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The Disintegration of the USSR: A Complex Protracted Process

Mary Buckley

Over the centuries, political unions have forged, been maintained and/or, with time, disintegrated.[1*] Unions may also be redefined without necessarily collapsing. To persist, however, they require successful mechanisms that enable the political system to function without suffering a legitimacy crisis. What might constitute such a crisis will depend, at any given time, on the wider historical context, the level of socio-economic development, the nature of the political system itself and the expectations of society. The relationship between society and state is thus crucial in a union's endurance. This paper illustrates one example of a union's collapse in a state socialist system at the end of the twentieth century and examines the dynamics that brought it about.

I The Soviet Case Study

The disintegration of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), like the disintegration of the Tsarist state, was a complex protracted process, spread over several years. One variable alone cannot account for the union's collapse. The process was multi-variate and one in which sequence and timing mattered. Certain key developments in the system's final months of implosion could not have come about without other prior, and crucial, developments. There were necessary pre-requisites for disintegration, ongoing and interrelated social and political processes of change integral to it, build-ups of tensions, vital accelerators that speeded the disintegration and catalysts for fundamental transformations.

The prior context of this erosion and collapse of the one-party state was an anachronistic economic system suffering from negative growth rates

[1] I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system here with exceptions for names or words customarily known in the West differently. Thus El'tsin, Iakovlev, Ianaev and Iazov are here rendered Yeltsin, Yakovlev, Yanaev and Yazov and soft signs have been dropped from the ends of words that would otherwise correctly be *glasnost'* and *oblast'*.

and a cynicism among the intelligentsia and wider public about politics and party privilege. In the early 1980s, the stalled and embarrassing gerontocracies in quick succession of Leonid Brezhnev, Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko vividly illustrated the need for rejuvenation and redefinition.

Integral to the processes of change from 1985 to 1991 were the following enabling factors: first, an instigator of reform in a socio-economic context that required reform; second, an officially approved policy of perestroika (restructuring or reconstruction); third, the encouragement 'from above' of new groups and movements to form, independent of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), in order to encourage support for perestroika; fourth, changes to the electoral system; fifth, pressing demands arising from the nationalities question; and sixth, a failed coup as catalyst. Without the first, the other key factors for disintegration would either have been missing or, in the case of the nationalities question, would have lacked the legality to express itself and demand further change. Ultimately, a war of laws between different administrative levels, namely between the union's centre in Moscow and the newly elected parliaments in the republics, illustrated the grave legitimacy crisis that the Union confronted due to reforms adopted by it. Political chaos, ungovernability and fragmentation were among the consequences. The paradox for its instigator, Mikhail Gorbachev, was that when his *de jure* power was at its strongest in 1990 and 1991, after he assumed the title of President of the USSR, his authority at home was at its weakest, even if his prestige abroad was high. Power without authority means weak *de facto* power. By 1991, the components of the USSR that had held the union together, the very logic of the system, had been undermined, just as in 1917 the props that had held up Tsarism were no longer in place. Moreover, the instigator was losing his closest supporters, becoming increasingly politically isolated, trapped between radicals and conservatives, neither of whom he wanted fully to join. Final attempts after the failed coup of August 1991 to maintain some sort of union without the Baltic states failed and disagreements among remaining republics over attempts to coordinate economic and social policy finally undermined the viability of any cohesive political union.

i) The Instigator

When Gorbachev's colleagues on the Politburo selected him in March 1985 to become the new General Secretary after the death of Chernenko, no-one suspected quite how much of a reformer he was. Had the rest of the Politburo realised this in advance, they would probably not have picked him. The

