

The Role of the National Problem in the Disintegration of the Soviet Union

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‘The Soviet Union, like the United States, was a country established to serve and promote a political idea, not to be a state for nations. The United States was founded in order to be a modern democratic polity; the Soviet Union in order to promote Marxism-Leninism. The Soviet Union thus began as a ‘modern,’ post-imperialist state. The cement holding the state together was a compound of ideology, a hierarchical, disciplinary party, charismatic leadership, and external treats. [In the 80s] this cement was crumbling... [The Soviet] state had lost its *raison d’être* and the people turned to the traditional and conventional basis of the state – that is, the nation. But since this was a multinational state – and unlike the multiethnic United States, most peoples in the USSR have distinct languages and territories of their own – [they returned to them to establish independent states.]’¹

Introduction

From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, a new theory gained strength, dubbed ‘the theory of self-determination of nations’ or ‘the theory of revival of nations.’ The definition of a nation in this context is a cultural or ethnic group possessing a certain set of characteristics in common (language, culture, territory, economic system, etc.). It is argued that at a certain historical stage, any people can become a nation and establish their own state, if this state is not subject to assimilation by a larger state. According to this theory, if a nation is not yet independent, it will become a sovereign political entity in the future. The people can delegate power to authorities who subsequently become sovereign. This new interpretation of sovereignty designates the rule of the people through the organs vested with power by them. This concept was partially implemented in the early 1920s in the USSR and subsequently in the early 1990s in Russia. The October Revolution destroyed the old national policy system and attempted to install a new one, the basis of which was the ‘liberation’ of nations and the right of each one to self-determination. In the current article it is claimed that problems of nationality in the Soviet Union brought about the disintegration of the Soviet state during the period from 1987 to 1991.

Problems of Nationality

Soviet nationalist policy defined nations simultaneously in territorial and political terms (as national republics) and in extra-territorial, cultural terms (as nationalities). Had the various nationalities lived exclusively in 'their own' national republics, the two definitions would have been congruent. But this was far from being the case when the system of ethno-territorial federalism was established, and even less so after the massive state-sponsored and state-imposed migrations associated with industrialization, collectivization and war.

The tensions arising from this dual and non-congruent institutionalization of nationhood were exacerbated by the strict limits placed by the Soviet regime on nationalism. Nations were to be seen not heard; culture, politics and administration were to be 'national in form but socialist in content.'

The tension associated with the dual definition of nationhood was also attenuated by the repression of nationalism. Despite their favoured access to positions defined by the regime as 'strategic' or 'sensitive,' and despite the privileges they enjoyed as a result of the special union-wide status of the Russian language, the Russian residents of non-Russian republics resented the affirmative action programs designed to further the educational and professional chances of titular nationalities. At the same time, these titular nationalities resented the key positions reserved for Russians immigrants and the key role accorded the Russian language.

During the period in which the Soviet Union was being established, the theory of self-determination was the basis of state constitutional and legal norms and the national question was transferred into the sphere of state construction. The tendency to preserve distinct national identities was fundamentally incompatible with Soviet goals. From the very beginning, the Soviet state was considered by its leaders to be a unified body whose underlying principle, proletarian internationalism, allowed no leeway for national differences and aspirations.

Non-Russian republics were treated as subject to central policy rather than entities capable of independent decision-making, and their national destinies were fundamentally altered as a result. A deep-seated contradiction between empire and emerging nations grew like a cancer within the Soviet state. Far more than the tsarist empire, the USSR had become a 'prison-house of nations' that had developed within the Soviet Union. It is probably more correct to say that the USSR was both the cradle and the cage of Soviet ethno-nations, although this was not always obvious. As Zbigniew Brzezinski notes, 'Although communism declares itself to be an international doctrine, in fact it fostered nationalist sentiments among the people.'²

In 1989 Roman Szporluk, wrote:

The subsequent Bolshevik attempt to transcend altogether the dialectic of nation and nationalism by establishing class as the basic referent, and class solidarity as the principle of new legitimacy and identity, failed. Instead, the imperial model was restored in a communist guise, with the Russian nation being elevated to the rank of 'elder brother,' but itself becoming an object of manipulation by Stalin and the system he created ... The already existing nationality problem has become especially evident under glasnost.³

Mikhail Gorbachev's Reforms and their Consequences

As of 1960 the economic gaps between the Soviet Republics continually widened. In Asia, educated national elites sprouted in regions that had become increasingly poorer than the Soviet Union's national average. Ethno-social and economic gaps played a significant role in the national partnership crisis. Until the mid 1980s, the political goals of the educated new elites included participation rather than separation. This reflected the realistic assessment of what was feasible under the existing power system. The nations demanded more consideration of the economic, cultural and personnel interests within their territories. This included the distribution of economic resources, the preservation of cultural autonomy and the official perpetuation of the national language.

Pushing for badly needed economic reform, Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, chose to implement democratization, *glasnost* and *perestroika* in order to subject government bureaucrats to some measure of popular control and promote social initiative and creativity. Greater freedom of expression, both in the media and through unofficial channels, served to bring complex social, economical, and political problems to the surface. But Gorbachev's political and economic reforms also encouraged centrifugal forces. The policy of *glasnost* and democratization allowed informal organizations to further their interests by employing grassroots tactics such as mass demonstrations. Nationalist leaders politicized ethnicity by convincing people that their personal material interests were connected to their ethnic identity. They persuaded people that their chances depended on the political fate of their ethnic community.

During the Soviet era, political accountability ran vertically from the centre to the republics, with the Communist Party in Moscow appointing their leadership according to the *nomenklatura* system. Regional party leaders were selected and dismissed on the basis of central party decisions. These *nomenklatura* leaders in turn controlled the appointment of party and managerial cadres within their republics. After his inauguration Gorbachev embarked on a strategy of shifting power away from the CPSU and toward the state, that is, toward central and regional legislatures. In 1988 he undermined the power of the central party *apparat* and later rescinded Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which had granted the CPSU a monopoly.

The CPSU Central Committee Plenum on Nationality Relations was held in September 1989. In the course of that plenum Gorbachev admitted that at the time of his inaugural plenum in April 1985, he had underestimated the necessity of restructuring relations with the republics, which had currently become very complicated. He decided to establish a CPSU Central Committee Commission for Nationality Policy and Relations. But this had come too late: republican leaders could no longer count on enterprise directors to continue supporting the status quo. Directors of factories and mines had financial incentives to support the nationalist goal of republican sovereignty, realizing that they could exploit central state weakness to increase ownership of state property under their management. *Perestroika* benefited enterprise directors by releasing them from following the economic plan and by reducing Moscow's ministerial monitoring. The increase in local control offered by republican sovereignty could further enlarge these benefits. In the long run, directors of large enterprises in the national republics did in fact profit financially by the increased autonomy won by their republics from Moscow.

Since the initiation of these reforms by Gorbachev, three major myths of Soviet nationality policy have been shattered. The first myth, of '*druzhiba narodov*' (friendship of peoples), has been belied by the death of over 3000 people in ethnic clashes since early 1988; about one million people have been forced to leave their homes as a result of these clashes.

The second myth is that national consciousness declines as a society moves nearer to socialism. By January 1989 Gorbachev was declaring that 'of course, we cannot permit even the smallest people to vanish or the language of the smallest people to be lost.'⁴

The third myth is encapsulated in the opening line of the Soviet national anthem: 'Unshakeable union of free republics...'; it turns out that as the republics have broken free, the union has been proven to be quite shakeable.

Due to Gorbachev's reforms, the myths of Soviet nationality policy were demolished in a relatively short period. The Soviet ethnic revolution was facilitated by *Glasnost*, *perestroika* and democratization. Gorbachev reduced the level of coercion in the system. *Glasnost* made the Soviet people realize they were a people without a memory, deprived of knowledge of their own histories and cultures. *Glasnost* allowed people to express their national and cultural aspirations and air their grievances. *Perestroika* devolved power away from the centre and permitted the formation of grass roots organizations. Over 60,000 such groups have come into being since the late 1980s, many of them ethnically based.

Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote about this issue:

Gorbachev's realization that the Soviet system could not be revitalized without a significant decentralization of economic decision making and without a broader democratization of the political system inherently meant that the national units would have to be endowed with greater authority. That automatically created an opportunity for long-suppressed national grievances to surface and for national aspirations to focus on the quest for effective control over the potentially significant local instruments of power. Hence, again quite unintentionally, Gorbachev's emphasis on greater legality – so necessary to a revival of the Soviet economy – gave the non-Russians a powerful weapon for contesting Moscow's control over their destiny.⁵

For decades no nationalist movement had challenged Moscow's rule. Nationalism surfaced only when channelled into nationalist movements confronting Moscow with a range of demands for autonomy. This situation had been impossible under a stable Soviet regime that was capable of preventing nationalist intelligentsia from reaching out to broader communities. In 1988–1991 such movements began to present an immediate danger to Soviet stability. The exercise of force had been crucial in preventing the formation of nationalist movements. The retraction of the security forces from public life and the sanctioning of independent political groups that accompanied *perestroika* created the political space necessary for opposition forces to organize.

Valery Tishkov, who was Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Republic's first Minister of Nationalities, posits that

...an unexpected challenge to Gorbachev's *perestroika* came not from 'hidden nations' but from elite elements who empowered themselves through a new set of arguments and

group mobilization ... For me the turning point in the difficult Russian-Tatarstan dialogue was not the signing of the treaty on the delimitation of power, which was a more or less symbolic act ... The decisive point was reached when Tatarstan President Shaimiev had accumulated enough authority and resources to manage an intercontinental flight in his private plane to deliver a lecture at Harvard University and introduce Tatarstan's businessmen and politicians to useful ... outside world contacts.⁶

The Baltic Republics

The Soviet Union had incorporated the three Baltic republics in 1940, after they had enjoyed two decades of independence between the two World Wars. From the time of Stalin's death until the ascendance of Gorbachev, Communist authorities had regularly been beleaguered by nationalist unrest and protests in the Baltic republics.

Lithuania

At the end of the 1980s, social, economic and political change in Lithuania created a process leading toward national independence and democracy. What began in large measure as an initiative for democratization had become a movement for national liberation. Independent groups sought to dismantle the Communist Party's monopoly of power in favour of a pluralistic social and political order. These goals quickly won grass-roots support among almost all segments of Lithuanian society. After the March 1989 elections to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, the Sajudis, the Lithuanian Movement for Reconstruction, pushed for re-examination of the 'Secret Protocols' of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 (protocols that governed the division of Eastern Europe and other regions between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany). By highlighting the pact's illegality, they hoped to show that the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet state was invalid and, therefore, that Lithuania's independent statehood should be restored. The Catholic Church in Lithuania became a significant factor in the rise of anti-Soviet ethno-nationalism. Underground publications of the Catholic Church and its adherents, protests against Soviet religious oppression, and international petitions on behalf of the Church over the years all helped forge Lithuanian national identity and strengthen anti-Soviet sentiments.

Latvia and Estonia

Latvian and Estonian grievances against the USSR centred on environmental, cultural and human rights issues, the Russification of the republics' populations and the illegitimacy of the 'Secret Protocols'. In 1989, the Baltic republics jointly petitioned Moscow to establish a parliamentary commission to examine the Nazi-Soviet Pact. On 27 November 1989, under pressure from the three Baltic republics, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the USSR Supreme Soviet passed a 'Law on the Economic Independence of the Lithuanian Republic, the Latvian Republic, and the Estonian Republic,' which was signed by Gorbachev as chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet.

