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0521806704 - Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State

Mark R. Beissinger

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From the Impossible to the Inevitable

... we travel abroad to discover in distant lands something whose presence at home has become unrecognizable.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

On May 18, 1991, two Soviet cosmonauts blasted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome for a routine four-month mission aboard the Mir space station. While aloft in weightlessness, below them one world died and another was born. By the time they returned to Earth, they no longer knew whether the country that had dispatched them still existed and to which state they and their spacecraft belonged.

The shattering of the Soviet state was one of the pivotal transformations of the twentieth century. It fundamentally altered the world in which we live, provoking an end to half a century of communist domination in Eastern Europe, breaching the Cold War division of the planet, and prompting new disorders with which the twenty-first century will long grapple. But the breakup of the USSR also presents us with many paradoxes that challenge our understanding of politics. The Soviet Union was a nuclear superpower with global commitments and a seventy-four-year record of survival – a polity which had endured two devastating wars, several famines involving millions of deaths, the mass annihilation of its own citizens by its rulers, and a social revolution that brought it into the industrial world. It was a state which launched the first human into space, whose founding political ideas inspired millions throughout the world, and which was widely regarded by many social scientists as a model of successful transition to modernity. From 1988 to 1991 that state exploded, largely under the pressure of its ethnic problems.

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The disintegration of the Soviet Union was also one of the most notoriously unanticipated developments of modern history. Had Western experts been polled in 1987, the near-unanimous opinion would have been that the dissolution of the USSR was highly unlikely, if not impossible. Indeed, some prominent experts refused to recognize the demise of the USSR even after it happened! As Jerry Hough later recalled about the period, “[t]he flow of events was so rapid and so unexpected that no one had time to step back and reflect upon what had transpired. Observers tended to retain their interpretations of events even after they had been proved incorrect and to combine them with interpretations of later events in contradictory ways.”¹ Those few experts who before 1988 had entertained the possibility that the Soviet Union might disintegrate as a result of its nationality problems largely did so for the wrong reasons, believing that the breakup would be precipitated by a Muslim uprising in Central Asia.² In reality, Central Asia played little role in the entire affair and was conspicuous for its quiescence. Western experts on ethnicity fared no better. In a book of essays written in 1990 and published in 1992 in which leading theorists of nationalism and ethnicity were asked to place the ongoing upheavals in the USSR into a comparative perspective, not a single author anticipated the imminent breakup of the country, and many openly argued against the idea that the Soviet Union was disintegrating.³

¹ Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), p. 3.

² Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *Decline of an Empire* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1980). Even Richard Pipes, who in 1984 correctly concluded that the Soviet Union was facing a “revolutionary situation,” did not predict the breakup of the USSR, but thought that the likely outcome of crisis was reform. As he wrote: “There is no likelihood that the Soviet government will voluntarily dissolve the Soviet Union into its constituent republics, but genuine federalism of some sort, with broad self-rule for the minorities, is not inconceivable; it calls only for making constitutional fiction constitutional reality. Such a step would go a long way toward reducing the ethnic tensions that now exist.” Richard Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 1 (Fall 1984), p. 58.

³ Alexander J. Motyl, ed., *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Among those who argued that the breakup of the USSR was unlikely were Ernest Gellner, Crawford Young, Donald Horowitz, David Laitin, and Michael Hechter. Anthony Smith, Paul Brass, and Kenneth Minogue expressed no opinion on the issue, while only John Armstrong and S. N. Eisenstadt noted the “uncertain” future of the USSR. In an article written on the eve of the August 1991 coup, David Laitin similarly decried “the unjustifiable assumption” that the USSR was on a course toward dissolution; after the August coup, a postscript was added in which Laitin confessed that recent events had made “the image of a rotting empire, discredited in . . . [the] essay, seem intuitively correct.” David D. Laitin, “The National Uprising in the Soviet Union,” *World Politics* (October 1991), pp. 139–77.

