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Source: *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Revisiting 1989: Causes, Course and Consequences (Aug., 2009), pp. 331-347
Published by: Cambridge University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40542830
Accessed: 07-08-2018 16:10 UTC

# Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism

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**Abstract**

*This article examines the role of nationalism in the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, arguing that nationalism (both in its presence and its absence, and in the various conflicts and disorders that it unleashed) played an important role in structuring the way in which communism collapsed. Two institutions of international and cultural control in particular – the Warsaw Pact and ethnofederalism – played key roles in determining which communist regimes failed and which survived. The article argues that the collapse of communism was not a series of isolated, individual national stories of resistance but a set of interrelated streams of activity in which action in one context profoundly affected action in other contexts – part of a larger tide of assertions of national sovereignty that swept through the Soviet empire during this period.*

That nationalism should be considered among the causes of the collapse of communism is not a view shared by everyone. A number of works on the end of communism in the Soviet Union have argued, for instance, that nationalism played only a minor role in the process – that the main events took place within official institutions in Moscow and had relatively little to do with society, or that nationalism was a marginal motivation or influence on the actions of those involved in key decision-making. Failed institutions and ideologies, an economy in decline, the burden of military competition with the United States and instrumental goals of self-enrichment among the nomenklatura instead loom large in these accounts.[1] In many narratives of the end of communism, nationalism is portrayed merely as a consequence of communism's demise, as a phase after communism disintegrated – not as an autonomous or contributing force within the process of collapse itself.

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[1] See, for instance, Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997); Steven Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

*Contemporary European History*, **18**, 3 (2009), pp. 331–347 © 2009 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0960777309005074 Printed in the United Kingdom

Such a story, however, leaves a number of critical issues unaddressed. For one thing, it completely ignores the critical mobilisational dimension of politics during the 1987–92 period. Within the Soviet Union enormous mobilisations involving millions of people occurred during these years, with nationalist demands being the most prominent among the banners under which people mobilised. Indeed, in the Soviet case regime change and the break-up of the Soviet state were not entirely separable phases in the unfolding events that brought about the end of communism, but were rather more overlapping and interrelated than many analyses portray them to be. In 1988 and 1989 institutional opening politicised nationalism across multiple contexts in the Soviet Union. These conflicts in turn magnified divisions within the Communist Party over how to deal with them, encouraged the spread of contention to other groups, created enormous disorder within institutions and eventually led to the splintering of the Soviet state into national pieces. This was an outcome that seemed utterly unimaginable to the vast majority of Soviet citizens (and even most Soviet dissidents) when glasnost began in late 1986. It was the unintended result of Mikhail Gorbachev's policies – one that was made possible not just by the widening political space that glasnost afforded, but also by the social forces that moved into that space and utilised it to reconfigure regime and state. Agency and contingency, not just structural determination, were important elements of communism's demise. Moreover, where nationalist mobilisation was weak (as in Central Asia), communist elites survived the end of the Soviet Union, even while the Soviet state collapsed around them. Indeed, to say that communism ended in these cases begs the question, 'in what respects?' None of the post-Soviet states were entirely new. They were all fragments of pre-independence state authority, and the extent to which governing elites and bureaucracies were reconfigured in the post-communist period ultimately depended on the degree to which they were challenged from below by society during the glasnost period, principally through nationalist mobilisation.[2]

But the argument that nationalism was marginal to communism's demise also provides an inadequate answer to the question of why some communist regimes (China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Cuba) survived the 1987–92 period. Many of these communist regimes also experienced ideological crises and failed economies, were moving decisively toward market reform or were facing the threat of increased military competition with the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Their economies were just as irrational, their governments just as repressive and their bureaucracies just as corrupt as those European and Eurasian communist regimes that failed. Yet Asian and Latin American communist regimes survived while European and Eurasian communist regimes did not. Of course, the chief reason why Asian and Latin American communist regimes survived is that they never initiated the kind of political liberalisation undertaken inside the Soviet Union, unleashing political forces that eventually overwhelmed the state.

[2] Keith Darden and Anna Grzymala-Busse, 'The Great Divide: Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse', *World Politics* 59, 1 (October 2006), 83–115.

But another important difference has been the ability of Asian and Latin American communist regimes to harness the nationalism of dominant national groups as a core legitimating force, enabling these communist regimes to stigmatise foreign influences, to marginalise more easily the oppositional challenges they have confronted and to maintain their legitimacy within key sectors of society.[3]

By contrast, within European and Eurasian communist regimes in the late 1980s nationalism largely failed as a legitimating force for communist regimes and served instead as a major source for delegitimation and opposition.[4] Whereas Russian nationalism was long considered the linchpin of Soviet power, sustaining the Soviet regime since the 1930s and mobilising critical support within Soviet society for Soviet political domination throughout eastern Europe and Eurasia,[5] for the most part Russian nationalism failed to come to the defence of either communism or the Soviet empire in the late 1980s. Instead, many Russians joined in the attacks, ironically coming to identify themselves as victims of Soviet 'imperial' domination and declaring Russian sovereignty vis-à-vis the Soviet government. In this sense, Soviet communism was brought down in part by what Roman Szporluk perceptively termed the 'de-Sovietisation of Russia'[6] – that is, the growing dissociation of Russians and of Russian national identity from a state with which they had been routinely identified in the past.