After the victory of the nationalists in the March 1989 elections for the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, Latvian Party First Secretary Alfred Rubiks wrote a document to the

Politburo outlining the Communist Party's loss of control in his republic, and the rise of the Latvian National Front as a real alternative to the Communist Party.

Ultimately, the central authorities did resort to coercive measures against the Baltic States. In April 1990, Moscow blocked oil and gas pipelines to Lithuania, which Vilnius countered by blocking gas transfers to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. In January 1991, Soviet riot troops and KGB forces stormed several buildings in Vilnius to remove the elected government of Vytautas Landsbergis (the leader of Sajudis) and to install the so-called Lithuanian National Salvation Committee, an entity created by the KGB. Fourteen people were killed, eliciting worldwide condemnation.

The use of force in January 1991 to prevent Baltic secession was a case of 'too little, too late.' By that point public sentiment in the Baltic republics had taken on a much more radical edge than in either 1988 or 1989. No longer would the Baltic peoples be satisfied by anything short of outright independence. The secession of the Baltic republics increasingly moved closer to becoming a reality.

Georgia, Armenia, and Moldavia

Like the Baltic States, Georgia, Armenia and Moldavia also had strong nationalist movements. In Georgia, nationalism dated back to the early 1920s, after Bolshevik Russia invaded the republic and incorporated it into the Soviet Union.

Georgia

During the early years of Gorbachev's rule, Georgian nationalists expressed their concern over ecological, historical and religious issues. However, by 1988–1989, Georgian nationalist groups had begun to adopt a more exclusivist ethnic stance and an anti-Soviet orientation. In April 1989, calls by Abkhazian nationalists to separate from Georgia incited a fierce popular and official reaction. Massive demonstrations ensued in Tbilisi, as protesters demanded that Abkhazia remain part of Georgia and that Georgia itself break away from the Soviet Union. A directive from Moscow ordered troops and police to quell the demonstrations. Nineteen people died and thousands were injured when security forces opened fire. In March 1991, a republic-wide referendum on Georgian independence yielded an almost unanimous vote in its favour. A month later, the Georgian Supreme Soviet declared the republic independent.

Armenia and the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh was an autonomous *oblast'* located in Azerbaijan, but inhabited predominantly by Armenians. After October 1917 Nagorno-Karabakh fell under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan, becoming more and more tangled in the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict. A constructive way of easing this tension would have been to raise the status of Nagorno-Karabakh to that of an autonomous republic, but the Politburo rejected such a proposal in 1977. Gorbachev and other leaders basically waived responsibility by asking the two republics to resolve the problem themselves, but Moscow subsequently refused to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia. This decision, followed by an anti-Armenian

pogrom in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait in 1988, which resulted in the death of at least 32 Armenians and the wounding of hundreds more, catalyzed the transformation of the Armenian national movement into an anti-Moscow and anti-Soviet crusade. In January 1990, Soviet troops stormed Baku and killed as many as 150 Azeris aligned with the Azerbaijani Popular Front, thus preventing this body from seizing power. In May 1990, Soviet troops also killed 29 demonstrators in Erevan and elsewhere in Armenia. These actions and the continued stalemate over Nagorno-Karabakh caused Armenian dissatisfaction to intensify. In August 1990 the Armenian parliament declared the republic independent from the Soviet Union.

Moldavia

As in Georgia and Armenia, so too in Moldavia there developed a powerful nationalist movement during the Gorbachev era. Except for a few brief periods, Soviet leaders throughout the pre-Gorbachev era had sought to create and preserve a Moldavian national identity that would be distinct from that of neighbouring Romania. By the 1970s, partly as a result of the rise of the Moldavian intelligentsia and partly because of the continued tension between Bucharest and Moscow, pan-Romanian sentiments began to re-emerge in Moldavia. These sentiments were expressed far more openly under the political liberalization implemented by Gorbachev. By 1989, Moldavian demands for reunification with Romania began to surface. In August 1989, nearly half a million demonstrators, led by the Popular Front of Moldavia, held a rally in Chisinau demanding that Romanian be made the republic's official language. After the failed August 1991 Moscow coup, Moldavia declared its independence.

