

# Explaining Soviet collapse

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This paper is a companion piece to a book titled *Contemporary Russian Politics* that will be published by Polity in 2018. Originally it was written to be a part of that book, but the first draft of the manuscript of the book was too long and some things had to be cut. This paper was one of those things. It was supposed to be Chapter 4 of the book and came between a chapter on the Gorbachev *perestroika* reforms and a chapter on political developments under Yeltsin if anyone wants to slot it back in. Since the question of why the USSR collapsed is an important one and is often a topic for discussion and essay questions, and in order to salvage something from the time it took to write it, the paper is being made freely available on several online platforms.

## 1. Introduction

Explaining the collapse of the Soviet system is different to explaining the causes of *perestroika*.<sup>1</sup> The causes of *perestroika* are generally agreed upon: reform was initiated because of economic decline, Soviet loss of international power relative to Cold War rivals, the accumulation of social problems, and the need for political reform to deal with some, if not all, of these problems (see Robinson, 2018, chapter 3). Explanations of Soviet collapse all recognize the range of problems that the USSR faced in the mid-1980s and that led to *perestroika*. The difference between explanations of Soviet collapse is over whether or not collapse was inevitable, and over the nature and the extent of collapse. The different positions adopted on these questions reflect different understandings of the Soviet system, understandings that have their roots in debates about Soviet power that began (mostly) in the 1960s. These debates were over whether or not the USSR was 'essentially' flawed. Was a basic design fault in the USSR as a socio-political system so that it could not evolve? In the view of essentialists 'the Soviet system collapsed because it was essentially abnormal; stability requires normality, and normality requires consent, but the Soviet reliance on coercion crowded out consent. Thus the nature of the Soviet system made its eventual collapse inevitable and even predictable' (Harrison, 2001, p.4). Alternatively, anti-essentialists stress that the Soviet system could evolve so that its collapse was contingent on actions taken by the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev.

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<sup>1</sup> There are several accounts of the collapse of the USSR that present a cut of the literature different to the one presented here. See, for example, Rowley, 2001, or the essays in Cox, 1998.

This paper has two main parts. In the first we look at arguments on why the Soviet Union collapsed, contrasting arguments that its demise was inevitable with arguments that its collapse was a matter more of circumstance and the particular decisions that were made between 1985 and 1991. We then move on to discuss the nature of Soviet collapse, to discuss what type of process collapse was. These arguments are not unrelated to discussions about the inevitability of Soviet collapse. However, they do take us in a slightly different direction. The two sets of ideas that are discussed in this second section, namely that the end of the Soviet Union was either a revolution or a part of democratic transition, are neither wholly right. In many ways the nature of Soviet collapse, as opposed to the reasons for it, is still open for debate. Looking at these arguments, however, does show us the range of problems that post-Soviet Russian politicians faced and the limited tools that they had to deal with them as they attempted to reconstruct a political regime and a state.

## 2. Essentialist explanations: the inevitability of collapse

The dominant school of thought on the USSR after World War II, and the main essentialist school of thought on Soviet politics then and now, holds that the Soviet Union was a totalitarian system.<sup>2</sup> This view was challenged from the late 1960s and the debate over what kind of political system the USSR had as still very much in play when Gorbachev came to power and has shaped responses to the collapse of the USSR. For scholars who thought that the USSR was totalitarian the Soviet system was unreformable and therefore could only continue in existence or collapse. For many scholars who opposed the idea that the USSR was totalitarian the Soviet Union could and was changing since it was modernizing. Modernization, it was argued, had the power to create social and political forces that would change the USSR. Alternatively, the USSR has been seen having become post-totalitarian; faith in ideology had died down, terror had abated, mass mobilization was largely formulaic, and there were some private spaces that people could inhabit to develop interests of their own and in common with some of their fellow citizens.<sup>3</sup> The USSR was still non-democratic but it had within it sources of change and adaptation that could not be described by the concept of totalitarianism and that meant that the developmental direction that the USSR could take was not set: it could stay the same, change or collapse.

The totalitarian version of the inevitability of collapse is based on the idea that totalitarianism either exists or does not. Totalitarianism is a particular modern or non-traditional form of non-democratic political system. Traditional non-democratic political systems have centralized structures of political power, exclude the mass of people from decision-making, and distribute resources according to the preferences of rulers rather than citizens. In such traditional non-democratic states political power rests on violence and human rights are abused but there are limits to the extent of violence and rights abuses, and to the extent of social control that the political system has.<sup>4</sup> Totalitarian

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<sup>2</sup> For a history of the concept of totalitarianism see Gleason, 1984 and 1995. A survey of the concept can be found in Linz, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> For a description of post-totalitarianism see Linz and Stepan, 1996. For a description of some of the many different classifications of the USSR that were used in debates against the idea that it was totalitarian see Brown, 1974; Almond and Roselle, 1989; Sakwa, 1998, 156-69.

<sup>4</sup> There are many reasons for this, but principally the lack of a ruling ideology and the fact that control over the means of coercion is sometimes shared around the ruling elite limits violence and rights abuses. The absence of a singular ruling ideology means that there are some areas of life that the political system does not try to control. Since this is the case the citizens of a traditional non-democratic polity may have some economical, civil and social 'freedoms'. They may, for example, be able to set up in business for themselves, live where they choose within the state, or change their religion *if* the state is not interested in these things.

polities know no such constraints. Totalitarianism was, according to Friedrich and Brzezinski (1961, p.3), 'a logical extension of certain traits of our modern industrial society' and hence far worse than the 'autocratic regimes of the past'. Autocratic regimes of the past could not mobilize their populations in efforts to transform society and economy as Stalin had done in the 1930s. They lacked the bureaucratic machines through which mobilization could be affected, could not effectively control people's world-view in the absence of mass media, and did not control effectively the means of armed combat in their societies because the difference between military and civilian technology was not as great as it was to become in the modern world. Modern autocratic, but non-totalitarian, regimes were likewise not committed to ideological transformation, although they did possess control over media and the military. Their lack of commitment to ideological transformation could be seen in the fact that they allowed some independent institutions to exist, such as churches, and did not direct economic activity to achieve a politically determined collective goal.