historical lesson that reform from above in one-party authoritarian systems is potentially dangerous since it can lead to demands for further change than what is on offer from leaders had already been learnt from Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Gorbachev, as a reformer, did not call for a new system. He merely wanted to modify the existing one, within its own socialist parameters. He called for a perfection of socialism in the tradition of Lenin. Gorbachev hoped, as a consequence, to see a more efficient economy, a higher standard of living, a more democratic socialism, an activation of the 'human factor' as he put it and a 'new political thinking' in foreign policy.[2] Economic stagnation and crisis, as pointed out by economists Abel Aganbegian and Tat'iana Zaslavskaia as characterising the years 1979–82, made the need for change and initiative in the workplace and in society compelling.[3] Gorbachev supported *khozraschet* (cost-accounting) and *samofinansirovanie* (self-financing), as introduced in the 1987 Law on State Enterprise. He wanted a more committed workforce (with an end to the reality of 'they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work') and fewer bureaucratic orders sent down to factory directors. The stifling role of ministries and widespread corruption needed to be tackled. The economic changes that Gorbachev attempted were geared to his goal of an 'intensification' of economic growth. '*Intensifikatsiia*' became a buzz word along with 'efficiency' and 'acceleration of the scientific-technological revolution.' Gorbachev wanted to replace old machinery with new in order to boost productivity, which called for both the import of Western technology and the production of new and more sophisticated Soviet forms. He also advocated stricter labour discipline, initially continuing Iuri Andropov's anti-alcohol campaign, until 1989 when he relaxed it due to opposition and failure. All these aspects of economic reform were subsumed under Gorbachev's perestroika which he defined as a revolutionary process of interrelated changes in economy, polity and society.

ii) The Policy of Perestroika

Officially, perestroika was launched at the 27th Party Congress in 1986, an event convenient in its timing, just one year after Gorbachev became General

[2] Mary Buckley, *Redefining Russian Society and Polity* (Boulder, CO., 1993); Stephen White, *Gorbachev and After* (Cambridge, 1992); Richard Sakwa, *Gorbachev and His Reforms 1985–1990* (London, 1990); Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, 1996).

[3] On economic reform consult: Anders Aslund, *Gorbachev's Struggle for Economic Reform* (London, 1989) and Gertrude E. Schroeder, 'The Soviet Economy on a Treadmill of Perestroika: Gorbachev's First Five Years' in Harley D. Balzer (ed.), *Five Years that Shook the World* (Boulder, CO., 1991), 31–48.

Secretary. It presented him with the opportunity for defining his desired direction quickly and also for triggering some turnover in the membership of the Central Committee. Whereas 87% of the full membership of the Central Committee had been re-elected under Brezhnev in 1981, only 59% enjoyed re-election in 1986, with Gorbachev benefiting from greater shake out. In fact, in his first year in office, Gorbachev got off to a quick start by dismissing thirty-nine out of 101 ministers with seats on the Council of Ministers and also fourteen out of twenty-three heads of Central Committee party departments.

The precise meaning of perestroika changed over time, as did the permitted limits to the use of glasnost, or openness. These two concepts were linked since problems that perestroika had to solve could not be tackled until they had been named, aired, shamed, tackled and solved. Hence the necessity for 'publicity' about them which glasnost provided. After 1987 a range of social problems were refreshingly admitted to exist, such as prostitution, drug addiction, suicide and crime, although they were blamed mainly on the stagnation of the Brezhnev era which became an ideological target. But early on glasnost had its limits. Gorbachev did not wish to question Leninism, to attack the KGB, to expose violence in the army or to discuss the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact of 1938.[4] Nor did he wish to see discussion of the compulsory two years of military service or to see opinion polls which showed Andrei Sakharov and Jesus Christ as more popular than himself. Certainly, with time, he got them all as the truth can become addictive and also corrosive of established norms and values.