Ukraine

Unlike the Baltic republics, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldavia, a mass separatist movement did not exist in the Ukraine during most of the Gorbachev years. One of the factors that tempered Ukrainian nationalism was the presence of roughly 11 million ethnic Russians in the Ukraine, constituting nearly a quarter of the republic's population. Ukrainian activists were aware that expressions of vehement Ukrainian nationalist sentiments might stimulate an irredentist response from the Russian government, possibly leading to civil conflict or even to the dismemberment of the republic. By the summer of 1991, public sentiment in the Ukraine had shifted strongly in favour of separatism. On 24 August, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a declaration of independence, while on 1 December 1991 the republic conducted a national referendum on independence. Over 90% of voters, including those in areas heavily populated by Russians, voted in favour of Ukrainian independence.

Central Asia

Upon seizing power in 1917, the Bolsheviks sought to foment a worldwide revolution by appealing to the 'toilers of the East' as well as the 'proletarians of the West.' To them, Turkestan became another front in the battle against Western imperialism and local feudal underlings.

After 1924, the Soviets developed an ingenious strategy to neutralize the two common denominators most likely to unite Central Asians against continuing Moscow-based control: Islamic culture and Turkish ethnicity. After a protracted period of trial and error, their ultimate solution was to create five Soviet Socialist Republics in the region: the Kazakh S.S.R. (now Kazakstan), the Kirgiz S.S.R. (now Kyrgyzstan), the Tadzhik S.S.R. (now Tajikistan), the Turkmen S.S.R. (now Turkmenistan) and the Uzbek S.S.R. (now Uzbekistan). The plan was to will into being five new nations whose separate development under close surveillance and firm tutelage from Moscow would pre-empt the emergence of a 'Turkestani' national identity and such concomitant ideologies as Pan-Turkism or Pan-Islamism. The original impulse leading Moscow to create the national republics in Central Asia in 1925 was the need to divide its opponents and undermine the regional unity of the Islamic community.

A 'divide and rule' approach recommended the establishment of national republics such as the Uzbek SSR (a national state established artificially for a not yet existent nation – the Uzbeks). The Soviet regime's opponents viewed this as Moscow's creation of phony political units based on artificial nationalities in order to play local ethnic groups against each other within and between republics. With the creation of the Uzbek nation, sub-national identities (and trans-national Islamic and Turkic linkages) were invigorated.

The division of Turkestan clearly contradicted the political will of prominent local communists. In January 1920, the Third Muslim Conference had objected to 'efforts to divide the Turkish peoples into Tatars, Kirgiz, Bashkirs, Uzbeks, etc., and create small separate republics but proposed to unite them ... in one Turkish Soviet Republic.'⁷ In his speech before the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow on 5 June 1989, Andrei Sakharov, according to Szporluk, said:

We have inherited from Stalinism a constitutional structure that bears the stamp of imperial thinking and the imperial policy of 'divide and rule'. Among the victims of the imperial system Sakharov counted not only the non-Russian nations but also the Russian nation, which had to bear the main burden of imperial ambitions and the consequences of adventurism and dogmatism in foreign and domestic policy.⁸

Paradoxically, it appears that nationality was not only given a boost by Soviet politics but was also actually perpetuated by them. A similar phenomenon could be found throughout the Third World, where an imperial presence and tactics served as a catalyst for crystallizing national perceptions and movements. After decades of territorially based entities, ethnic groups were all on their way to becoming national communities with their own elites and institutionalized vested interests.