Friedrich and Brzezinski argued that totalitarianism was a 'syndrome' or 'pattern of interrelated traits'; other states shared some characteristics with totalitarianism, but only totalitarianism had all of the features of the syndrome and this made it a unique political form. The six essential elements of the totalitarian syndrome were:

1. 'an official ideology' that claiming to be scientific, to which all must adhere and which interprets the world in order to transform it to a new perfect state;
2. 'a single mass party led typically by one man' and 'intertwined with the bureaucratic government organization' that is 'dedicated to the ideology';
3. 'a system of terroristic police control', directed against society arbitrarily as well as against enemies;
4. 'a technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly ... of all effective means of mass communication';
5. 'a technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly ... of means of effective armed combat';
6. central control of the 'entire economy' and its direction through 'bureaucratic co-ordination (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1961, pp.9-10).

According to theories of totalitarianism, the combination (in different ways and to different extents) of all of these features in a totalitarian state created a system that was not conducive to change and political development. Society, under pressure to conform ideologically, was fragmented by police terror so that organic social connections and identities broke down. This 'atomised' society lacked the resources to force change so that revolution from below was impossible. Likewise, it was unlikely that modernization would create technocratic politicians (politicians who were 'expert' not 'red') who would downgrade ideology. Even if such elites did appear they would not be able to conceive of how to rule legitimately without resort to ideology and violence. The most likely prospect for the USSR was that it would overtime become 'more total' (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1961, p.300).

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Rights are not secure in a traditional non-democratic regime since people have few means of claiming them and protecting them; they depend on the regime being disinterested in some areas of life to enjoy 'rights'. Still, some rights do exist and the level of the regime's disinterest in parts of its citizenry's life means that there are some 'private' spaces where people can make choices for themselves and develop their own interests. This limits the extent of violence in a traditional non-democratic political system since such a system is not trying to police all of social activity. This limit to violence can be reinforced by wide control over the means of coercion. Where different fractions of the elite share control over the means of coercion they may be constrained in their behaviour towards one another and the populace as a whole by mutual fear; rulers cannot be sure that violence will not rebound on them if they use it too freely as a means of securing their power.

The impossibility of change in a totalitarian system created a political impasse. It was both unchangeable and in dire need of reform because as a totalitarian state the USSR was engaged in the unworkable political project of building communism. This project underlay both totalitarianism and the USSR's failure: of 'all the reasons for the collapse of communism, the most basic is that it was an intrinsically nonviable, indeed impossible project from the beginning' (Malia, 1999, p.81; Pipes, 1999, p.42). The impossibility of the Soviet project made the USSR totalitarian since to cover for its failures the system had to be controlling in the extreme and violent. The collapse of such a system was inevitable at some stage because its inherent failings would lead to efforts at change that would always fail. If these efforts at change were serious and extensive the whole system would come apart. A totalitarian system can only work when all parts of its syndrome protect one another. Remove one and the result is collapse since the 'logic of totalitarianism is one of system coherence. The diffusion of control in one area could not but trigger changes in other areas.' (Karklins, 1994, p.30). Gorbachev's 'achievement' from this perspective is that he exposed the USSR to collapse by allowing its unworkable nature to show. For Karklins (1994), Gorbachev did this by introducing *glasnost*. This broke the party's control over mass media, one of the six features of the totalitarian syndrome. Once media control went so did the single ideology. In short, knocking out one or more of the pillars of totalitarianism had a domino effect; when one pillar was removed another fell, and then another. As each pillar buckled the pace of collapse quickened so that the speed of Soviet collapse was rapid and unpredictable. Particularly important in this was the collapse of the ideological pillar. The USSR could not survive once other political principles were allowed expression. Unlike Soviet Marxism political ideas such as nationalism reflected 'real' social aspirations and achievable political projects (Laqueur, 1994).

There are, of course, some differences in accounts of the Soviet collapse by adherents of the idea of totalitarianism as they disagree when the collapse of the Soviet Union moved from always being likely due to its totalitarian nature to actually happening and on what key pillar of the totalitarian syndrome was knocked out and how. For Karklins (1994), it was *glasnost*. For Laqueur (1994) and for Hollander (1999), it was a loss of self-belief in the Soviet leadership that removed the ideological underpinning of the regime and eroded the system's capacity to use violence, with Hollander describing this as a longer-term decay than Laqueur. For Malia (1994, pp.492-493), collapse came as a response to economic debility and declining superpower status, with economic debility undermining ideology and working with reform to cut the ground out from underneath the Soviet system. These are differences of interpretation rather than of analytical substance. The essential cause of collapse is the same in all of these accounts: it had to happen as something (policy, economics, will) undermined ideology and commitment to use violence to enforce political and ideological control. As well as being united on the basic reason for collapse proponents of the totalitarian approach to Soviet politics are also consistently proponents of the view that the collapse was a complete one. Again, the reasoning behind this claim stems from the definition of the nature of totalitarianism: a political system either is or is not totalitarian; it cannot be a halfway house between totalitarianism and something else. The complete collapse of the system means that what occurred 'qualifies in normal parlance as a "revolution" ... not by breakthrough but by implosion', as Malia (1994, p.497) puts it. Democracy does not necessarily follow a revolution. For some adherents of the totalitarian thesis like Karklins (1994) democracy was possible in the wake of Soviet collapse because collapse saw the re-emergence of organic social interests out from under the totalitarian regime; for others, like Brzezinski (1989) and Malia (1994, p.498) democracy was unlikely because totalitarianism leaves behind little but 'generalized institutional rubble'.

