordon Hahn, *1985–2000: Russia's Revolution from Above: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), chs. 7–9. For the role of the KGB, see Amy Knight, 'The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5, 1 (2003), 17–66.

38 Kramer provides a good review of military criticism; see 'The Collapse of East European Communism, (Part III)', 5–26. On the military in this period, see also Brian D. Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil–Military Relations, 1689–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 233, 240; see also Brian D. Taylor, 'The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5, 1 (Winter 2003), 17–66; William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT, and

The widespread anger and disaffection that international developments generated in conservative circles, and especially within the security establishment, flowed from a triple sense of loss. First, many found it difficult to abandon the traditional beliefs and assumptions that had underpinned Soviet security thinking. Accustomed to being guardians of the Soviet fortress, military and KGB officers found it hard to come to terms with a Kremlin that played down the Western threat. The military found it difficult to swallow new doctrine on mutual security and on 'reasonable sufficiency'.[39] KGB leaders were troubled by talk of universal human values and the new commitment to a Helsinki-plus line on human rights and freedom of information, all moves that exposed the country to what they saw as growing Western subversion.[40]

Secondly, security professionals felt they had lost out to political amateurs in the making of policy. Many on the General Staff resented the way in which politicians, notably Shevardnadze, had run roughshod over the military in revising security doctrine and negotiating asymmetrical arms agreements. The KGB, to a far greater extent than the military, had ambitions to be a force in the making of both foreign and domestic policy.[41] By 1989–90, KGB chief Vladimir Kriuchkov had become frustrated by the way in which the liberal approach, promoted by radical reformers such as Gorbachev's close colleague, Aleksandr Iakovlev, was taking domestic and foreign policy in directions that conflicted with KGB interests. As a major author of the 'new thinking' and the principal proponent of glasnost, Iakovlev was seen as having encouraged trends that had led to disasters in both the outer and the inner empire – the loss of Eastern Europe and the loss of control over the union republics.[42] The 'capitulation' over East Germany was a turning point for

London: Yale University Press, 1998), 305–46; and Robert V. Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics: Duty, Dictatorship, and Democracy Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), ch. 4.

39 Georgii Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody: reformatsiia Gorbacheva glazami ego pomoshchnika* [The Price of Freedom: Gorbachev's Reformation through His Aide's Eyes] (Moscow: Rossika Zevs, 1993), 89–92; Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics*, 52–53; and Sergei F. Akhromeev and Georgii M. Kornienko, *Glazami marshala i diplomata: kriticheskii vzgliad na vneshniuiu politiku SSSR do i posle 1985 goda* [Through the Eyes of a Marshal and a Diplomat: A critical view of the USSR's Foreign Policy before and after 1985] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1992), 73, 93.

40 Vladimir Kriuchkov, *Lichnoe delo* [Personal File] (Moscow: Olimp, 1996), vol.II, 289.

41 Aleksandr Iakovlev, *Omut pamiat'* [Maelstrom of Memory] (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), 317, 388, 447.

42 Kriuchkov charged Iakovlev with advancing American rather than Soviet interests: *Lichnoe delo*, I, 282–99.

Kriuchkov; he became increasingly critical of Gorbachev and tried to pressure him into taking a tougher stance on republican nationalism.[43] Here we have an instance of how resentment about loss of influence over the foreign policy process, together with hostility to its substance, fuelled determination to press for a tougher stance against domestic nationalist protest.