Given the divide-and-rule frontiers Stalin had imposed, there were minorities of these republics' citizens in other republics, while there was a presence of other neighbouring ethnic groups within their borders. Almost all had large numbers of Russians settled in their midst as a result of industrialization; these migrations were part of a deliberate policy of diluting territorial homogeneity in order to create a single Soviet people parallel with a homogeneous economy and a unitary Party. Nation-making in the USSR occurred within a unique context: a state that had set out to overcome nationalism and the differences between nations had in fact created a set of institutions and initiated processes that fostered the development of conscious, secular, politically mobilized nationalities.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Afghan War of 1979–89 refocused Moscow's attention on the Muslim world, including the Soviet enclaves. The notion that, 60 years after the Bolshevik revolution, any part of the USSR could be anything but Soviet was anathema to Communist ideologues. In the early 1980s, there were aspects of regime policy toward Islam that offended the national as well as the religious sentiments of the Muslim nationalities. In this way, Moscow inadvertently encouraged the intellectual elites of these ethnicities to stress the importance of Islam, with its collective entity and patrimony.

At the time of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the combination of universal condemnation of Moscow throughout Central Asia and growing concern and resentment at the deteriorating economic and ecological situation constantly drove the republican leadership to take up radical positions that would have been totally inconceivable only a short time previously. Central Asian nationalists demanded the filling in of 'blank spaces' in their history regarding events that had occurred in the pre-revolutionary period. Above all, they objected to the official history that proclaims the voluntary annexation of their various territories to Imperial Russia, while this was obviously the result of military conquest.

The acute weakening of central state authority leading to the famous 'parade of sovereignties' contributed to the disintegration of the USSR and the near collapse of the RSFSR, objectively laying the foundation for the growth of a Russian nationalism that could, in the future, re-establish Russia as a powerful multi-ethnic state.

That was also Walter Laqueur's opinion:

The collapse of the system came about because of the loss of self-confidence among the rulers: the fact that they put up surprisingly little resistance against the forces challenging them ... It has to do with the erosion of ideological belief and the disappearance of utopian hopes, as well as with closer contacts with Western ideas and realities ... The single most important factor was the emergence (or re-emergence) of ethnic nationalism in the non-Russian republics.⁹

The loose post-Soviet community, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), was founded in Minsk in December 1991 by the three Slavic republics, Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus. Later, after much prodding from Central Asian leaders, who sought autonomy within the USSR but not secession from it, the CIS expanded to include 'the Asians.' Despite this, the May 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (CST) divided the Soviet Union's military assets and apportioned national quotas under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) without laying the foundation for a new alliance. Post-Soviet integrationist projects, such as the CIS Economic Union or the more comprehensive Eurasian Union proposed by Kazakhstan's president Nazarbayev, invariably fell flat with the Russians. Moscow was not interested in schemes that would once again turn it into an economic bulwark for its less developed partners.

The Russian Republic

Perhaps the most dramatic development in recent years has been the transformation of Russian national consciousness from its traditional association with an imperial identity toward an interest in creating a Russian national state. Until recently, the dominant stand

of Russian nationalism has been anti-Western, focusing on Russian exclusiveness, and the uniqueness of the Russian historical path and the messianic mission of the Russian people. All too often, this impulse was closely associated with the defence of the empire. But there has been a notable shift in recent years away from the former imperial consciousness to a profound disillusionment with empire, accompanied by the widespread conversion to the ideas of liberal Russian nationalism. The explosion of anti-Russian sentiments in the non-Russian republics was largely shaped by a general dissatisfaction with the Soviet system and its declining performance. The predominant Russian reaction to these sentiments was a crystallization of Russian nationalism. The notion of a Russia free from its burdensome empire appealed to the Russian popular mind, and it became increasingly common for segments of the intelligentsia to envision Russia's future from the standpoint of enlightened national interest.

Striving to undermine Gorbachev's political authority by discrediting his economic reforms, the radicals realized the potential power of populism. In May 1990, Boris Yeltsin strove to openly exploit Russian feelings of insecurity. His task was made easier by an increasingly severe food shortage and a high incidence of hoarding in Moscow. In June 1990, clearly challenging the Soviet constitution, the Russians declared the sovereignty of their own republic.