Finally, we should note that although the idea of totalitarianism is associated with anti-communist political views there are also leftist essentialist versions of the collapse of the USSR. Sometimes these also explicitly refer to the USSR as totalitarian. Most of these alternative essentialist accounts see the collapse of the USSR as having been inevitable because the Soviet system had an economic system that was unviable and unsustainable. The unsustainability of the Soviet economic system is blamed on a wide range of factors: its perversion of socialist principles led to creation of an unsustainable form of economic planning; its requirement for violence as a means of social control; the social contradictions that it contained (which might include the desire for its rulers to fully realise themselves as a capitalist class); and its inability to compete as a social and military order with the West (see Ticktin, 1992, 1998; Halliday, 1992; Callinicos, 1991; Lockwood, 2000). The intellectual root of these ideas is often Marxism and therefore very different to the classic anti-communist formulation of totalitarianism. However, they share with the anti-communist totalitarian school the idea that the USSR was not going to last due to an essential flaw. As Trotsky (1939), the granddaddy of many of the Marxist explanations of Soviet collapse, put it:

A totalitarian régime, whether of Stalinist or Fascist type, by its very essence can be only a temporary transitional regime. Naked dictatorship in history has generally been the product and the symptom of an especially severe social crisis, and not at all of a stable régime. Severe crisis cannot be a permanent condition of society. A totalitarian state is capable of suppressing social contradictions during a certain period, but it is incapable of perpetuating itself.

Although later Marxists, and some of his own followers, would have eschewed Trotsky's use of the label 'totalitarian' (he himself was erratic in using it) they would generally have agreed with his sentiment. Regimes like the Soviet Union were created by crisis and their collapse at some time was inevitable because of their failure to adhere to a 'true' socialist path of development. Deviation from the 'true' socialist path meant the USSR was either a hybrid system between capitalism and socialism, or a dysfunctional form of capitalism in which bureaucrats took the place of entrepreneurs (Robinson, 1999). Either way Marxist critics argued that the USSR was too economically inefficient to compete with the West and to provide wealth to Soviet society. Its economic failure interacted with social tensions created by Soviet failure to develop socialist social structures and popular democracy to make it inherently unstable. As the USSR entered economic decline bureaucrats-cum-capitalists railed against the restrictions that the USSR's nominal socialism put on their accumulation of personal wealth and the Soviet system lost legitimacy as living standards stagnated. Soviet collapse, rather than reform and adaptation, was inevitable as Soviet problems were a product of a failing social system that had to be replaced by either a new social revolution or by a reversion to a more orthodox form of capitalism. Either of these alternatives would not be able to coexist with Soviet social and political structures so that its replacement with a new order as it collapsed was inevitable.

### 3. Evolution and contingency

The alternative to viewing the USSR as totalitarian in the Soviet period was to see it as having evolved and as having evolutionary potential, and/or to see its collapse as a matter of contingency, accident, fate, of choices made that need not have been made. These approaches sometimes overlap since evolution is often seen as leading to a point where choices had to be made about reform, choices that then went 'wrong' and led to Soviet collapse. The stress on evolution and contingency is not the only thing that distinguishes

these approaches from essentialist arguments. They also differ from such arguments in that they distinguish between the collapse of the Soviet system – the rule of the party and of a particular form of ideologically inspired socio-economic organization – and the collapse of the Soviet state – a particular arrangement of territory in which Soviet institutions had a monopoly over rule making and coercion. Essentialist arguments treat the Soviet state and system as the same; the collapse of one entails the collapse of the other; people freed themselves from the totalitarian party and then they freed themselves from the state that it had built. Evolutionary, and particularly contingency arguments are more likely to see the collapse of the Soviet system (party rule and the planning system) as a precursor to the collapse of the Soviet state (the end of a particular political geography). One set of decisions led to the collapse of the Soviet system and created the circumstances in which another set of decisions were made that led to the collapse of the Soviet state. The distinction between system and state collapse is not unproblematic, however. It was not obvious to all of the actors involved in politics in the USSR at the time that there was a difference between the Soviet state and the Soviet ‘system’. Many of them saw themselves as engaged in a struggle for and against the Soviet system as much as they saw themselves engaged in a struggle against the Soviet state. Certainly for Gorbachev Soviet patriotism was not just to the Soviet state as a territorial entity but also to some elements of the system, to the CPSU and to a version of socialism, albeit one that was defined vaguely (see Robinson, 2018, chapter 3).

Evolutionary approaches to the collapse of the Soviet Union see change as a product of economic growth and development. The USSR did change over the course of its history from being an agrarian, rural society at the time of the revolution to being a largely industrial and urban society at the time of *perestroika* (Robinson, 2018, chapter 2). For some analysts this path of development shows that the USSR was to some extent following a standard, albeit particularly violent, path of modernization. Economic development and growth create wealth and social complexity. Wealth and social complexity create diverse social interests, the means to demand that those interests be addressed, and a systemic need to address those interests in order to develop the economy further by managing it as a complex entity and by preserving the social peace between new social forces (Pye, 1990). In this view *perestroika* was an ‘end to hesitant modernization’ as the Soviet system got to grips with the demands of a more complex, urbanized and industrialized society that it had itself created out of ‘backward’ peasant Russia (Amman, 1986, 1990; Lewin, 1988).

The idea that the USSR was ‘just’ another modernizing state was damaged when the USSR’s collapse showed that there were limits to the adaptability of the Soviet system. But the idea that the USSR was adaptable has been used as the basis for claiming that its demise was not inevitable. The very fact that reform was launched in the Soviet Union shows that there was some adaptive capacity in the Soviet system: change came from within the Soviet system, from its own institutions and from its leader, and was an attempt at working with Soviet society. That the USSR was adaptive also means that the crisis that the USSR faced throughout the 1980s cannot be invoked as a simple reason for Soviet collapse. The USSR, as Alexander Dallin (1992) argued, faced many crises in its existence and came through them all until Gorbachev. Indeed, crisis was almost the normal mode of operation in the Soviet system and it had managed to adapt to overcome crisis before. That it did not do so under Gorbachev was due to contingency, to the particular factors that arose in the late 1980s. The reasons for collapse are either that the USSR fell because of the particular choices of its political leadership – as a result of what Dallin (1992, p.299) called ‘very distinct acts of will’ – or because of the interaction of those choices with very particular circumstances.