But it was not only the weakening Russian identification with the Soviet state and its imperial project that facilitated communism's collapse. The struggle against what were widely viewed as repressive alien regimes imposed from without by Soviet power was also a central animus underlying the events of 1989–91, both within the Soviet Union and among its east European satellites. Communism in Europe and Eurasia was more than just tyrannical rule, an idiotic economic system and a ritualised ideology. It was also an international and multinational hierarchy of such polities established and managed by Moscow – an interrelated structure of control that replicated patterns of politics, economics and social organisation across geopolitical space. Within Soviet-dominated eastern Europe, calls for popular sovereignty could not easily be disentangled from those for independence from Muscovite tutelage,

[3] See Martin K. Dimitrov, 'Why Communism Didn't Collapse: Exploring Regime Resilience in China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba', paper presented at a conference on 'Why Communism Didn't Collapse: Understanding Regime Resilience in China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba', Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 25–26 May 2007.

[4] The major exception was Yugoslavia. Minority nationalisms obviously played a major delegitimating role in the collapse of Yugoslav communism and in the unmaking of the Yugoslav state. But Serbian commitment to maintaining Yugoslavia's territorial integrity and to Serbian communists who peddled such an undertaking remained considerably stronger than the commitment of Russians to maintaining the territorial integrity of the USSR, accounting for the outbreak of ethnic civil war in Yugoslavia persistence of communist control in Serbia (in the guise of the Socialist Party) over the decade of the 1990s. See Veljko Vujačić, 'Historical Legacies, Nationalist Mobilization, and Political Outcomes in Russia and Serbia: A Weberian View', *Theory and Society* 25, 6 (December 1996), 763–801.

[5] David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[6] See, in particular, Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Break-up of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

since these regimes had largely been imposed and maintained through intervention and externally imposed controls. Thus behind the desire in 1989 for freedom stood the desire for national sovereignty. In this sense, 1989 in eastern Europe was not merely a series of revolts against communism as a repressive political and social system; it was also a series of national revolts against Soviet domination, and as such closely related to the same revolt that, by autumn 1989, had already become widespread within Soviet society itself.

Precisely because nationalism was an underlying factor in the demise of communism, the process of collapse largely spread along the two institutional forms that were used to structure multinational and international control: ethnofederalism and the Warsaw Pact. Both of these institutions utilised faux forms of sovereignty to mask centralised control, so that the collapse of communism revolved in significant part around making genuine the bogus sovereignties of communist-style ethnofederalism and the Warsaw Pact. With the exception of Albania (explicable as a simple case of regional spillover effects, and in fact the last of the east European communist regimes to collapse), the other nine communist regimes that collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s were either members of the Warsaw Pact, were under the strong political domination of the USSR (Mongolia) or like the USSR were ethnofederal states (Yugoslavia). By contrast, the six Asian and Latin American communist regimes that survived stood outside the system of Soviet institutional control, had established themselves independently from Soviet power and did not employ ethnofederalism as an institutional form for mediating relations with their own internal minorities.

In what follows I develop three arguments related to the role of nationalism in the collapse of communism.[7] First, nationalism (both in its presence, in its absence and in the various conflicts and disorders it unleashed) played an important role in structuring the way in which the collapse of communism unfolded. Of course, to argue that nationalism was an important factor in structuring the collapse of communism should not be interpreted as saying that nationalism 'caused' the collapse of communism. History involves complex causation, and we would be fools to constrain a series of events as complex as the collapse of communism within the confines of any single causal factor. But, as we shall see, we would also be foolish to ignore the national dimension to communism's demise, not only because it was central to the dynamic by which this demise materialised, but also because we would seriously misunderstand post-communist politics and societies without elucidating its national dimension. Second, nationalist mobilisation during this period was not a series of individual nationalist stories. Rather, it was a set of interrelated streams of activity in which action in one context exercised a profound effect on action in other contexts – what I have called the 'tidal' context of nationalism. Indeed, neither the Soviet state nor east European communism would likely have collapsed

[7] These arguments are drawn from or are elaborations on my own work on the Soviet collapse. See Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilisation and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

had these nationalist revolts occurred in isolation from one another, so that these interconnections were critical to the production of the collapse itself. Third, while clearly structured, acts of nationalist mobilisation did not simply reflect a pre-existing logic of institutions, structures and identities. Rather, acts of mobilisation also played independent roles in *transforming* institutions, structures and identities, so that while the collapse of communism is often portrayed as a structurally overdetermined drama[8] (some would even say that communism's collapse was predetermined from its very establishment), its manifestation depended on myriad acts of defiance and contention whose outcomes themselves were hardly predetermined.