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Although many of the accusations against Sovietologists for their defects of vision are deserved, they must be understood in context: Even the vast majority of Soviet dissidents in 1987 (including most non-Russian dissidents) could not imagine the collapse of the USSR.⁴ Before 1990 the breakup of the Soviet Union remained outside the realm of the conceivable for the overwhelming mass of Soviet citizens, irrespective of ethnic background.

This book is about the disintegration of the Soviet state – and specifically, about how within a compressed period of history the seemingly impossible came to be widely viewed as the seemingly inevitable, turning a world once unthinkingly accepted as immutable upside down. Ironically, though few thought it possible only a few years before it happened, the prevailing view of Soviet disintegration today is that the breakup was inevitable – the manifestation of inherent qualities of the Soviet state and of processes set in motion long before the actual events which brought it about. Often underlying assertions of the structural predetermination of Soviet disintegration is an implicit teleology, defined by Isaiah Berlin as the assumption that history contains an inherent logic, nature, or purpose beyond control of the individual that is revealed in the movement of history itself. Berlin argued that teleological explanation obfuscates the role of human action in the history that we make and takes as the goal of explanation the *ex post* revelation of the essential character of things which makes the present unavoidable. As Berlin asserted, in teleological reasoning “[w]e are plainly dealing not with an empirical theory but with a metaphysical attitude which takes for granted that to explain a thing . . . is to discover its purpose. . . . Teleology is a form of faith capable of neither confirmation nor refutation by any kind of experience; the notions of evidence, proof, probability and so on, are wholly inapplicable to it.”⁵

Several types of teleological explanations predominate in scholarly and folk accounts of the collapse of the Soviet state. Some authors, such as Martin Malia, assert that the total disintegration of the Soviet state was inherent in the very logic of Leninism because its totalitarian essence bred an incapacity to reform. As Malia puts it, “the intrinsic irreformability of communism is no longer a question of opinion; it is now a matter of

⁴ Writing in 1969, Andrei Amalrik was one of the few who foresaw the breakup of the USSR along national lines, although he believed it would be precipitated by a war with China, not by internal reform. See Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 62–65.

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 12–17.

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historical fact.”⁶ Malia’s is not a probabilistic explanation of Soviet collapse. It is rather an essentialist understanding. Yet, if this were true and the breakup of the USSR was inevitable, why did so many come to believe only a short time before its collapse that the Soviet state was fundamentally stable? It was widely argued on the eve of *glasnost* that Soviet institutions had achieved a degree of broad-based legitimacy within the Soviet population, irrespective of the national context within which Leninism appeared, and that persuasive methods of rule had replaced state-sponsored intimidation.⁷ In retrospect, Soviet legitimacy was an illusion, but at the time seemed real enough to inspire the decisions of Gorbachev and others to introduce *glasnost* in the first place. As one Western expert on Soviet nationalities issues put it at the time, *glasnost* was above all “an expression of confidence in the legitimacy of the Soviet system” and “a recognition that the pretense of infallibility is no longer necessary to command popular allegiance and support.”⁸ This popular support eventually faded in the wake of the subsequent onslaught of events. Nevertheless, Gorbachev’s reforms cannot be accounted for by arguments which view the disintegration of the Soviet state as emerging only from the system’s inherent logic, for why should a system whose very logic doomed it to failure give rise to the confidence that seemed to underlie political liberalization? The very fact that Soviet leaders risked liberalizing reform tells us that something critical is missing from explanations of Soviet collapse that make reference only to the “logic” of the system.

There is also the fundamental problem of how the Soviet state came to be recognized as irreformable – that is, how its irreformable quality became the “historical fact” that Malia observes. Obviously, when viewed from the present, the past contains no contingency in the sense that it took place. The choices embodied within it are irreversible and buried in history’s immutability. But as Marc Bloch described the way in which we

⁶ Martin Malia, “Leninist Endgame,” in Stephen R. Graubard, ed., *Exit From Communism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), p. 60. For a critique of what he called this “essentialist” argument, see Alexander Dallin, “Causes of the Collapse of the USSR,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1992), pp. 279–302.