Accounts that stress political leadership focus on the choices made by Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Archie Brown (1996) puts emphasis on Gorbachev's role and on his belief that the USSR needed to be changed fundamentally.<sup>5</sup> This, Brown argues, led to the adoption of policies that over the years of *perestroika* wore away at communism. The USSR was not, Brown argues, a communist system by the time that the USSR collapsed. The Soviet system had been reformed out of existence by Gorbachev, who then lost a political struggle with other leaders, notably Yeltsin, so that the collapse of communism (Gorbachev's achievement) was followed by the destruction of the Soviet Union (Yeltsin's achievement). This separation of the end of the Soviet system from the end of the Soviet state makes some sense. With hindsight we can see that many of the essential elements of the Soviet political system had effectively collapsed by 1990 so that all that was left of the Soviet Union was a state. The focus of political competition in 1991 was the continued existence of the Soviet state at least as much as 'communism'. Arguing that the collapse of the USSR was due mainly to leadership decisions – whether Gorbachev's, or Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's – is hard to sustain, however, because the argument relies too much on perceptions of leaders' intentions. These perceptions are contestable. Intentions are hard to read. Soviet leaders – like politicians elsewhere – were often uncertain and made contradictory statements so that deciphering what out of the mass of their statements constitute their true beliefs is difficult. For this reason, much of the literature on the contingent nature of Soviet collapse stresses that collapse was caused as reform policies, and struggles over them, combined with the circumstances in which reform occurred. This means that there are many different explanations of why the USSR collapsed for contingent reasons because Soviet leader's choices have been variously put together with economic, institutional and ideological factors, or a mixture of these factors, to account for collapse. Common to all of these arguments, however, is that the nature of reform was destructive of political control in a new way in the late 1980s so that problems that the USSR had lived with and survived for years became fatal. If reform had not happened the USSR would have survived: 'while the Soviet system faced numerous underlying problems as of 1985 and was not proceeding vigorously to solve these problems, the regime faced no immediate danger to its survival' (Mitchell and Arrington, 2004, p.460; Robinson, 1995, p.189).

Ellman and Kontorovich (1992) advance this argument for the economy. They recognise that the Soviet economy was fundamentally flawed but argue that the Soviet economic system 'was not predestined to disintegrate in the late 1980s. The ultimate causes [of collapse] could have been alleviated by appropriate policies' (Ellman and Kontorovich, 1992, p.13). Policies that had been tried in the past and that had had some success, such as tightening labour discipline were abandoned. Instead, Gorbachev forced through policies such as giving Soviet factory managers more independence that were destructive. Together with political reform, which changed the party's role in the economy, the 'result of Gorbachev's economic policy and his changes to the economic and political system which he had inherited was to demolish a system that functioned, if far from optimally, and to leave in its place systemic chaos' (Ellman and Kontorovich, 1992, p.28). Left alone, or if more appropriate economic policies had been taken up and political reform had been less destructive, the Soviet Union's economy would have endured.

Politically, the nature of reform has been seen as destructive because of the way that it attacked the Communist Party as the lynchpin of the Soviet system and allowed the emergence of alternatives to it. This had never been done in earlier rounds of Soviet

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<sup>5</sup> This theme is also common in the memoir literature on Soviet collapse. See, for example, Matlock, 1995.

reform. By attacking the party and enabling the development of political alternatives Gorbachev's reforms exposed the hollowness of Soviet political legitimacy and the Soviet Union fell into a legitimization trap that previous Soviet leaders had avoided. Gorbachev, if he had pushed reform in a different direction, could have avoided it too. This legitimization trap was that Soviet type systems could not define the power of the ruling communist party clearly or allow other actors in a Soviet system to define it. Ruling communist parties claimed the right to rule because of their ability to interpret historical development and to translate this interpretation into action that they then both lead and regulate. In such a system crises were useful to the party because they enabled it to make judgements about what should happen next and to lead action to resolve crisis; they enabled the party to act in a heroic manner, justifying its unique role in the process. But this, as the Polish sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis (1992, p.86) noted, 'aggravates the intellectual powerlessness of the authorities in crisis situations' since they could not properly identify or deal with all of the political sources of crisis in Soviet type societies. Crucially they could not confront the extent to which problems were a product of the Communist Party's ambitions and dysfunctions. As a result, problems generally went unsolved since addressing them fully would threatened the grounds on which the party legitimated itself.

Gorbachev's reforms were novel in that they began to address the Soviet system's failings as the responsibility of the party and undermined the party and allowed for the development of alternative forms of political organization. The design of reform thus triggered collapse by eroding the foundations of the Soviet polity. Arguments made along these lines balance the idea of evolution within the Soviet system with an appreciation that there were limits to how far Soviet political actors were prepared to let it evolve before they defected from it. Broadly such arguments stress either institutional or ideational factors as the determinants of collapse, although there is considerable overlap between these explanations.

Institutionalist arguments stress the collapse of the informal rules that shaped Soviet politics and held it together. For Philip G. Roeder (1993), the break came as reform confronted the rigidity of the Soviet system. This rigidity had, Roeder (1993, p.6) argues, built up in the post-Stalin period as the USSR had 'established a stable political equilibrium among empowered political actors, but the institutionalization of this political system made it increasingly difficult to either innovate or adapt'. The basis of this equilibrium was the shifting coalitions between the top leadership in the Politburo and the second-tier of bureaucrats. These coalitions developed after Stalin and created a system of mutual support. The top leadership of policy makers relied on the support of their bureaucratic constituencies, which in turn held office because of the patronage of the leadership. These coalitions made Soviet politics stable but also meant that it was less adaptable overtime. Leaders had to confront real problems such as declining international position and economic stagnation, but tackling these problems threatened the bureaucratic constituencies on which they depended. Policy makers therefore compromised on reform so that it was not effective, and did not punish their supporters when they too did not push any reforms enacted to a successful conclusion. Gorbachev's reforms were one more stage in this cycle of reform, but were also different because he chose to supplement traditional reform in the economy with constitutional reform. Constitutional reform aimed to change the balance of power between policy makers in the top leadership and their bureaucratic constituents so as to allow reforms to be more fulsome and effective. Instead they fragmented the coalitions that had stabilized Soviet politics and put the Soviet system into a spiral of fragmentation that Gorbachev was unable to halt. Reform was still blocked by bureaucratic resistance, but reform broadened political participation so that politics became more than the search for



equilibrium between policy makers and bureaucrats. New political actors could not force bureaucrats to enact reform, but they destabilized coalition politics until a point was reached where there was no longer any agreement over the maintenance of the USSR as a state. At this point not just the Soviet system but the Soviet state collapsed.