## Nationalism's extraordinary appeal under glasnost

Gorbachev's policy of glasnost and the political liberalisation that it produced were obviously the critical institutional conditions that allowed the collapse of communism to occur. Without glasnost, the forces that most directly brought about the collapse could never have materialised or been able to act. But despite the absolute importance of the Gorbachev factor and the broader factors that led Gorbachev to choose this path, we should also remember that the collapse of communism was in fact the unintended result of Gorbachev's policies, not its conscious goal, and that the collapse occurred precisely because other social forces moved into the widening political space that glasnost afforded. Gorbachev sought to reform communism both domestically and internationally, not to dismantle it. As Gorbachev recalled about the early years of *perestroika*, 'We talked not about revolution, but *about improving the system*. Then we believed in such a possibility.'[9] Gorbachev's disavowal of the Brezhnev doctrine in late 1988 similarly was not aimed at dismantling socialism in eastern Europe or undoing the division of Germany, but rather at remaking Soviet relations with its allies while undoing the cold war division of Europe. Of course, there was a great deal about Gorbachev that was naive. But communism collapsed not only because of Gorbachev's policies, but also because social forces (in some places but not others) utilised the opportunities that Gorbachev's policies produced in order to mobilise oppositions, transform institutions and identities, and appropriate power.

There is an unfortunate tendency in the literature on the collapse of communism to draw a sharp line between events within the Soviet Union and those in eastern Europe. Scholars of the Soviet collapse tend not to speak about a single *annus mirabilis*,[10] but of a five-year intense and protracted period in which new revelations filled the newspapers every day, a dizzying array of institutional changes were enacted and dozens (at times hundreds) of protests were mounted daily – many of them spectacular events. From this perspective, the east European revolutions were but one set of episodes (though a very critical set) in the events that constituted communism's

[8] For a critique of the heavy determinism in the literature on the breakdown of communism, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2 (1999), 323–43.

[9] Mikhail Gorbachev, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 203 (emphasis in original).

[10] Michael Howard, 'The Springtime of Nations', *Foreign Affairs*, 69, 1 (1990), 17–32.

collapse. An accurate understanding of the collapse of communism needs to view its Soviet and east European dimensions as interrelated rather than separate processes. What stood beneath this interrelationship was the ability of oppositions to draw analogies across a wide expanse of political and cultural space, due to subjection to common modes of domination and a shared sense of alien rule. It is here that nationalism played a critical role in providing a frame through which analogies across cultural and political boundaries were drawn.

The issues that effectively mobilised populations within the Soviet Union during these years revolved precisely around nationalism. To be sure, issues of democratisation, labour unrest and consumer shortages, and environmental justice constituted autonomous vectors of mobilisation, at times intersecting with nationalism and at times diverging from it. But as my own study of thousands of protest demonstrations throughout the Soviet Union during the glasnost period showed, nationalism gained a particular force and appeal not enjoyed by these other streams of contention. For example, not only were demonstrations that voiced nationalist demands but not democratising demands almost three times more frequent than those that voiced democratising demands but not nationalist demands, but demonstrations that voiced nationalist demands and did not raise democratising demands mobilised ten times more participants than those voicing democratising demands but not raising nationalist demands. The patterns are quite striking. Moreover, demonstrations that combined both democratising and nationalist demands mobilised five times more participants than those voicing democratising demands but not raising nationalist demands. In other words, the strongest pressures from society for democratisation came precisely from those movements that also pulled on nationalist tropes, and without nationalism to underpin them demands for liberalisation on their own had relatively weak resonance within Soviet society. A similar but even more pronounced difference occurred between mobilisation over nationalist demands and mobilisation over economic demands – in spite of the enormous decline in living standards that occurred during this period.[11] In short, nationalism exercised an unusual force of attraction within the Soviet society during these years that was unparalleled by any other set of issues.

The deeper causes for this were rooted in Soviet history and in the institutional crisis of the Soviet state. Significant grievances revolving around the brutality of the Stalinist past and the struggle for historical truth played prominent roles in motivating nationalist mobilisation during glasnost. The Brezhnev era, lasting from the accession of Leonid Brezhnev to the post of general secretary of the Communist Party in October 1964 until Gorbachev's selection as general secretary in March 1985, bred a sclerotic political system, a declining economy, widespread corruption, and a deepening malaise and cynicism within society – all of which contributed to a growing identification of the Soviet ruling elite as an alien other, even among many ordinary Russians. The Soviet state and communist regime were closely fused, since the multinational state had been founded by the communist regime, and the

[11] Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 75–9.

regime sought to legitimate itself primarily as an internationalist revolution. Yet beneath the veneer of formal equality the reality of Russian dominance persisted, reinforced in particular during Stalin's rule, when a once multi-ethnic political elite tipped towards disproportionate Russian representation, and a discourse of cultural and political stratification came to be embraced. As a result of the fusion of state and regime, any political opening that led to challenges against the regime was also bound to politicise issues of stateness,[12] particularly for groups like the Balts, who had been incorporated forcefully into the USSR as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. And because the state had been the creation of the regime, widespread separatist challenges also necessarily assumed the form of anti-regime activity and were unambiguous challenges to communist rule. Thus, regime change and the break-up of the Soviet state were not easily separable phases in the demise of communism, but were interrelated and partially concurrent phenomena.

