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Robert Strayer, "Decolonization, Democratization, and Communist Reform: The Soviet Collapse in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 2 (2001), 375–406.

Abstract: This article seeks to situate the collapse of the Soviet Union in a set of broader comparative contexts, each of which illuminates particular aspects of late Soviet history. It treats that history first as an end-of-empire story, comparing it with other disintegrating empires of the twentieth century, then as a democratization narrative juxtaposed to those of other authoritarian regimes in southern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and east Asia over the past three decades, and finally as a communist reform process gone awry, comparing it to an analogous and apparently more successful process in China.

The collapse of the Soviet experiment, and of the country that embodied it, has surely been among the most dramatic and consequential events of the postwar world, and indeed of the twentieth century. But how might this event, and the processes leading to it, be placed most effectively in a world historical context? How should world historians, as opposed to Russian or Soviet historians, treat the passing of the Soviet Union into history?

One response might be to focus on the external roots of the Soviet collapse. The negative comparison with an economically flourishing capitalist world; the delegitimizing impact of an increasingly dominant ethno-nationalist discourse on a multinational polity; the pressure of Western containment policies and Cold War expenditures; the declining price of oil on the world market in the 1980s; the corrosive consequences of the Afghan debacle; the stimulus of a successful Chinese reform program; the demonstration effect of the 1989 Eastern European revolutions—all of this and more testify to the "embeddedness" of the Soviet Union in a network of international linkages, many of which exacerbated the declining domestic sources of Soviet cohesion and vitality.

Alternatively, world historians might highlight the global outcomes or the global significance of the Soviet collapse. It marked the disappearance of the world's largest state, one that had been central to Eurasian political life for four centuries or more, and it occasioned new instability in many places along the borderlands of the former Soviet [End Page 375] Union. It signaled the apparent end of the great global rift, generated by the rise of communism, that had shaped so much of twentieth-century world history. It was part of a larger abandonment of Marxism as a serious guide to political and economic

life, and thus signified at least the temporary closure of a 150-year ideological debate about capitalism and socialism as distinct and rival systems. ¹

But a third approach to framing the Soviet collapse in a world historical context – and the one pursued here – is comparative. Three perspectives on that event provide the basis for such comparison. First, we may consider the demise of the Soviet Union as an “end of empire” story and compare it to other imperial disintegrations of the twentieth century. Second, we might regard the final years of the Soviet Union as a democratization narrative, marking a dramatic political change away from what remained of the Stalinist political system, and warranting comparison with the democratization of other highly authoritarian regimes in southern Europe, Latin America, Africa, East Asia, and elsewhere during the final quarter of the twentieth century. And third, we might recount the Soviet collapse as a communist reform process gone awry, comparing it to an analogous and apparently more successful process in China. Juxtaposing the Soviet collapse to other disintegrating empires, other transitions to democracy, and other reforming communist regimes enables us to situate that event – though only suggestively – in a set of larger twentieth-century contexts while highlighting some of its distinctive features.

The most deeply rooted and historically grounded context that we might situate the Soviet collapse involves that grand meta-narrative of world history – the fall of empires. The disintegration of the Soviet Union provides further grist for the mills of those who seek pattern and regularity in the 4000-year history of imperial rise and fall. ² Here, however, we focus on the more limited period of the twentieth century, which has been so hostile to the imperial ideal. In particular, we confront the collapse during World War I of the land-based Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires, and the “decolonization” after World War II of Europe’s overseas empires. The collapse of the Soviet [End Page 376] Union joins these “end of empire” narratives in one fundamental respect: all of them were conditioned, if not entirely caused, by the growth of that uniquely modern solvent of empire that is anticolonial nationalism, leading to the creation or reassertion of a multitude of new “nation-states.” In the Soviet case, however, nationalist movements confronted an official ideology that had long and strenuously denied its imperial status, casting itself instead as a multinational state in the process of creating a new “Soviet” identity. And most outside observers had focused on the USSR’s “totalitarian” features rather than on “imperial” patterns of ethno-national stratification. But the Soviet state had inadvertently nurtured a variety of distinctly ethnic nationalisms by policies that recognized and encouraged national cultures on the one hand, while sharply restricting their prerogatives and offending their sensibilities on the other. Thus by the 1980s, and in places much earlier, many groups within the Soviet