For Leslie Holmes (1993) the crisis of Soviet institutions was a legitimization crisis triggered by the attempt to build legitimacy through combining economic growth and traditional party rule with greater legality. The novel stress on greater legality, seen in Gorbachev's calls for a 'Soviet law-based state', and desire for greater economic prosperity combined to target official corruption. Corruption was seen as a drag on economic development and a source of economic waste that deprived the party of resources to distribute to the population. Anti-corruption campaigns were supposed to free up these resources and improve administration as a prelude to sustainable economic development. However, in practice anti-corruption campaigns were politically corrosive. They did not improve economic performance, but did identify the party as the source for economic underachievement. They also destroyed the links between leaders and officials so that the Soviet system at its apex was left unprotected from popular protest; its officials deserted it since they no longer saw protecting the system as being in their interest. Why protect a leadership that targets you as corrupt? A slightly different take on this has been put forward by Steven Solnick (1998), who argues that the collapse of Soviet power was triggered by officials coming to see that they would no longer be punished for acting in their own interest, as opposed to the interests of the Soviet state as a whole. Officials came to this realisation as they saw the use of coercion in the Soviet system and political discipline within the party decline. The result, Solnick argues, was akin to a run on a bank as officials cashed in the assets of the state where and when they could; the Soviet system imploded as a result, its administrative system and assets 'disappearing' into private hands.

Where institutionalist accounts stress the destabilization of relationships within the Soviet polity ideational accounts hold the intellectual content of Gorbachev's reforms responsible for the USSR's decline. Stephen Kotkin (2001) argues that the idealism of Gorbachev's political policies combined with unfortunate timing to bring about the USSR's collapse. Gorbachev's political policies were not going to work because they were trying to build a Soviet system of humane socialism that had never existed. Reform was therefore going to run into difficulties but it did so as one of the Soviet economy's main supports, oil export revenue, collapsed when oil prices fell in the early 1980s. Poor timing combined with policy to create a fragmentation of political power that was unstoppable because there was a shortage of resources that might otherwise have been available to buy-off discontented groups. Even if resources had been available they might not have been enough because of the conflict that Gorbachev's reforms created. The party before Gorbachev defined what public politics was and policed what was allowed exist publically as political action. This power of the party had never been challenged in previous reforms of the Soviet system, or where reform had threatened this, as it had in the early 1960s under Nikita Khrushchev, reform had been rolled back. Gorbachev changed this when he created new legislatures and opened up elections to them. At this point it became possible to point out that the party was a part of the problem, not the solution to it (Kiernan, 1993; Robinson, 1995). After the election of 1989 arguments began over what institution – party or legislature – was the authentic representative of the popular will of the Soviet people. These arguments about whether popular sovereignty should be vested in the party or the parliament could not be resolved, short of using violence that Gorbachev eschewed. The claims of the party and of independent parliamentarians to represent the people were irreconcilable. The 1990 elections and nationalist mobilization compounded this problem as new claims to being

representative of popular sovereignty emerged in nationalist parliaments. The emergence of nationalist movements was both a response to *perestroika*, since many of them developed initially as movements *for* Gorbachev's reforms, and against Soviet reform because these movements turned on the Soviet system as a whole when it failed to deliver change. Nationalist movements were able to use the federal institutions of the Soviet state thanks to Gorbachev's attempt to use elections to reinvigorate party leadership and make them 'subversive institutions' as Valerie Bunce (1999) has put it, dismembering the Soviet state as a territorial entity as well as destroying Soviet socialism as a socio-economic order. As nationalist mobilization took place in one republic of the USSR after another they developed into an unstoppable force that created an irresistible and inevitable pressure to break up the USSR as a state (Beissinger, 2002). Soviet collapse was not preordained but followed the institutional structures that the Soviet system had created once change began to break the USSR apart and leave fifteen successor states in its place.

#### 4. The nature of collapse

We can see from the discussion of accounts of collapse above that explanations of why the USSR collapsed do not always discuss what the nature of the collapse was. Only the essentialist arguments present an argument about what the nature of collapse was as a matter of course, arguing that the collapse of totalitarianism is revolutionary because by definition the end of totalitarianism involves a complete move away from one form of socio-political system to something else. But even then, as Malia (1994, p.497) recognized, this was a particular type of revolution; it was 'not by breakthrough but by implosion'. This qualification points to the problem of defining the collapse of the USSR as a particular type of radical change

Definitions of radical political change concern more than the end of an old order; they also describe the emergence of a new socio-political order. We define radical political change not just by the collapse of a polity but also by what emerges afterwards. A revolution consists both of a *revolutionary situation* – the breakdown of power in a political system so that the old state fails and can no longer insure the loyalty of its citizenry through either coercion or consent – and a *revolutionary outcome*, the emergence of a new state that is capable of securing citizen loyalty (Skocpol, 1979). A democratic transition occurs when there is both a crisis of a non-democratic polity but also the replacement of that polity with a democratic one. It is therefore very difficult to talk about the nature of Soviet collapse independently of what followed that collapse since what followed collapse is as important to the classification of the nature of collapse as the collapse itself.

Despite this problem it is still important to discuss the type of change the collapse of the Soviet Union was at this stage before we go on to look at the development of the post-Soviet political system. This is because even though the process of change was incomplete at the point when the USSR was dissolved comparing it to ideas about what constitutes radical political change can help us see some of the issues that the post-Soviet Russian state had to confront. Commonly, the collapse of the USSR is discussed as a form of revolution, as a form of democratic transition, or as a hybrid combination of these two forms of radical political change.