As number of scholars have pointed out, many of the everyday institutional practices of the Soviet state in the nationalities sphere (the ethnofederal system, the primordialised passport system of ethnic identification and its use as a source of discrimination in everyday life, the promotion of minority cultures within the framework of the socialist state, and official personnel policies that promoted cadres in part on the basis of nationality) also reinforced ethnicity over other (specifically, class) modes of identity.[13] Class identities had, of course, provided the initial underpinning for communist ideology. But as modernisation and upward mobility proceeded, the class basis of communism receded and the ethnic dimension of everyday life grew more prominent.

Still, until glasnost, secessionist sentiments remained very much on the margins of Soviet society – even in regions like the Baltic, where Soviet rule had come to be seen as an unalterable fact of life and 'a permanent state of affairs'.[14] When glasnost first began in late 1986 and early 1987, it contained no strong nationalist component, and as an Estonian sociologist later observed, 'neither its chief architects nor the broad public were prepared for the possible rise of national movements'.[15] Glasnost initially manifested itself almost entirely in the operation of official institutions – in the press, movie theatres and government offices. But already by spring 1987 glasnost began to escape official control, as small groups of hippies, Crimean Tatars, ecologists, Jewish refuseniks, Russian nationalists and Baltic dissidents tested the boundaries of the permissible by taking politics to the street, engaging in small-scale demonstrations. The new atmosphere of press freedom, growing factionalism within

[12] Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[13] Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset: The Failure of Soviet Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Rogers Brubaker, 'Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account', *Theory and Society*, 23 (1994), 47–78.

[14] Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 162.

[15] K. S. Hallik, quoted in *Pravda*, 7 June 1989, 2.

the Politburo and toleration of small-scale protest encouraged deeper politicisation. In the early years of glasnost nationalist mobilisation followed closely upon the heels of institutional reform, with key periods of institutional reform precipitating thickenings of nationalist activity: the October 1987 Central Committee Plenum; the Nineteenth Party Conference in June 1988; the March 1989 elections; and meetings of the First Congress of People's Deputies in July 1989. But by spring and summer 1989, large-scale nationalist demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of participants had spread across multiple republics and had become a relatively frequent affair. By this time the effect of institutional constraints on nationalist action had largely faded, and nationalist mobilisation had increasingly become its own autonomous progenitor of events, influencing the character of political institutions instead of being contained by them.

Just how rapidly this transformation occurred is one of the astounding features of the collapse of communism. It was not until February 1988 – over a year after the initiation of glasnost – that the first major eruptions of nationalism occurred in the Soviet Union: the massive Armenian protests over Karabakh, involving up to a million people in Yerevan alone. Over the following nineteen months – from February 1988 to August 1989 – the USSR experienced a veritable explosion of nationalist mobilisation in the Baltic, the Transcaucasus, Ukraine and Moldova. By the end of 1988 and the beginning of 1989, the coherence of Soviet control over its own territory had been compromised by the rise to dominance of nationalist movements within the Baltic republics and the veritable loss of control by the Soviet state over events in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The massive mobilisations in Tbilisi in April 1989 that incited violent suppression by the Soviet army and the political backlash that this evoked not only had undermined completely communist control in that republic, but also convinced many throughout the Soviet Union and in the Soviet government itself to question the utility of the deployment of the army as a means for containing nationalist revolt. By summer 1989 the tide of nationalist contention spread to the point that the Soviet regime appeared highly unstable. Enormous demonstrations (involving hundreds of thousands of people, and sometimes up to a million) racked all the republics of the Baltic and Transcaucasus at the time, spreading as well to Western Ukraine and Moldova. During summer 1989, multiple violent inter-ethnic conflicts also broke out across the southern tier of the USSR: between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks, Kazakhs and Lezgins, Abkhaz and Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Massive miner strikes in eastern Ukraine, western Siberia and northern Kazakhstan – though non-national in character – reflected the spread of large-scale protest to the Russian community, as well as the growing disaffection of Russians from the Soviet state.

This mounting domestic incoherence and instability of the Soviet state was an important part of the political opportunity structure that presented itself to east Europeans in autumn 1989. If Balts could get away with declaring sovereignty vis-à-vis the Soviet state at the end of 1988 and early 1989, and up to a million of them could hold hands across the Baltic in August 1989 in favour of independence from the USSR, why should Poles and Czechs not be expected to press their own claims for popular sovereignty against their repressive, Kremlin-controlled regimes?