⁷ See, for instance, Peter Hauslohner, “Politics Before Gorbachev: De-Stalinization and the Roots of Reform,” in Seweryn Bialer, ed., *Politics, Society, and Nationality: Inside Gorbachev’s Russia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 41–90.

⁸ Gail Lapidus, “State and Society: Toward the Emergence of Civil Society in the Soviet Union,” in Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus, eds., *The Soviet System in Crisis* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 140.

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should approach history, “[w]hen the historian asks himself about the probability of a past event, he actually attempts to transport himself, by a bold exercise of the mind, to the time before the event itself, in order to gauge its chances, as they appeared upon the eve of its realization.”⁹ In this case, several years before the events in question, they seemed highly improbable to most participants and observers. Did the Soviet state break apart because it was inherently incapable of survival, or do we now see it as having been incapable of survival precisely because the Soviet state broke apart? In history winners take all, including the explanation of their own victory. As daunting as the structural obstacles to reform were (a subject about which many scholars, including myself, wrote well before the events of the late 1980s), ultimately the argument of the fundamental inevitability of Soviet collapse can only be meaningless, since any judgment concerning the inability of the Soviet state to survive cannot be extracted from the very events which caused the Soviet Union to disintegrate in the first place. As Berlin noted, teleological explanation cannot be proved or disproved; it rests rather on faith. In this instance there are good reasons to inject some doubt into teleology’s faith. The fact that within a relatively short but very intense period of history the idea of the disintegration of the Soviet state moved from the wholly unimaginable to the completely inevitable within the popular mind – both within the USSR and outside – does not breed confidence in ascriptions of the Soviet collapse solely to an inherent logic of Leninism, for this fails to explain how such a tremendous transformation in attitudes toward the state took place within such a short period of time.

Similar problems beset other widely accepted explanations of Soviet disintegration. It is commonplace to argue that the Soviet Union broke apart because it was an empire. From this perspective Soviet collapse was inevitable – determined perhaps even as far back as the creation of the Soviet state – due to the inherent imperial quality of Bolshevik rule.¹⁰ In this view, all empires are destined to disappear in a world in which national self-determination has become the accepted norm, and because the Soviet Union was an empire, it too could not escape its preordained fate. A similar

⁹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), p. 125.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Alexander J. Motyl, “From Imperial Decay to Imperial Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Empire in Comparative Perspective,” in David Good, ed., *Nationalism and Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 15–43.

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dilemma confronts these arguments: Did the USSR collapse because it was an empire, or is it now routinely referred to as an empire precisely because it collapsed? A sudden profusion of empire imagery accompanied the demise of the USSR. On the eve of *perestroika*, relatively few observers employed a discourse of empire to depict the nationality problems of the USSR. Crawford Young expressed the attitude prevailing at the time toward the use of the term “empire” to describe the Soviet Union:

States perceived in international jurisprudence and dominant political discourse as colonial have been dismantled, but this imagery – however serviceable as cold war lexicon . . . is unlikely to govern the unfolding dialectic between the central institutions of the Soviet state and its non-Russian periphery. . . . [A]lthough there is an undeniable element of “exceptionalism” to the Soviet case, it belongs on balance in the contemporary universe of politics founded on the doctrinal postulates of the “nation-state,” and is therefore susceptible of interpretation according to the same empirical inferences as other members of the contemporary body of states.¹¹

Throughout the Cold War the dominant image used by scholars to describe the Soviet Union in its internal dimensions was that of state rather than empire. To be sure, the countries of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe (and to a lesser extent, the Balts) were frequently referred to as “captive nations.” But the imperial analogy was only occasionally extended beyond this to cover the multinational character of the Soviet state. Rather, as the Soviet Union collapsed, it came to be widely recognized as a multinational empire. In this sense, the real issue that needs to be explained is how a polity once almost universally construed as a state came to be universally condemned as an empire. The critical question that those interested in understanding the disintegration of the Soviet state need to answer is not whether the Soviet breakup was inevitable, but rather how it came to be widely viewed as inevitable by a population that, only a short while before, could barely imagine such an outcome.