##### *4.1 Soviet collapse and revolution*

The case for seeing the collapse of the USSR as a type of revolution is not solely based on the idea that it was a totalitarian system. Although analysts working from the totalitarian

approach to Soviet politics have called Soviet collapse a 'revolution' there is little in their writing that actually supports this claim in detail. When discussing the collapse of the USSR as a revolution 'school of totalitarianism' arguments are generally making a claim about the scale of change involved in the collapse to produce a self-serving and circular argument that is as much about claiming the USSR was totalitarian as it is about the nature of change involved in the USSR's collapse. The argument is, in essence, that the USSR was totalitarian and when it collapsed it stopped being totalitarian. Stopping being totalitarian involved an abrupt, fundamental, radical and broad change. Abrupt, fundamental, radical and broad changes are revolutions. The collapse of the USSR was a revolution and since the collapse of the USSR was a revolution, what was involved was the end of a totalitarian system. This leaves little room for discussing continuities between the Soviet and the post-Soviet Russian polities, and does not tell us very much about the sources and nature of Soviet collapse as a revolution.

More complete accounts of the USSR's collapse place it alongside the more general crisis of communist systems that occurred between 1989 and 1991, between the collapse of the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the USSR in 1991. These accounts stress structural factors and revolutionary 'tasks', where there is some commonality between the end of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR and 'classical revolutions' such as those in France, Russia in 1917, and China, but also highlight the difference between the end of communism and 'classical' revolutions.

The idea that revolution is the product of structural forces is most associated with Theda Skocpol's (1979) study of the French, Russian and Chinese social revolutions. Social revolutions result from the failure of relatively backward states to compete internationally with more advanced states. Competition with more advanced states strains the economies of backward states and undermines their capacity to control their populations through coercion. The most spectacular revolutions happen as warfare ruins backward states economically and at the same time destroys the military as an institution of domestic coercive control. A power vacuum develops in which different social and political forces violently compete to put in place a new state that can more adequately deal with international competition. This violent competition involves a mass mobilization of social forces and new ideas about the organization of the state so that it can gather resources to compete internationally. A revolution is a drawn out affair, rather than just a spectacular and dramatic take-over of power. Completing the revolution means social, economic and political renewal through the reconstruction of a state, which also involves political authorities being involved in changing society's socio-economic foundation so that the state is able to develop on a new, more secure financial footing. The 'tasks' of revolutionary forces are not complete until this reconstruction of the state and the foundations on which it rests are addressed. Revolutionary situations – bitter struggles over who is sovereign in a state – do not reach revolutionary outcomes until these tasks of social, political and economic reconstruction are completed.

The collapse of communism shared many of these features of classical social revolutions (Goodwin, 1994; Goldstone 2001). As we have seen the deep causes of reform were a combination of relative economic backwardness to the main competitors of the USSR in the West and aggressive loss of position economically and militarily in international competition. The Cold War, particularly after its more vigorous conduct under Reagan in the early 1980s, strained the USSR's weak economy, and it struggled to maintain control over Poland. The war in Afghanistan saw it suffer military losses and caused a crisis in faith in the Soviet military as the efficacy of its armed forces, and their usefulness as agents of domestic control, came under question (Reuveny and Prakash, 1999). The collapse of the Soviet system and state involved a collapse of coercive order as the Soviet federation broke up. This 'imperial' collapse meant that there was a

contestation over who was sovereign in the state, Soviet or republican authorities, and that there were revolutionary 'tasks' to be dealt with by whoever emerged victorious from this struggle. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a social, economic and political crisis. The old socio-economic system needed to be replaced with a new one; politics needed to be conducted in new ways and a state administration rebuilt in order to organize and insure that this economic change took place. Just as in any other post-revolutionary state, in other words, the state machine with its monopoly over coercion and rule making and enforcement had to be rebuilt. This problem was particularly marked acute in Russia. Post-communist states in Eastern Europe could view their post-communist state building as a return to pre-Soviet independence and draw on help from other European states to recreate social, economic and political administration as a part of their 'return to Europe'. Russia was too large and too central to the Soviet experiment to do this. Moreover, as a federal state Russia had to contend with multiple contesting claims over sovereignty. Claims to sovereignty made against the Soviet state by republican authorities such as Russia's were mirrored by claims to sovereignty from within Russia by ethnic groups and territories. This 'matrioshka nationalism' (so-called because like the famous Russian painted dolls inside each nationalism was another nationalism waiting to be released) meant that Russia did not really exist as a unitary political and economic space.

Structural factors underlying collapse and structural tasks of state building in Russia were therefore very much like those factors and tasks that have produced and then faced other revolutionary polities. The collapse of the USSR and the emergence of Russia was, however, also very different to classical social revolutions in many important respects. These differences are mostly concerned with the scope and intensity of revolutionary agency, differences in who made the revolution, how and to what ends. The classic social revolutions saw major social upheaval and mass mobilization, generally along lines of social class. This mobilization led to high levels of violence and social warfare, with previously subordinate social classes attacking and destroying the social foundations of the old regime, the old ruling classes and their social supports. Mass mobilization was often unstructured in its initial phases but became channelled and structured by political leadership in order to address the state reconstruction problem. Revolutionary mobilization was thus not caused by revolutionary ideas but came, after a time, to be put to the service of such ideas as they formed the core of a new state project.

Mobilization, its forms, activity and relationship to ideas was very different in the collapse of communism generally and Russia specifically. Mobilization was sporadic rather than sustained, particularly in Russia. It did not involve the mass of the population and did not take class forms. Other identities, ethnic, regional, sectoral (such as the miners' strikes of 1989 and 1990), and political (attitudes towards communism) were often more important than class identities. Mass popular mobilization was highly constrained by people's dependence on officialdom, particularly on their employers, so that new political movements did not become vehicles for mass social mobilization (Fish, 1995). Outside of the major cities demonstrations were small and even in the major cities political participation was most often through officially sanctioned channels – people voted in the elections that Gorbachev provided for them – or passive, as people consumed the increasingly free media that *glasnost* allowed emerge. People used their vote to help drive change forward and became more distanced from the Soviet system as they developed more critical attitudes to the Soviet system under the influence of a freer media, but this was a long way from the social destruction of a classic social revolution. Violence was not used to destroy the power of old elites, and the destruction of these elites was very much focussed on the destruction of the central Soviet political elite. At the apex of the state there was elite turnover as Yeltsin and his cohort replaced Gorbachev

and the central Soviet elite. But beyond this, in the regions and in economic organizations, elite turnover was often minimal if it occurred at all: an estimated 80-90 per cent of local officials retained their posts after the fall of communism (White and Kryshatanovskaya, 1998, p.107).