The crucial point on economic reform was that Gorbachev wanted a more flexible system, based on planning and central control. He attempted to get more market elements into a system of socialist planning. A reduction in the number of state orders from the ministries was essential to his vision, as were cooperative businesses. The latter were legalised in 1986 and 1987 in laws on individual enterprise and in 1988 on cooperatives. In brief, these early economic reforms failed because the success of cost accounting required price reforms that did not occur and the ministries and Gosplan failed to reduce the number of administrative orders sent down to factories, leaving many directors with no space for initiative. Gorbachev also hesitated to adopt the Shatalin plan of economic reform after having first been keen to see it drawn

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[4] See Buckley, *Redefining*, 44–71 and Alec Nove, *Glasnost' in Action* (London, 1989). For the relevance of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, see David R. Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (London, 1988).

up. His fear of offending conservatives was a key factor here. Gorbachev's call for 'more initiative' from below was tepid because the space for taking it was limited and many citizens were afraid to pursue this path in case they made errors and were subsequently punished, especially if Gorbachev's tenure was short as some feared early on during his battle with hard-liners.

Failed economic reforms were crucial to the process of disintegration since Gorbachev came to believe that economic reform needed political reform in order to be successful. Political reform, he hoped, would shake up the old controlling practices of the ministries and make them more accountable. The ensuing political reforms, taken together, were vital for leading to disintegration which Gorbachev neither wanted, nor envisaged at their outset.

iii) New Groups and Movements

Beginning in 1987, as glasnost was taking off, Gorbachev encouraged new groups and movements to form, independent of the CPSU.[5] Under Stalin any group independent of the party would have been dubbed 'anti-Soviet' as an 'enemy of the people' and under Brezhnev they would have been labelled 'dissident.' This development was absolutely key to the political momentum and pace of change that followed. Why did he permit them, given the risks involved?

First, Gorbachev badly wanted new movements to support his reforms and to help in his arguments and battles with conservative communists who opposed his ideas. Initially, indeed, these movements did support him. In the Baltic states, for example, popular fronts for perestroika wanted economic reforms. Socialist groups who desired genuine socialism and human rights also formed, as did a wide range of other democratic groups such as the tiny Democratic Union and the larger umbrella movement Democratic Russia (which included quite diverse groups such as the Democratic Party of Russia, the Christian Democratic Movement and the Car Lovers' Party). Secondly, this process was part of what Gorbachev called democratising socialism.

The key point for this discussion is that as momentum built, and as other changes occurred, the popular fronts and other groups, including a Democratic Platform within the CPSU, began to call for more change than Gorbachev himself wanted. For instance, Democratic Russia hoped for the election of democrats to the soviets, the election of Boris Yeltsin to the presidency of

[5] Useful overviews can be found in Vladimir Brovkin, 'Revolution from Below: Informal Political Associations in Russia, 1988–1989', *Soviet Studies,* 42 (1990), 233–57; Geoffrey Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union* (London, 1990).

Russia, an end to Article 6 of the Constitution which enshrined the 'leading and guiding role of the CPSU' and effectively an abolition of the command-administrative system of the USSR and the advent of the multi-party system. And out of the popular fronts in the Baltic states came nationalist movements, such as Sajudis in Lithuania. Sajudis wanted economic autonomy, then sovereignty, followed by political independence.

In short, groups and movements that Gorbachev initially needed in his political battles, ultimately were crucial in sealing his political fate and in challenging the very fabric of the union. The embryonic civil society that he enabled eventually betrayed him. Without it, nationalist pressures could not have been so easily expressed.[6]

iv) Changes to the Electoral System

The political opportunities and levers for the array of social, political and nationalist groups to express themselves fully, and also to act with some legitimacy, came through changes to the electoral process. In democratising the soviets and in ushering in candidate choice, Gorbachev began to unpick and redefine the established relationship between strong party and weak soviets. In 1989, Soviet citizens voted for the Congress of People's Deputies which was an all-union parliament with 2,250 deputies from across the Union. This body then selected its own smaller Supreme Soviet of 542.