The third and final source of disaffection was resentment of the material losses associated with Gorbachev's mishandling of foreign and security matters. There was unease in the military about the withdrawal from Eastern Europe, on the grounds that it weakened defences. And there was outrage at the precipitate and chaotic nature of the withdrawal and the lack of proper provision made for returning troops. Grievances over Eastern Europe heightened military leaders' sensitivity to the disruption caused by the loss of central control over the republics and prompted many of them to refuse to allow their men to serve in other parts of the union.[44]

Leading hard-liners tried to capitalise on these widespread concerns about the damage being done to national security at home and abroad. In June 1991, Kriuchkov described the country as being 'on the edge of catastrophe' and in danger of becoming a second-rank power, vulnerable to a predatory West.[45] The depth and extent of discontent within the security establishment helped encourage the putschists to think they could enlist sufficient numbers of the traditionally non-praetorian Soviet military to support drastic measures against the Gorbachev leadership. In this sense, international developments had an indirect hand in the making of the August coup. But they also contributed to its undoing. The putschists overestimated the degree to which patriotic clarion calls would rally the military behind a coup. In the event, there were enough officers who supported perestroika, or saw in Yeltsin the best hope for the restoration of order, to shift the balance of forces against the hard-liners.[46] The effect of the coup was to accelerate precisely those developments it had meant to avert: its failure opened the way for the victory of the radicals and for the final collapse of the USSR.

43 Kriuchkov interview with Aleksandr Prokhanov, *Zavtra* [Tomorrow], No. 14, April 1994; Kriuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, II, 24–25.

44 Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army*, 230, and Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 277–79, 281–85, 292–304.

45 Kriuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, II, 387–92; and Knight, 'The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union', 77–78.

46 Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army*, 229; and John P. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 247–54.

26. The August 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev failed, and Boris Yeltsin, the Russian president, was the hero of the hour. Here Yeltsin is defying the coup-makers from atop a tank in front of the parliament building.

Western benevolence without benefaction

In the atmosphere of growing crisis that marked the second act of the Soviet collapse, there was a qualitative shift in the nature of Western engagement.[47] Developments in the USSR became the focus of ever greater attention and activity in the capitals of the G7 major industrial powers. At the Moscow end, there was growing interest in dialogue and co-operation not only on international questions, but also on matters bearing directly on the domestic scene.

The most intensive dialogue and engagement developed around problems besetting the Soviet economy. From 1989, industrial production began to fall, shortages increased, rationing became widespread, and there was large-scale labour unrest in Russia and Ukraine. In the course of 1990, the economic crisis deepened and assumed growing importance in the struggle between Moscow and the republics: in October 1990, the Russian parliament laid claim to assets on its territory.[48]

47 For an incisive analysis, see Celeste Wallander, 'Western Policy and the Demise of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5, 4 (2003), 137–77.

48 Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy*, 228–31.

With the economic crisis making him ever more vulnerable to political attacks from conservatives and radicals, Gorbachev turned for help to his newfound Western friends. Bonn agreed to a package of around DM 15 billion as part of the overall settlement on unification, though relatively little of this was available to tackle urgent economic needs.[49] Moscow had long relied on substantial agricultural imports from the West, but no longer had sufficient energy export revenues with which to pay for these. Gorbachev had to contend with falling world prices and declining domestic production.[50] In the unfavourable international economic climate, Western banks became more risk-averse and reduced lending to Moscow. It was to the Americans, as leaders of the G7, that Gorbachev turned for substantial help to relieve the symptoms of the economic crisis; he asked for support in the order of $15–$20 billion.[51]

Bush firmly adhered to the policy that no large sums could be extended to the Soviet Union unless Moscow introduced serious market reform.[52] Conditionality of this kind was unhelpful to Gorbachev, who was trying to steer a centrist economic and political course. In the fragile political situation, the risks of radical reform bringing more social disruption seemed excessive, especially to a leader who had fundamental doubts about moving rapidly to a liberal market economy. A nervous Gorbachev shifted uneasily between radical and conservative positions – the result was a series of hybrid reform plans that caused confusion at home and dismay among potential foreign donors.[53] Western leaders might have made a more helpful contribution had they pressed the Kremlin to phase in a less ambitious market reform programme, along the lines advocated by some West German bankers.[54]

Gorbachev saw much of the talk about the need for market reform as reflecting American insensitivity and lack of real willingness to help.[55] The G7 leaders, including the more sympathetic West Europeans, were decidedly unimpressed by the Soviet anti-crisis programme presented at the July 1991

49 Angela E. Stent, *Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse, and the New Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 138–39.