Not all writers view the national problem as the main reason for the Soviet Union's disintegration. Pechenev in his essay 'Disintegration of the USSR: Historical Accident or Targeted Action?' wrote that one of the chief factors leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union was that its leaders did not fully comprehend the contradiction inherent in their country's basic political structure. Legally speaking, the Soviet Union was a federation, but in fact it was a political unit absolutely controlled by the Centre. No measures were taken to overcome this contradiction, which ultimately led to the state's collapse. The Kremlin had become a prisoner of the system it had instituted.

In Tishkov's words:

Boris Yeltsin and his close advisors were prisoners of the same Marxist-Leninist theory of nationalities which knows only the solution to the problems of multi-ethnic societies: national self-determination up to and including the right to secession. The new leaders of Russia have inherited the deeply contradictory views of their predecessors, and have already repeated much of the same contradictory policy.¹⁰

It was Mikhail Gorbachev who, in 1984–85, when on behalf of the Politburo he was overseeing the activities of a committee preparing a new edition of the CPSU Programme, wrote to Pechenev, who was also a member of that group: 'When we talk about the national question at the present stage and the talking is about the form in which it exists in the context of developed socialism, then, it seems to me that there are implications that we should avoid.' In addition, in his speech at the XXVII Congress of the CPSU in 1986, Gorbachev announced that the national question had been 'successfully resolved.'¹¹ 'From the time of his accession in 1985,' wrote John Dunlop,

Gorbachev had repeatedly shown himself to be blind and insensitive to ethnic issues. An ardent 'Soviet patriot,' Gorbachev fought hard to preserve the 'Russian'/'Soviet' identification in the mind of Russians which had served as vital cement for the unitary Soviet state during the pre-perestroika period.¹²

It is now commonplace in literature dealing with the *perestroika* era to argue that Gorbachev committed a serious error in judgment regarding the national question and initiated his liberal reforms without foreseeing the ethnic explosion that was to follow.

Conclusion

The discrediting of socialist ideology in the Soviet Union legitimized the actions of ethno-nationalists in the eyes of the population and accelerated the disintegration processes of the Soviet state. New interpretations caused legal norms to lose their formality, and the right of nations to self-determination – even to secession – was declared constitutional. Republican elites were given a legal basis for appealing to their people's national feelings and expanding their administrative powers. Elections confirmed the legitimacy of the republican elites compared with the union leadership; these elites were thus able to proclaim the sovereignty of the republics and achieve independence. In this case, sovereignty was not regarded as the property of the state, but was rather the basis for establishing its authority. During this period, the union leadership assumed an increasingly weaker role, since the initiative in forming the 'rules of the game' was transferred to the leadership of the republics, thus strengthening the latter's political positions. Regionalization of power became a fact by the early 1990s and as a result the Centre's political power was virtually reduced to zero. This explains why the 1991 referendum on the future existence of the Soviet Union did not become an obstacle to the legal registration of new states and the collapse of old ones. Nevertheless, the referendum showed that people agreed to exist within a single political and economic space, hence the survival of a union on the basis of new, shared ideas and incentives.

The Soviet Union was ultimately divided into 15 internationally recognized states that crystallized into national republics. That such a massive state could disappear in so orderly a fashion was possible chiefly because the successor units already existed as quasi-nation states, with fixed territories, legislatures, administrative staffs and cultural and political elites. In addition, they had already been granted the constitutional right to secede from the Soviet Union.

Was the disintegration of the Soviet Union unavoidable? In 1971, the dissident Soviet historian Andrei Amarlik's prediction of the demise of the USSR was greeted with considerable scepticism. He wrote: 'I have no doubt that this great Eastern Slav empire ... has entered the last decades of its existence ... Marxist doctrine has delayed the break-up of the Russian Empire ... but it does not possess the power to prevent it.'¹³

In the final analysis, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was no different from the breakdown of the Ottoman or the Austro-Hungarian Empires. The rising tide of nationalism and the weakening of the political and administrative centre created a situation in which the Soviet state could no longer function.

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