Limited mobilization and limited elite turnover meant that the development of a new state project was going to be difficult. We can clearly identify what the collapse of communism as a revolution was against: the stagnant Soviet system that could not develop reformist ideas into substantive, positive change. But the absence of mass mobilization and the continued tenure of a large section of the Soviet elite meant that there was no channelling of mass support behind a new revolutionary idea. The revolution was against something specific, the Soviet system, but was for vague generalities; for 'democracy', for the 'market'. Popular understanding of these things was, however, often defined negatively. People supported these ideas because they were 'not-Soviet' and because the collapse of the USSR left people with the impression that there was no alternative (Wyman, 1997, p.183). The revolution against communism was as Claus Offe (1996, p.30) put it, 'a revolution without a revolutionary theory', with no organizing principles about who should do what, when and how, and what would constitute the post-revolutionary order and progress in constructing it. It was not, or could not become, a revolution in a more positive and purposeful sense. Rather it was a *refolution*, a revolt based on refusal to continuing accepting the old political system, as Timothy Garton-Ash (1990) labelled the East European collapse of communism, or a 'double rejective revolution', against dominance of the Soviet state by a part of it, Russia, and against communism, as Leslie Holmes (1997, p.14) put it. This means that as a revolution the collapse of the Soviet system was a revolutionary event – contestation of sovereignty, collapse of the old state – that would have difficulty reaching a revolutionary outcome through the creation of a new state. The level of social upheaval and popular mobilisation, the lack of elite change below the very apex of the political system, and the lack of a clear ideological blueprint around which to mobilise around meant that state building after Soviet collapse was going to be hard to achieve.

#### *4.2 Soviet collapse and democratic transition*

The absence of sustained and (eventually) focussed mass mobilization that could destroy the old regime and its social supports meant that political change was largely dependent on elite politics and the interaction between elite factions. Radical political change based on elite politics rather than mass mobilization is generally limited in scope and concerns changes in political regime, that is in the rules that govern access to power, rather than broader changes to state, society and economy.

The most common recent form of regime change, and the one usually associated with the collapse of communism, is a transition from non-democratic to democratic regime. Such transitions are usually described as an evolving political 'game' in which elite factions bargain their way towards democracy. The most influential studies of democratic transition were made of the movements to democracy in Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Karl and Schmitter, 1991). The pattern of transition in these countries was, generally, that non-democratic regimes began the transition when confronted with a problem that required them to introduce political reform. This led to a split in their elite: part of the elite favoured reform and became soft-liners, part opposed reform and became hard-liners. The introduction of reform was negotiated between the two parties. After reform's introduction new political actors could emerge. These would ally with soft-liners and this would change the balance of power. Soft-liners could introduce more

reform, which would create more new political actors again, and so a process of *liberalization* would begin. Gradually this liberalization would expand until it began to change the character of the non-democratic regime and a powerful enough constituency was created that would support *democratization*. The 'game' element of this was that the process of introducing liberalization and moving on to democratization had to be managed in such a way that hardliners did not take fright and withdraw from the process altogether. Scare hardliners too much with the prospect of their losing to an unacceptably high degree, the argument goes, and the transition would end because they would revolt and overthrow the fledgling democracy. Democratization is, therefore, the 'contingent outcome of conflict' (Przeworski, 1986). It is not a guaranteed result of a transition. Transitions can go awry if the wrong choices are made and can lead to 'an uncertain "something else" [t]hat "something" can be ... political democracy or the restoration of a new, possibly more severe, form of authoritarian rule ... [or] simply confusion, that is the rotation in power of successive governments which fail to provide any enduring or predictable solution to the problem of institutionalizing political power' (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, p.3).

The chances of such mistakes being made depend on the type of non-democratic regime that is being replaced and the 'mode of transition', the form that the final collapse of the non-democratic regime takes. There are more chances of a transition leading to democracy the less totalitarian a state is and the more that the mode of transition is based on negotiation, on pacting between elite factions. Non-totalitarian non-democratic systems have greater social and economic pluralism that can support a transition (Linz and Stepan, 1996). A more restricted range of actors involved in a transition is more likely to achieve compromise and therefore less likely to scare hardliners into rolling back liberalization and democratization (Karl and Schmitter, 1991).

The collapse of the USSR has elements of a transition process in the same way that it has elements of revolution (Bova, 1991; Colomer, 2000, pp.72-90). Reform began as Gorbachev confronted the problems that the USSR faced. After a time, Gorbachev even began to talk about reform as *demokratizatsiya* (democratization). The development of political change was also influenced by splits in the elite and the emergence of new actors on the political stage. There were also moments when change was achieved by alliance building between Gorbachev, as the leading softliner, and these new political actors, such as his reaching a compromise with Yeltsin in the spring of 1991 over reform of the Union. The limited mass mobilization noted above also meant that the main actors involved in change were elite members. Despite these similarities the collapse of the USSR was more a failed transition than anything else. The start point for transition, the form of the Soviet Union's non-democracy was not conducive to supporting transition. Although there was an explosion of social organization during the *perestroika* period civil society development was weak due to its historic repression by the CPSU. Economic pluralism was also weak because of central planning and because the rudiments of a market economy still had to be built.

Proponents of seeing the collapse of communism as a transition have tried to downplay these differences to the classic cases of transition in Latin America and Southern Europe. They claim that the moves away from Stalinism made Soviet-type systems either little different to authoritarian regimes (Bova, 1992; Colomer, 2000), or had turned them into 'post-totalitarian regimes (Linz and Stepan, 1996) in which totalitarianism had decayed to a point where transition was possible. Some of these claims are true for *some* East European states. Some East European states had introduced elements of market economics as early as the 1960s and/or had never fully suppressed private economic activity, allowing, for example, private agriculture (Hungary, Poland); some were strongly affected by international economic changes

(Poland); some had long traditions of social protest fuelled by nationalist resentment at Soviet domination and/or national democratic traditions that they could build on as communist power imploded (Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Poland). These factors, or the combination of them, meant that democratic majorities could be built in these countries as communism failed. Democratic forces therefore had no need to seek alliances and build pacts to begin the process of democratic consolidation (McFaul, 2002).