Teleological explanation violates one of the fundamental attributes of social causation: Causation always flows through the beliefs and actions of individuals, even if the actions produce unintended results. Indeed, teleological explanation can be defined as “the attribution of the cause of a historical happening neither to the actions and reactions that constitute the happening nor to concrete and specifiable conditions that shape or constrain the actions and reactions but rather to abstract transhistorical

¹¹ M. Crawford Young, “The National and Colonial Question and Marxism: A View from the South,” in Motyl, ed., *Thinking Theoretically*, pp. 91, 97.

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processes leading to some future state.”¹² Whether this be some inevitable march toward freedom and democracy, the unavoidable requirements of modernization or the market, or the unfolding drama of national self-determination, teleological explanation celebrates the determination of structure over agency. It is one thing to talk about the effects of structure – that patterning of social interaction which constrains, facilitates, or defines human behavior – in probabilistic terms and as factors conditioning choice. But teleological explanation is not probabilistic. It views the actions of individuals as epiphenomena of structure, as if the human actions involved in the collapse of the USSR were not intentional but mere reflections of a larger logic or moving hand operating outside the individual.

In all the ink that has been spilled concerning the demise of Soviet communism, the serious task of probing the causal interaction between structure and agency has not yet been tackled. It is true that a great deal of attention has been focused on Gorbachev's personal role in bringing down the Soviet state,¹³ and a considerable literature has emerged on individual nationalist movements that were instrumental in fostering change.¹⁴ Others, by contrast, have placed emphasis on the institutional, economic, or social structural conditions which prepared the way for both Soviet liberalization and the eruptions of nationalist mobilization that precipitated the Soviet collapse.¹⁵ Whereas the first group of authors focuses almost

¹² William H. Sewell, Jr., “Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology,” in Terrence J. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 247.

¹³ For a few of the many works on Gorbachev's impact on events, see Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hough, *Democratization and Revolution*; Mark Galeotti, *Gorbachev and His Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Martin McCauley, *Gorbachev* (New York: Longman, 1998); Robert G. Kaiser, *Why Gorbachev Happened: His Triumph and His Failure* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991). The Russian-language literature is also enormous.

¹⁴ Among the numerous English-language works, see Rasma Karklins, *Ethnopolitics and Transition to Democracy: The Collapse of the USSR and Latvia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Rein Taagepera, *Estonia: Return to Independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Alfred Erich Senn, *Lithuania Awakening* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Alfred Erich Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Jane Dawson, *Eco-nationalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Taras Kuzio and Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine: Perestroika to Independence* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus: At a Crossroads in History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset: The*

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exclusively on a specific individual or movement and fails to probe larger relationships of social causation which might have conditioned action, the latter group largely eschews in-depth analysis of the actual actions which brought about the collapse, treating these as the logical manifestations of particular institutional designs or social processes set in motion well before the events in question occurred. As one review of the literature concluded, social scientific explanations of the collapse of communism have tended to be excessively deterministic.¹⁶

Still others view the Soviet collapse as largely unrelated to the mobilizational explosions that rocked the Soviet state in the *glasnost*' years – as a realignment of control within the ruling elite or as a process of the appropriation of the state's resources by bureaucrats due to a loss of confidence in central institutions.¹⁷ Obviously, nationalism was both a cause of and a consequence of the declining institutional coherence of the Soviet state brought on by *glasnost*' and failed institutional reform. But in a period of revolution, insurrection, and major upheaval in which hundreds of thousands took to the streets on a daily basis, explanations that focus solely on elite maneuverings or on the bureaucratic appropriation of state resources lack a ring of authenticity. They ultimately cannot account for why the Soviet state ended by disintegrating into national pieces as opposed to merely undergoing regime change. They fail to address how the seemingly impossible – the breakup of the Soviet state – became the seemingly inevitable. Indeed, much of the appropriation of resources by bureaucrats occurred as the future prospects of the state declined.

Closely related to the interplay between structure and agency in the disintegration of the Soviet Union is their broader relationship within the study of nationalism. For the USSR was brought down in large part by a remarkable explosion of nationalist mobilization and the impact that mobilization had on the ways in which both Russians and non-Russians thought

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 Institutional Account," *Theory and Society*, vol. 23 (1994), pp. 47–78; Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); David Lane, *The Rise and Fall of State Socialism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

¹⁶ See Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 2 (1999), pp. 323–43.