Instigating this change had been extremely difficult and Gorbachev showed himself an immensely adept politician in so doing. He had briefly mentioned electoral reform at the 27th Party Congress, but no-one else did. The topic was returned to at a Central Committee plenum in January 1987 where Gorbachev advocated electoral choice. The plenum officially endorsed the idea in a resolution. Legal journals then began to debate how best to go about this and a tiny experiment in 1% of constituencies took place in June (with one 'automatic' deputy of sixteen years shocked not to be elected, another upset to the point of heart attack and chairpersons of commissions finding it hard to read out results when a party boss was not returned).[7]

Rather than wait until the next Party Congress for the opportunity to widen political reform, Gorbachev convened a special party conference at which he called for more radical reform of what he described as a deformed

[6] For a wider discussion of nationalism, see Gail W. Lapidus and Victor Zaslavsky with Philip Goldman, *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics* (Cambridge, 1992).

[7] See White, *Gorbachev*, 28–75.

and ossified political system. The conference was stormy with Soviet citizens glued to their television screens to watch resolutions passed for more democracy. At the 19th Party Conference in June 1988, Gorbachev rammed this policy of electoral reform through, amid debate, anger and an unprecedented political liveliness. Central Committee meetings in July and September followed the suggestions of the Conference, out of which came an electoral law, passed in December 1988 by the Supreme Soviet. Gorbachev revived Lenin's slogan 'all power to the soviets', not yet anticipating what they would do to him and to the system. In his speeches Gorbachev likened political reform to oxygen.

The upshot was success for Gorbachev in attaining approval for electoral reform, possibly because many did not realise quite how radical it could be. Three sets of voting were to take place: 750 deputies to be elected in local constituencies; another 750 to be selected from larger units to ensure representation by nationality; and a final 750 to come from social organisations. These last group of seats were effectively 'saved' ones with 100 reserved for the CPSU, seventy-five for the Komsomol and so on. They came in for huge criticism from democrats, but arguably Gorbachev had to include them in his political package to win over his conservative critics. When it convened, the more radical deputies who had been elected to the Congress of People's Deputies set up the Inter-regional group of deputies. This linked advocates of change across the fifteen republics who wanted more change than Gorbachev and faster. Boris Yeltsin was one of its members.

The momentum of electoral reform did not stop with the new All-Union Congress of People's Deputies. As a system of many administrative levels, the logic of the USSR required elections at lower levels too. The fast pace of change accelerated in late 1989 and in 1990 due to elections to parliaments in the republics. These were arguably fundamental to the unravelling of the system which could not have logically occurred without them. Lively debates took place about what 'learning democracy' for parliamentarians meant in a system unfamiliar with it.[8] Bad behaviour and scuffles on the floor of debating chambers were part of the process.

v) The Nationalities Question

A strong case can be made that it was insensitivity to nationalist demands in this wider context of political reform that ultimately caused the break-up of

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[8] Buckley, *Redefining*, 182–247.

the USSR. If we contrast the USSR with Spain, we can see that in the latter, statutes of pre-autonomy showed respect for the historic nationalities enabling the state to continue without fragmenting. This did not occur in the USSR. Indeed, Gorbachev was 'nationality blind' until too late. At the 27th Party Congress, he reiterated the old party line that the nationalities question had been solved and also short-sightedly referred to the Russians as the elder brother of the others, just as Stalin and others before him had done.

Gorbachev did not instigate electoral reform to aid nationalism, but that was one of its consequences. Electoral reform gave nationalism a mouthpiece, a legitimate political outlet and a power base. Nationalism had previously been aided by the encouragement 'from above' of independent social movements which had allowed movements to begin to mobilise and to articulate their thoughts and policies. In December 1989, the Lithuanian communist party declared its independence from the CPSU. The newly elected Lithuanian parliament was the first to declare independence from Moscow. By the end of 1990, all Soviet republics, including Russia, had declared their sovereignty. This meant that they were rejecting the historic right of the All-Union level in Moscow to override their own legislation. Gorbachev could protest that much of this was unconstitutional, such as the seizure by Russia of control over the Russian KGB and of the mines on its territory, but in reality there was little he could do. To underscore the point that he needed to defend Russian interests first and foremost and to be independent of the CPSU, Yeltsin publicly and unexpectedly resigned from the party at the 28th Party Congress in 1990 and stunned Gorbachev by walking out. As elected Chairman of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in 1990 and as its elected President in June 1991, Yeltsin declared that the laws of his parliament could override the laws of the All-Union Congress of People's Deputies. In the ensuing 'war of laws' between fifteen republics and the All-Union level, or union centre, contradictory laws were passed and the republics assumed new powers, control over budgets, land, the militia and so on. Political chaos was one of the results. The words crisis (*krizis*), collapse (*krakh*), disintegration (*razval*) and despair (*otchaianie*) became part of intellectual, journalistic and daily discourse.