Why should Russians be afforded a greater degree of press freedom than Bulgarians or East Germans (particularly when Soviet newspapers were readily available for purchase throughout eastern Europe)? And if the Soviet state could not contain mass revolts within its own borders, why should its client states in eastern Europe be expected to contain them, even if they had been able to rely on Soviet help (which Gorbachev had privately indicated would not be forthcoming)? Until early 1989 the pace of political change inside the Soviet Union outstripped the pace of change within the Soviet Union's Eastern Bloc allies, so that the example of political change within the Soviet Union emboldened political reformers throughout the communist world (and not only in eastern Europe, as the Chinese example illustrates). By early 1989 reform efforts were already under way in Poland and Hungary, leading to free elections in Poland in June 1989 and to the opening of borders and the transition to political pluralism in Hungary. This in turn led to a dizzying three-month cascade of events in late 1989: massive demonstrations in East Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, unrest and the removal of Zhivkov in Bulgaria, and the violent overthrow of the Ceauşescu regime in Romania.

In turn, the collapse of communism in eastern Europe enormously accelerated and radicalised processes of nationalist revolt within the Soviet Union itself, leading to a sense that a momentum had built up against the Soviet state that could no longer be contained. The Ukrainian nationalist movement Rukh, for instance, actively utilised the east European example to mobilise support for its cause. 'The peoples of Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia have said no to communist dictatorship', its banners at a demonstration read. 'The next word is ours, citizens!'[16] The first half of 1990 saw a sharp rise in the number of groups pressing separatist demands inside the Soviet Union, spurred on in particular by republican elections, which brought to power nationalist movements in many republics and led to a bifurcation of authority (*dvoevlastie*) and increasingly bitter disputes over sovereignty. It was at this time as well that Gorbachev's popularity plummeted among Russians and nomenklatura elites began to defect from the centre in significant numbers, reinventing themselves as nationalists in anticipation that Soviet power would not last much longer. The classic example was Leonid Kravchuk. A party propagandist who once had been an implacable enemy of Rukh, Kravchuk came, in the course of 1990, to embrace the cause of Ukrainian sovereignty and independence. That once loyal nomenklatura like Kravchuk could reconfigure themselves as 'father' of their respective nations was not a plausible outcome outside these cross-case influences, for there would be no reason why, in isolation from what had occurred elsewhere, these elites would have ever considered defection.

## The transnationalism of nationalism

Thus nationalist mobilisation during the collapse of communism was not a collection of separate stories, but a series of interrelated streams of activity in which action

[16] *Ekspress khronika*, no. 51, 17 December 1989, 1.

in one context exercised a profound effect on action in other contexts – what I have called elsewhere a 'tide' of nationalism. This tidal dimension is often lost in the literature on the collapse that focuses on a single country or on national cases. The interconnectedness produced by common targets of mobilisation, common institutional characteristics, common ideologies and common modes of domination meant that oppositions also perceived a linkage of political opportunities, feeding the spread of contention across cultural and political boundaries. The upsurge of mobilisation across multiple contexts was produced not by a single shock, but rather by the way in which agents forged connections with the challenging actions of others through analogy and emulation. Institutional arrangements like ethnofederalism or the Warsaw Pact became lightning rods for the lateral spread of contention, because they connected populations in analogous ways. When such analogies cohered, the example of successful contention in one context weakened political order in other contexts by raising expectations among challengers that authority could be successfully challenged. Challengers looked towards each other for inspiration and ideas, widely borrowing tactics, frames and even programmes from those who demonstrated prior successes. Nationalism is often portrayed as parochial and inward-looking, lacking empathy and incapable of identifying with others. But the collapse of communism illustrates the limits of such stereotypes. Most nationalist movements are actually transnational in orientation, forced by strategic circumstances to conceive of their fates as intertwined with others.

But the transnational spread of nationalist mobilisation was more than just a matter of analogy and emulation. Those movements that gained early success also consciously sought to spread their contention laterally so as to increase overall chances of consolidating their victories by gaining allies and by further disrupting the coherence of the state they wished to undermine. After the Nineteenth Party Conference in June 1988, attempts to challenge the Soviet regime proliferated with great rapidity, diffusing across multiple groups. At this very time challenging groups engaged in a widespread sharing of information, pamphlets, expertise, modes of challenge and mobilisational frames. By June 1988 representatives of Ukrainian, Armenian, Georgian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian dissident nationalist movements had initiated contact with one another and established a coordinating committee among themselves. Indeed, in summer and autumn 1988 popular fronts created along the lines of the Baltic model sprang up throughout most of the Soviet Union. Representatives of these groups met frequently, shared documents and ideas, and occasionally aided each other by providing material support or organising demonstrations in solidarity with each other's demands. The tide of nationalism thus assumed concrete form during the collapse of communism in the ways in which nationalist paradigms were consciously exported and borrowed, organisational resources were shared and challenging groups sought inspiration from one another.