¹⁷ Hough, *Democratization and Revolution*; Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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about the Soviet state. The study of nationalism in recent years has undergone a paradigm shift. Scholars have increasingly come to appreciate the ambiguous, arbitrary, and constructed character of nationalist claims and the shifting, embedded, and overlapping nature of cultural identities. This book does not seek to overturn this consensus, but consciously attempts to build on it by pushing our understanding of nationalism in a direction which, I believe, deserves greater attention if observers are to avoid making the same types of mistakes in other contexts that were made with respect to Soviet collapse. Empirically, its central task is to elicit the process by which the unthinkable about nationhood becomes the seemingly inevitable. Theoretically, it seeks to carve out an answer by focusing on nationalist action as both cause and effect.

As with the study of Soviet collapse, the structure/agency debate so prominent within other areas of social science has rarely been interrogated within the study of nationalism. A large number of works seek to uncover the origins of nationalism, assuming that by understanding origins, one thereby understands the universal essence of the phenomenon. Most scholars regard manifestations of nationalism as the logical consequence of a particular social interest or identity position embedded by prior history or emerging out of the impact of broader social forces. Structure, not agency, looms heavily in their interpretations. Many theories are plainly teleological, portraying nationalist conflicts as the realization of an unfolding national spirit, universal norms of self-determination, or the logic of industrialism.¹⁸ The idea that identities could be defined in the context of agency or that nationalism is both a structured and structuring phenomenon has not received sufficient attention.

Most studies understand nationalist action as merely an externalization of nationalist ways of thinking brought into being well before the onset of nationalist action. Miroslav Hroch, for instance, focused attention on what he termed Phase B in the development of nationalism (the period of patriotic agitation), calling it “the most important phase,” largely ignoring how and why the emergence of nationalist elites leads to the rise of mass national movements (Phase C). Although Hroch noted that “Phase B was not necessarily destined to pass over into Phase C,” his assumption was that nationalist action is not worth intensive examination, since what

¹⁸ For a discussion of the teleological and functionalist aspects of Ernest Gellner's theories, for instance, see John Hall, ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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occurs during Phase C is largely determined by the ways in which national identities are formed prior to action.¹⁹ Liah Greenfeld takes this position to an extreme, arguing that “the character of every national identity was defined in the early phase” of the formation of national identity, when *ressentiment* took hold within elite segments of society. “Its effect, in the political, social, and cultural constitution of the respective nations, as well as their historical record, are attributable to this original definition which set the goals for mobilization, not to the nationalization of the masses.” To be fair, Greenfeld loosens the jaws of history somewhat, adding that the origins of nationalism do not “*completely* shape its social and political expressions” or determine the conduct of nations. They only create “a predisposition for a certain type of action, and a probability that, in certain conditions, such action will take place.”²⁰ But the questions of how and under what circumstances predispositions are translated into action remain unaddressed. Is there a direct relationship between certain nationalist predispositions (and ultimately the structural factors which lie behind them) and the ways in which people contest the nation? Why are some predispositions translated into action and others not? Can predispositions change in the context of translation in action? And moving still further away from the thought-to-action paradigm, can predispositions themselves emerge and form as a result of or in the context of action?

These are not idle questions. Rather, they engage the very epistemologies and ontologies that lie behind our knowledge of nationalism (and for that matter, many other political phenomena as well). The discursive shift in the study of nationalism that now dominates scholarly inquiry has raised questions about the thought-to-action paradigm by shedding light on the roles played by states and nationalist intellectuals in inventing standardized languages, national histories, and national traditions. Both primordialism and instrumentalism – the former focusing on identities as the product of sticky emotional attachments, the latter focusing narrowly on identities as mere expressions of self-interest – reflect a kind of structural determinism in which action flows logically from structurally determined

¹⁹ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 22–24.

²⁰ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 22–23, 25.