Russia had none of these democratic advantages having been the heart of Soviet power politically and economically. There was no linkage of nationalism to democracy as there was in some East European countries. In fact, the opposite was the case: Russian nationalists were more often than not opposed to reform because it threatened the great power status of Russia as Soviet collapse weakened Russia geopolitically. Central planning was only weakened under Gorbachev and the USSR was poorly exposed to the international economy in comparison to some East European states (Robinson, 2004b; Connolly, 2013). There was therefore no constituency of economic interests ready to support democracy. Social protest was, as we have seen, weak and anyway lacked a history in Russia given the check that the population had been held under during the Soviet period. Russia therefore lacked the basic structures upon which an elite-led transition could be built. Reform was created by and created divisions within the Russian elite, but these divisions did not lead to pacts. Negotiation between elites in Russia was not a matter of pacting but a sign of their weakness, of their inability to secure advantage over one another, or to forge a stable and workable compromise with each other.

Finally, the scale of Russia's problems was too large and diverse and this made it difficult for elites to agree compromise solutions. Rebuilding the state and reconfiguring economic and social relations so that a rebuilt state could rest on more secure foundations demanded policies and action that were threatening to some group or other's interests. Arguments about Soviet collapse and post-Soviet change have tried to capture these other dimensions of change by talking about the 'triple' or even 'quadruple' nature of post-communist transition: the transition to new forms of statehood; the transition to the market; and the transition to democracy (Offe, 1996, pp.29-49).<sup>6</sup> Recognising the multiple dimensions of post-Soviet change highlights the fact that the end of the USSR was very different to a conventional transition process such as occurred in Spain in the 1970s after the death of Franco. In transitions such as Spain's questions of statehood and economic organisation were long settled, or were manageable, and this made it easier to reach compromises over the movement from one regime type (authoritarianism) to another (democracy). The range of change that was occurring in the USSR, and that needed to be secured to build democracy, worked against elite compromise and the transformation of Soviet collapse into a process of negotiated democratic transition in which elites bargain their way to democracy. There were always going to be elite factions who would fear and resist democracy building because of their fear of economic change, and *vice versa*, or who would not support it because they could not establish what, if any, changes were in their interests. The need to rebuild the state as well as reform the economy and establish democracy complicated things even further. Compromise was to prove almost impossible to reach except through compromising on change. Such compromise over change left Russia weak and vulnerable to crisis, and crisis further divided elites and made negotiated transition to democracy unlikely.

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<sup>6</sup> The 'quadruple' transition divides transition to new forms of statehood in two to create an extra dimension of transition, dealing with issues of national identity. See Kuzio, 2001.

## 5. Conclusion

Neither essentialist arguments about the collapse of the USSR nor arguments about evolution can be totally dismissed. There were flaws to the Soviet project that made its long-term survival doubtful. This is one reason why the demise of the USSR was so often predicted in the 1960s and 1970s (Dziewanowski, 1972, p.367). Such predictions were less frequent – although were still made – after the totalitarian model of Soviet politics lost its hegemonic position in Soviet studies and the idea of the Soviet Union's being capable of evolving became more widely accepted. There were good reasons for this change in how the USSR was viewed: the USSR had changed after Stalin's death, and, as *perestroika* shows, was to continue to evolve. In the end, neither the essentialist nor the evolutionary perspectives on Soviet politics actually predicted when or how the USSR was to end. With hindsight we can probably see that such a prediction would have had to have been based on some intellectual blend of elements of both approaches, to see what was essential to the Soviet system, i.e., what it could not do without to remain being the Soviet system, and how evolution would challenge these essential elements and create the kind of political storm that Gorbachev unleashed to bring the end of the USSR about.

Even if such a fusion had taken place any consequent prediction of collapse would not necessarily have drawn the right conclusions about what the nature of change would be. How the end of the Soviet system happened was shaped by the choices that Gorbachev made about making it evolve further. These choices meant that the end of the Soviet system was neither a classical social revolution that would bring about the construction of a new state to fulfil the tasks that the old state had failed at and that had prompted the revolution in the first place, nor a transition to democracy. The transition paradigm does not work very well to explain what was happening as the Soviet Union collapsed and as the new Russian polity emerged. Unsurprisingly the notion of transition has come in for much criticism from specialists in Russian and East European politics.<sup>7</sup> However, thinking about Soviet collapse as a transition does allow us to highlight the centrality of elites in the changes that were underway as the USSR collapsed *and* that the conditions needed to sustain elite-led democratization and were missing in the USSR and Russia. Considering both revolution and transition leaves us with a very mixed picture. Structurally, what the USSR and Russia were going through as the USSR collapsed and a new Russian polity emerged was a revolution: the collapse of a state that was unable to sustain itself in international competition, leading to collapse and leaving a need to re-forge state administration as a part of a general process of social and economic renewal. The main agents involved in the process of change, however, were elite groups, not mobilized mass social forces, the traditional bedrock of support who could be organized to achieve deep and fundamental social and economic change. Elite groups are better at agreeing between them narrower political changes to do with who has access to power than at securing fundamental revolutionary change including the reconstruction of the state. The nature of Soviet collapse was that it was a hybrid, a combination of revolution and transition. The tasks that a post-Soviet Russian government had to achieve were revolutionary in depth and scope, but the tools that they had available to them were limited. Change, thanks to the weakness of a mobilized society, and because they were supposed to be working through democratic channels, had, for the most part, to be negotiated by Russia's leaders. There were some brief moments when Russian politicians tried to move beyond negotiation to take more

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<sup>7</sup> See the debate between Terry, 1993; Schmitter and Karl, 1994; Bunce, 1995.



decisive action and achieve greater, more 'revolutionary' ends. These were not, however, successful; the conditions for a revolutionary transformation of Russian politics were no more present than the conditions for a democratic transition. As a result, much of post-Soviet politics has been characterised by a tension between stabilising the political system – dealing with the regime issue and managing access to power – and creating some level of state functionality to deal with pressing problems of security and welfare that have remained largely unresolved since Soviet collapse.

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