Arguably the most important mobilisational frame to emerge within the Soviet Union during the glasnost era was the anti-imperial sovereignty frame that played such an important role in the ultimate demise of the Soviet state. In its final years of existence the imperial persona implicit within the Soviet state came to be openly

affirmed, as nations claimed sovereignty up to and including their place on the political map of the world. This anti-imperial sovereignty frame first gained mass resonance in the Baltic in summer 1988 and subsequently spread massively to Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine and, eventually, to Russia itself. When Boris Yeltsin embraced Russian sovereignty vis-à-vis the USSR in June 1990, he was borrowing from the tide of nationalism that had already swept across much of the USSR (Or, as one Politburo member put it, 'To make Russia sovereign is the golden daydream of the Balts.')[17] So successful was the spread of this sovereignty frame that over the course of 1990 every Soviet republic (as well as autonomous republics and even one island in the Far East) issued their own declaration of sovereignty vis-à-vis the Soviet government in what came to be known as the 'parade of sovereignties'. The diffusion of this anti-imperial sovereignty frame beyond the Baltic was partly an attempt to capitalise on the prior success of others – a process of emulation typical of modular phenomena like nationalism. But it was more than this. Baltic popular fronts consciously attempted to reproduce themselves throughout the Soviet Union, out of both philosophical and strategic considerations. They vigorously organised to extend their influence throughout the Soviet Union for aiding the spread of the master frame they themselves had pioneered. A conscious strategy of spreading secessionist revolt laterally was pursued, both as an effort to consolidate secessionist movements through the power of numbers and to weaken the regime by undermining its ability to defuse nationalist challenges.[18]

It is unlikely that the Soviet state or east European communism would have ever collapsed had these revolts occurred in isolation from one another. Certainly, had the Balts engaged in their struggle alone, there is little doubt that they would easily have been repressed. By contrast, the fact that claims of sovereignty against the centre had spread broadly throughout the fabric of Soviet society made rebellion difficult to contain. Part of the dilemma that had confronted opponents of Soviet communism throughout its history was that past east European revolts against Soviet control had exerted only limited influence inside the Soviet Union[19] and had been repeatedly cut short by Soviet intervention and pressure. In 1989, however, extensive revolt inside the Soviet Union was occurring at the same time as east Europeans pressed for their own freedom, so that the Kremlin for the first time faced a situation of multiple, simultaneous revolts both within and outside the country. The modular spread of revolt across the Soviet Union and eastern Europe represented an unusual period of heightened contention that transcended cultural and international borders and in which challenges to the state multiplied and fed off one another, overwhelming the capacity of the state to contain them and evoking large-scale tectonic change in the character of the state system.

[17] Vadim Medvedev, quoted in *Soiuz mozhno bylo sokhranit'* (Moscow: Aprel'-85, 1995), 64.

[18] Nils R. Muiznieks, 'The Influence of the Baltic Popular Movements on the Process of Soviet Disintegration', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47, 1 (1995), 3–25.

[19] See Roman Szporluk, ed., *The Influence of East Europe and the Soviet West on the USSR* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

## The weakness of Russian defence of the Soviet state

Nationalism was conspicuous in the collapse of communism not only by its presence, but also by its absence. By all measures of conventional wisdom, Russians should have been expected to come to the defence of Soviet communism and the Soviet empire. Soviet communism was widely viewed as Russian communism, and Leninist ideology was said to have resonated powerfully with embedded elements of Russian political culture.[20] Indeed, one of the reasons why earlier waves of revolt against Soviet control had failed was precisely the way in which Russians had come to the defence of the realm. Yet, in the late 1980s, at a time when the Soviet state liberalised and Russian dominance was under attack, this did not happen. Instead, large numbers of Russians protested against the Soviet state and acquiesced in its forfeiture of empire.

How does one explain the weakness of Russian imperial nationalism in the context of glasnost? To be sure, glasnost itself is to a large extent responsible, for its constant revelations of Soviet abuses and atrocities drove a wedge between many ordinary Russians and the Soviet state. But part of the explanation is also to be found in the multiple political roles that Russians could and did assume during these years. Russians were the dominant nationality of the Soviet Union and had the most to lose from attempts to undermine the Soviet empire. But Russians also constituted a disproportionate share of the Soviet intelligentsia and working class relative to most other nationalities.[21] The former were strongly attracted to ideas of liberalisation, while the latter (due to their vulnerable position at a time of growing economic shortage and insecurity) were most likely to protest against the regime's economic policies. This split structural position in relation to the changes introduced by perestroika in fact led to a trifurcation of Russian mobilisation into nationalist-conservative, liberal and labour-economic streams, each of which comprehended its relationship to the Soviet state in different terms.

In this respect Russian mobilisation differed substantially from that of other groups in the USSR, for it was unusually divided. Not only was there a plethora of Russian movements by 1988–89, but these movements stood for quite distinct, and in some instances opposing, frames. Rather than generating a nationalist backlash among Russians, as many observers had expected, the tide of nationalism instead drove a wedge more deeply between Russians, politicising and polarising cleavages among them. Russian liberals eventually forged an alliance with non-Russian separatists against the Soviet regime, borrowing their sovereignty and anti-colonial frames. They did not define themselves as nationalists. They saw themselves as struggling primarily against the communist regime, not for the nation. Yet in the first half of 1990 they adopted many of the tropes of national liberation then extant elsewhere in the USSR, coming to advocate a brand of liberal nationalism in which Russian sovereignty

[20] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

[21] Darrell Slider, 'A Note on the Class Structure of Soviet Nationalities', *Soviet Studies*, 37, 4 (October 1985), pp. 535–540.

and self-determination were seen as necessary parts of the democratisation process. In 1990 and 1991 this defence of Russian sovereignty against an overbearing and imperial all-union government became the dominant theme of Russian mobilisation. Similarly, as the economy deteriorated and the Soviet state disintegrated, labour activism radicalised, coming in many cases to embrace the dismantlement of central planning and the sovereignty paradigm.