This process of disintegration was also spurred on by the euphoria at witnessing successful revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989, where Gorbachev had also encouraged perestroika. As the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe collapsed, nationalists inside the USSR felt emboldened by a ripple effect which topped up the confidence that was developing internally anyway.

vi) The Failed Coup as Catalyst

The significance of the failed coup of August 1991 was that it accelerated political change at a previously unimagined pace. The irony here is that the coup's instigators wanted to maintain the old system but speedily achieved the opposite.[9]

Since 1989, there had been numerous rumours about impending civil war and a right-wing coup. Finding himself caught between opponents of perestroika on one side and radical reformers on the other who wanted more change than he did, Gorbachev endured an uneasy middle position, sometimes seeming to lean one way, then veering to the other. When, in 1990, Gorbachev assumed more powers through an executive presidency as membership of the CPSU was falling and its credibility dissolving with exposés of privileges and corruption, not only did radical reformers accuse him of authoritarianism, but also former supporters such as Eduard Shevardnadze. 1990 was a crucial year, with Gorbachev losing some of his erstwhile crucial backers, meaning an erosion of his political credibility, authority and strength. He also tried to reign in glasnost. In that year he appointed Leonid Kravchenko to head *Gosteleradio* and immediately lively programmes were stopped and transformed into dull ones. Yet now emboldened by changes, journalists and Gorbachev's critics fought back. No longer wary, cautious, cowed or afraid, as some had been in 1987 and 1988, they felt confident to demand genuine glasnost since the new political context of lively parliamentary debates and fresh legislation gave them legitimacy to demand that the new widened parameters of discussion remain.

This context was unacceptable to conservative communists, made worse for them in 1991 by two developments. First, in Russia, Yeltsin in a decree of July 1991 had declared that all party cells in the workplace had to close. To take the party out of the workplace was to kill the party's historical entry-point. Traditional party members were exceedingly unhappy at this. Second, ongoing calls for sovereignty had resulted in discussions and debates which were to culminate on 20 August 1991 in a signing of a new union treaty. Coup leaders wanted to stop this treaty since it meant dismemberment of the USSR as they knew it and wanted it.

An Emergency Committee of eight men formed, including Vice-President Yanaev, Head of the KGB Kriuchkov, Defence Minister Yazov, Boris Pugo the Minister of the Interior and Prime Minister Pavlov, and other leaders of

[9] For competing interpretations of the August coup, see a special edition of *Problems of Communism*, November–December, 1991.

industry and agriculture. They declared that chaos and ungovernability had prompted them to act. They banned all meetings, demonstrations and strikes and argued that the economy was in crisis and that famine was possible. With Gorbachev on holiday in the Crimea and effectively under house arrest, tanks rolled into Moscow.

Several factors, however, meant that the coup would fail. First, the security forces were divided. The Russian KGB, no longer part of the all-Union KGB, tipped Yeltsin off about what was happening which allowed him to begin the resistance immediately. The Russian KGB was loyal to Yeltsin and this was vital. Secondly, Yeltsin's role as popularly elected president of Russia meant that he enjoyed the people's mandate through the ballot box. Similarly, coup leaders had no mandate to rule, but the Russian parliament had. Thirdly, the coup leaders were disorganised and Yanaev and Pavlov were apparently drunk. Fourthly, and crucially, sections of the armed forces were ready to disobey orders and to refuse to attack the Russian parliament – its building increasingly a symbol of democracy. Fifthly, many citizens in Moscow, but admittedly a minority since most stayed home, tried to persuade the soldiers in tanks that they were wrong to be there. Some hauled soldiers out of tanks and started to argue with them about what they were doing. In this context, the coup crumbled. Pugo committed suicide and the others were arrested.