50 Revenues from oil fell by around a third between 1984 and 1987; see Egor Gaidar, *Gibel' imperii: uroki dlia sovremmenoi Rossii* [Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia] (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2006), 237; for production and prices, see 190–96, 234–35, 281–88.

51 Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 249–54.

52 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 276.

53 Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 352–72.

54 Andrei S. Grachev, *Final Days: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), 86.

55 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (London and New York: Doubleday, 1995), 612.

London summit.[56] Disappointed by the failure of his personal relations with Western leaders to yield returns, Gorbachev tried to make a more pragmatic case for major aid. As he told Bush in July 1991, if the United States was prepared to spend $100 billion on regional problems (the Gulf), why was it not ready to expend similar sums to help sustain perestroika, which had yielded enormous foreign-policy dividends, including unprecedented Soviet support in the Middle East?[57] But such appeals fell on deaf ears. Not even the relatively modest $30 billion package suggested by American and Soviet specialists – comparable to the scale of Western aid commitments to Eastern Europe – found political favour.[58]

Frustrated by the West's unwillingness to reward foreign-policy favours, Gorbachev set increasing store by the basic common interest that bound them together: the need to avoid the disintegration of the USSR. His concern to retain Western support helped to reinforce a determination, even after the August putsch, to salvage some form of union.[59] He hoped that his commitment to keeping the country together would secure Western support in his struggle against Yeltsin and those who wanted to break up the USSR. He became increasingly anxious about the West shifting its support to his political arch-rival. At the same time, Gorbachev tried to use the Western card to strengthen his hand at home, arguing to the end that the disintegration of the union would be unacceptable to the international community.[60]

Could the West have used its resources, material and political, more effectively to have exercised greater influence on the second act of the Soviet collapse? It is unlikely that even very large sums would have diverted the drama from its ultimate course. Still, substantial aid made available in early 1991 might have given Gorbachev some political respite and could conceivably have altered the way in which the drama played out.

If we consider the broad canvas of how the international dimension of the perestroika project figured in its domestic development, we see a mixed picture. In one sense, Gorbachev's initial plan worked: a liberal and concessionary foreign policy did create the kind of benign international environment

56 Rodric Braithwaite, *Across the Moscow River: The World Turned Upside Down* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 298–300; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Poniat' perestroiku … pochemu eto vazhno seichas* [Understanding Perestroika: Why It Is Important Now] (Moscow: Alpina Biznes Buks, 2006), 318–22.

57 Chernyaev, *My Six Years*, 356–57; and Yevgeny Primakov, *Russian Crossroads: Toward the New Millennium* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 79–82.

58 Primakov, *Russian Crossroads*, 79–80.

59 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 303–04; Gorbachev, *Poniat' perestroiku*, 346–51.

60 Grachev, *Final Days*, 20, 74–75, 107; Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 666–68.

that made it easier to undertake radical and risky domestic reform. Bringing an end to Cold War confrontation and dismantling the traditional Soviet 'fortress' removed some of the obstacles to building the 'temple'[61] of the modern socialist system which Gorbachev envisaged. But another dynamic came into play which the authors of perestroika failed to anticipate. The unintended consequences in Eastern Europe of the liberal turn in foreign policy helped to catalyse centrifugal pressures within the USSR; and these in turn reduced the Kremlin's capacity to manage the perestroika process. At the same time, East European as well as Western politicians exercised a calming influence on the struggle between the centre and the republics, by impressing on both sides the need to proceed cautiously and avoid the use of force. Taken together, these different international effects helped to make the Soviet collapse both a remarkably rapid and peaceful process.

61 For Gorbachev's use of this term, see Grachev, *Final Days*, 64.