Conservative-nationalists, by contrast, remained highly divided. Some distanced themselves from the communist regime; indeed, demands for Russian sovereignty initially emerged not from liberals, but from Russian nationalists, who, seeking to counter the 'Russophobia' prevalent at the time, noted that Russians also had been discriminated against and victimised by communism. Others embraced a conservative communism that emphasised the defence of the party and the state. But nationalist-conservatives failed to find a mass base for themselves within Russia. Their attempts to court the coalminers of Ukraine, Siberia and northern Kazakhstan also came to nought. Their support proved to be greatest within the Russian-speaking communities of the Baltic and Moldova, but even here much of their capacity to mobilise opposition to nationalist movements weakened in 1990 and 1991, as the break-up of the Soviet state grew imminent. In short, Russian nationalism fizzled out as a force for defending the Soviet empire because glasnost significantly undermined Russian support for the communist regime, Russians were deeply divided politically and Russians increasingly embraced the sovereignty paradigm championed by nationalist oppositions under the influence of the tide of nationalism.

## Structure and agency within 'thickened history'

While the events in eastern Europe in 1989 are widely referred to as revolutions, with the exception of the Baltic states it is not fashionable today to talk about the collapse of the Soviet Union in these same terms. After all, in some Soviet republics political power ultimately remained in the hands of communist officials, while in other republics nationalist revolts descended into intra-ethnic violence and even civil war. But the disintegration of the Soviet Union unambiguously deserves to be understood as revolutionary. It easily falls within Tilly's minimalist, processual understanding of revolution (a situation of dual sovereignty in which non-ruling contenders mobilise large numbers of citizens for the purpose of gaining control over the state).[22] Even if we assume a more robust, outcome-oriented definition such as that used by Skocpol (the rapid transformation of a country's state and class structures and its dominant ideology),[23] there is little doubt that the collapse of communism was revolutionary. In most (though not all) Soviet republics, property relations were totally reconfigured in the wake of communism's collapse, longstanding social institutions were dismantled,

[22] Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[23] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

new ideologies and new classes came to the fore and new forms of social behaviour sprang into existence.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was accompanied by immense transformations in political discourse and in public perceptions of politics. A population that could barely imagine the break-up of their country came, within a compressed period of time, to view its disintegration as inevitable. The record of public opinion polling during these years demonstrates massive transformations in attitudes toward the Soviet state – even for groups like the Balts, among whom the notion of independence, once considered the pipe-dream of dissidents, came to be almost unanimously embraced under the shifting boundaries of the possible. In the case of the Ukrainians the transformation in attitudes under the influence of external events was stark – to the point that 90 per cent of the Ukrainian population voted in December 1991 for independent statehood in a national referendum. As Bohdan Nahaylo described it,

> What appears to have happened is that swiftly and almost imperceptibly . . . a revolution occurred in the minds of Ukraine's inhabitants. Somehow, during a remarkably short period, the idea of Ukrainian independence, for so long depicted in the Soviet press as the hopeless cause of diehard nationalists in Western Ukraine, took hold throughout the republic.[24]

Even large numbers of Russians, under the influence of events elsewhere, by December 1991 came to support the dissolution of the USSR, as public opinion polls at the time showed (although nostalgia for the USSR quickly developed thereafter).[25]

This enormous transformation in outlooks was of course facilitated by specific structural conditions: the institutional and ideological crisis of the Soviet state, the fusion between state and regime, the submerged sense of ethnic grievance across multiple groups and the Soviet state's overreach abroad. Moreover, patterns of nationalist mobilisation broadly reflected such factors as the degree of urbanisation of a nationality, the size of an ethnic group, its ethnofederal status and the degree to which it had been assimilated to the dominant Russian culture. But the specific events that transformed institutions and brought movements to power also contained a heavy dose of contingency, and their outcomes were hardly predetermined. Repression could have easily shut down challengers in 1988 and early 1989. At other moments the backlash effects of repression, the outrage that erupted from intergroup violence and the anger that materialised out of callous government responses to popular demands played an important role in transforming the opinion climate of politics and affecting the prisms through which individuals related to the state and to others. Indeed, those who organised challenges often sought to provoke responses from states or other groups that heightened a sense of conflict and identity, so as to drive the engine of history more quickly, while other movements sought to ride the momentum

[24] Bohdan Nahaylo, 'The Birth of an Independent Ukraine', *Report on the USSR*, 3, 50 (13 December 1991), 1–2.

[25] See Matthew Wyman, *Public Opinion in Postcommunist Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 166.

generated from the successful prior actions of others. In short, the agency of ordinary people needs to be placed squarely in the centre of any accurate understanding of communism's collapse.