II The Union's Final Demise

Brought back to Moscow from isolation, at first Gorbachev did not grasp how fast and how far politics had moved on. During a painful speech to the Russian parliament (i.e. not the All-Union parliament but the one in which Yeltsin held the presidency) Gorbachev failed, at first, to appreciate the political mood, or to see why at his call for 'more perestroika' deputies openly laughed at him. Very slowly he caught on. With hugely boosted authority, Yeltsin then humiliated Gorbachev inside the Russian parliament by publicly insisting that he resign as General Secretary of the CPSU, and ask the Central Committee to dissolve itself, as well as to ban the Russian communist party on 23 August. The Soviet era was now effectively over, but the Union had not yet gone entirely. The coup alone did not mean an end to the USSR, although the Baltic states demanded independence and were given it immediately.

Gorbachev wanted to maintain some sort of union right up to the very end. The All-Union Congress of People's Deputies met to declare change and to formalise independence for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. On 1 September, the Congress approved new central institutions which effectively made itself powerless. Executive power from September to late December 1991 lay in the State Council. Its members were Gorbachev and the top office holders of the republics, thereby reflecting a power shift to the republican level. These office holders could be presidents, prime-ministers or chairs of Supreme Soviets where presidential elections had not yet taken place. The purpose of the State Council was to find coordinated solutions to problems of domestic and foreign policy. Thus policy making became an attempt, above all, to *coordinate* among political units, not to issue orders from the union centre at the top down to all. In essence, the Union's 'top' or 'centre' was much eroded.

The Supreme Soviet was retained, after much debate. The Council of Nationalities was transformed into a Council of Republics in which each union republic had one vote. The Council of Republics could now veto legislation coming from the Supreme Soviet's other chamber, the Council of the Union. This, again, reflected the power shift to the republics. So did the right of the Council of Republics to suspend USSR laws on the territory of the republics, if the laws contravened the republican constitution. Thus, the republics enjoyed more power than the centre.[10] The Congress approved a change of name from USSR to Union of Sovereign States. This name applied until October when it became the Union of Free Sovereign States. That name lasted until the end of December only.

Gorbachev remained president. The important point is that institutions at the centre were now designed to link and coordinate the new states, not to decide policy for them. They were there to try to hold the parts together. The most important coordinating committee was the inter-republican economic committee headed by Ivan Silaev, meant to coordinate economic and social policy.

On 9 October, a new draft Union Treaty declared a Union of Free Sovereign Republics. It made no reference to a federation. The idea of exclusive powers for the Union was absent. On 8 October, the Russian Supreme Soviet had adopted a resolution that all deputies representing Russia in the USSR Supreme Soviet had to be guided now by Russia's laws, not the laws

[10] A political Consultative Council also formed but this was just a loose advisory body. On it sat the mayors of Moscow and Leningrad, Gavriil Popov and Anatolii Sobchak, KGB chief Vadim Bakatin, Eduard Shevardnadze, Aleksandr Yakovlev and others.

of the Union. This would affect voting in the new Council of the Republics where each republic had one vote. Then on 11 October, Russia approved a resolution on a Draft Treaty of Economic Community. After much argument on 18 October, eight republics signed a treaty establishing a new economic community, which included many contradictory clauses.

For the inter-republican committee to be successful, its leaders had to agree to work together. This was the political dilemma. The grand goal was to coordinate economic and social policy. From September to November, this looked very doubtful. Tension between Ukraine and other states complicated matters. At first, Ukrainian leaders objected to a coordination of economic policy since they believed that coordination really meant being dictated to by Russia. But then Ukraine was needed by Russia for a viable committee. So Russia put pressure on a recalcitrant Ukraine. Russia restricted Ukraine's supplies of oil, wood, medicines and banknotes. This was done deliberately to show Ukraine that it needed Russia. Not until 6 November did Ukraine initial the economic treaty that it had refused to sign the previous month. Ukrainian nationalists hoped that the document would not be ratified in the parliament. All the time the Ukrainian leader, Leonid Kravchuk, made clear that Ukraine's participation in economic coordination depended upon results of the referendum on independence on 1 December. In the meantime, Kravchuk often neglected to attend meetings on the economic future.

Also in the meantime, Yeltsin became very impatient. He wanted a market economy now. So, although inconsistent with the economic treaty he had signed in October, he now declared that Russia would launch a crash programme to establish a market economy. He then took the post of prime minister of Russia, on top of his presidency, and thereby shouldered political responsibility for the crash programme himself. He also appointed Yegor Gaidar as deputy prime minister, responsible for economic policy. Aleksandr Shokhin was appointed deputy prime minister in charge of social policy. They were both known for their commitment to 'Russia first.' Russia was not ready to wait for the others.

Further change was prompted as a result of the overwhelming popular support shown on 1 December in Ukraine's referendum on independence. Just over 90% voted in favour of independence and, with that, the vestiges of the old union crumbled. On 8 December 1991, the secret meeting of the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, the big Slavic three of Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich, crucially without Gorbachev, established the beginning of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), thereby denying

Gorbachev and the Soviet centre any role at all. Gorbachev and the Union were redundant.

In sum, Gorbachev suffered a creeping loss of *de facto* power, which then accelerated when the republics seized more from him and from the All-Union level.[11] The failed coup was the final catalyst for a further speed-up of the destruction of the CPSU and for the construction of new political arrangements which, in turn, failed due to disagreements over economic policy and demands for independence within the Slavic camp from Russian domination. Gorbachev felt left out of the deal to form the CIS; indeed, he was politically superfluous to it.[12] He opposed it when he heard the news and was humiliated to have been excluded.

III Conclusion

When Nikita Khrushchev decided in 1934 to mark the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's reunification with Russia with a gift of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine, Otto Kuusinen allegedly declared 'Only in our country is it possible for such a great people as the Russian people without any hesitation magnanimously to hand over one of their richest oblasts to another fraternal people.'[13] Dmitri Volkogonov observed that since the 'Union' was really 'a single political entity' Khrushchev could see nothing offensive to the Russian people by this act.[14]

That the Union was not really a single political entity was graphically clear by 1989 and 1990. The sequence of events mattered hugely in its unravelling. Certain key developments, such as the Lithuanian nationalist deputies in the Congress of People's Deputies walking out in 1989 rather than agree that All-Union laws could override republican ones or the Lithuanian communists declaring that they were leaving the CPSU in 1990, could not have occurred without a series of prior events triggered by Gorbachev himself. Furthermore, these acts emboldened Lithuanian nationalists to demand more.

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11 For more detailed elaboration of this argument see Mary Buckley, 'Russian Interpretations of Crisis', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 17 (2001), 1–31.

12 For an introduction to the CIS, refer to Mark Webber, *CIS: Integration Trends* (London, 1997).

13 Quoted in Dmitri Volkogonov, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire*, Harold Shukman (trans.) (London, 1998), 200.

14 Ibid., 198.

If we briefly compare the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with that of the Tsarist state, there are certain similarities and differences. First, in both cases, it was a process spread over several years, not an instant happening. Second, also in both cases, different groups of people became dissatisfied with the system, although for very different reasons from each other.[15] This growing dissatisfaction built up into legitimacy crises which meant that not only did old critics of Tsarism and the USSR become more critical but that, most importantly, those who had previously defended and propped up the systems ceased to do so. In the Soviet case, they made demands on the union centre that it was unwilling to meet. Therefore they reached the conclusion that the union had to cease and politics and economics had to be radically redefined and reshaped.

Hughes Hall, Cambridge

[15] On the collapse of Tsarism, consult Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 3–73.