As E. H. Carr noted, in real life there is no contradiction between the influence of structure and the role of agency, because structure exercises its effects not by rendering outcomes inevitable, but rather by making action possible, more probable and more likely to meet with success.[26] But it is also true that, as actions accumulate, they can also exercise a structure-like effect, as having the capacity to render subsequent action possible, more probable and more likely to meet with success. Rather than simply being a manifestation of structurally predetermined conditions, the collapse of Soviet communism materialised over a five-year period of what I have called 'thickened history' – in which events acquired a sense of momentum, transformed identities and political institutions and increasingly assumed the characteristics of their own causal structure. As one Soviet journalist put it in autumn 1989, 'We are living in an extremely condensed historical period. Social processes which earlier required decades now develop in a matter of months.'[27] This heightened pace of contention affected both governing and governed – the former primarily in the state's growing incoherence and inability to fashion relevant policies, the latter by introducing an intensified sense of contingency, possibility and influence from the example of others.

One of the characteristic features of 'thickened' history is that the pace of events outstrips the movement of institutions and the understanding of leaders. In the collapse of communism the pace of events was itself a causal factor in the outcome, as events simply moved far faster than institutions were capable of reacting. This was most glaringly evident with regard to nationalities issues, in which formulas embraced by Gorbachev in 1988, 1989 and 1990 soon grew outdated as a result of shifting events on the ground. The tide of nationalism also produced enormous confusion and division within Soviet institutions, making it even more difficult to find institutional solutions to the challenge of holding the Soviet state together. The pull of alternative movements within the Communist rank-and-file was particularly strong in many parts of the country. In the course of 1989 nationalist movements came to dominate republican politics in the Baltic republics, Georgia and Armenia, so that party organisations largely went 'underground', as one communist official put it. In the 1990 republican elections nationalist movements or those sympathetic with them came to power in practically every republic with the exception of Azerbaijan and those in Central Asia, institutionalising the waves of nationalism that had swept across the country. This was soon followed by what came to be known as the 'war of the laws' – a struggle between the centre and the republics over whose laws actually were sovereign. Gorbachev insisted that the central government's laws had precedent over republics and localities, and declared invalid a whole series of laws that contradicted

[26] Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1962), 124.
[27] *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 13 September 1989.

all-union laws. In turn many republics refused to recognise the authority of the centre over them. The conservative reaction to this disorder pushed the Soviet state towards its final, tumultuous demise in the failed August 1991 coup.

Nationalist mobilisation not only undermined the authority of state institutions; it also helped to dissipate the state's capacity to repress. In the wake of the April 1989 Tbilisi events, the use of the Soviet army as a tool to contain ethnic revolt grew heavily politicised, and as authority shifted to the republics, actions by the central government's institutions of order to quell the nationalist unrest became embroiled in controversy. The constant deployment of the military and special police units to nationalist 'hot spots' around the country bred a sense of exhaustion among them. The declining morale of those charged with keeping order was a constant theme during these years, and over the course of 1990–1 discipline within the armed forces began to unravel in a serious way. Most of the officers who commanded key units during the August 1991 coup had been intimately involved in putting down nationalist unrest in various parts of the country. Given the effect that many of these earlier actions had on morale within the police and the military, it hardly seems accidental that these same officers, when called on to use force against a civilian population of their own nationality on an even larger scale for the sake of preserving the USSR, refused to carry out their superiors' orders.

## Nationalism within and beyond the collapse

It would be impossible to understand post-communist politics today without reference to the national dimension of the communist collapse – one of the reasons why any serious discussion of communism's demise needs to explicate nationalism's role in this process rather than treat it merely as a consequence of the collapse. A glance at the front page of a randomly chosen Russian newspaper almost two decades after the collapse included stories about continuing conflicts between Estonia and Russia over demarcation of their borders, claims by Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov that Ukrainian authorities were discriminating against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine, and the opening of regular passenger ship routes between Russia and Abkhazia despite Georgian objections that this was a gross violation of Georgian sovereignty.[28] The collapse of Soviet communism remains a fundamental reference point, both positive and negative, for populations throughout the region. It is either mourned as, in Putin's words, 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'[29] or celebrated as the foundation of a national political community and marked as a national holiday by fireworks and military parades (as in Ukraine). These identity narratives are woven into the fabric of new national histories and continue to manifest themselves politically in issues such as NATO and EU expansion, the geopolitics of

[28] *Vremia*, 2 July 2008, 1.

[29] Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii V. V. Putina Federal'nomu Sobraniiu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 25 April 2005, available at www.kremlin.ru/appears/2005/04/25/1223_type63372type63374type82634_87049.shtml.

energy, policies toward Russians and Russophones living in the post-Soviet republics and desires for and fear of a resuscitation of Russian power in the region. Thus not only did nationalism occupy a central role in way in which the collapse of communism unfolded, but the fundamental identity conflicts that gave structure to the collapse remain with us, manifested now more in the realm of interstate relations, but nevertheless still central to the ways in which individuals understand themselves and their relationship to political authority.