Union had come to define the country as an “empire” with all the connotations of illegitimacy, exploitation, and ethnic or national subordination which that term carried by the late twentieth century. Western scholars as well increasingly represented the Soviet Union in imperial terms as demonstrated by a spate of books on the “end of empire” theme.³ Subjectively, then, the Soviet Union was, or had become, an empire, as defined from below, and thus merits comparison with other polities that had acquired or embraced that status.⁴

The Soviet encounter with anti-imperialist nationalism bears the greatest similarity to those of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires, for each of them also initially possessed a supra-national ideology that increasingly gave way to a definition of empire as a core national project, and in so doing fostered a nationalist response from the periphery. The Habsburg Empire, long legitimated by its historic role in the Holy Roman Empire and its protection of Catholicism, became increasingly German after the Compromise of 1867. The Ottoman Empire, bearing the torch and the sword of an internationalist [End Page 377] Islam, became increasingly Turkish, particularly in the hands of the Young Turks after the 1908 coup. And the dynastic empire of the Romanovs, acting as protector of Christian Orthodoxy, sought to bolster itself through Russification in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In a similar fashion, the Soviet Union, defining itself as the avatar of proletarian internationalism, nonetheless became increasingly Russian. Stalin liberally invoked Russian themes in World War II and even earlier. The Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes actively pushed the use of the Russian language throughout the USSR. Russian-Slavic dominance in the central institutions of the Soviet party-state, and the presence of some 25 million Russians in the western and southern peripheries of the USSR likewise increased the perception of the Soviet Union as a Russian-dominated enterprise. Thus all of these regional European empires moved closer to the imperial model of Europe’s overseas empires that a distinctly national and racially defined core exercised control while nationalist responses emerged in the peripheries.

Despite these broad similarities, the end of the Soviet empire was distinctive in several ways. Perhaps the most obvious was its timing. Why was the Soviet empire able to persist into the final decade of a highly nationalistic twentieth century while others had succumbed much earlier? One answer is that the Soviet Union, if it was an empire, was a unique imperial system. Its central integrating institution was an omnipresent political party, with a Georgian as its dominant leader, and with a membership open to all. It was inspired by an internationalist and socialist ideology that denied legitimacy to nationalist claims and that sought to create a new and inclusive “Soviet” identity from the ashes of a Russian empire that the Bolsheviks had both destroyed and

inherited. That ideology served for a time as an attractive alternative to national identity for many non-Russians. Few of them would have defined the Soviet Union as an empire – illegitimate and doomed to extinction on that account – until fairly late in the game. The Russian language was long a “ticket to the larger world,” while Soviet society provided numerous opportunities for social mobility and economic improvement.⁵ The federal structure of the Union allowed the regime to co-opt and to reward handsomely republican elites willing to pursue their material interests and express their nationalist sentiments [End Page 378] within prescribed limits. And the multiple sufferings which that regime inflicted on its peoples – the destruction of peasant villages, dekulakization, the terror and deportations, closure of churches, the assault on the environment – were manifestly shared by the dominant Russians. All of this served to blur and diffuse the national identity of the imperial center. And to state the obvious, the coercive capacities of the Soviet state were overwhelming until virtually the eve of collapse. Thus the Soviet Union endured far longer than other empires.

If the distinctive features of the Soviet “empire” delayed its “decolonization,” the manner of its demise was likewise unique. The Soviet collapse was both widely unexpected and extraordinarily rapid. Over the seven decades of Soviet history, the regime had unintentionally fostered the growth of nationalist sentiment, and a kind of “inconspicuous decolonization” had given rise to relatively autonomous national elites or “mafias” in a number of republics.⁶ Still, no national crisis greeted Gorbachev as he assumed Soviet leadership in 1985. Few opposition figures or ordinary citizens foresaw or demanded independence more than a few years before it occurred, and a number of Western academic experts were subsequently embarrassed about their misreading of late Soviet politics.⁷ The national explosion occurred only after glasnost and democratization had decisively weakened the center and permitted active mobilization along ethnic or nationalist lines. In Ukraine, for example, a public opinion survey in late summer of 1989 revealed only 20.6 percent in favor of full political self-determination,⁸ but a little over two years later, in December 1991, over 90 percent of Ukrainians voted for complete independence in an action that sealed the fate of the Soviet Union. This contrasts sharply with the gradualism, constitutional devolution, and endless negotiations that accompanied much of British decolonization in the twentieth century. That process in India lasted over three decades, while independence-minded nationalism was brewing there for almost a half century. The Union Treaty negotiations of 1990–91 compressed Soviet “decolonization” into a single year, and were in any event never intended to eventuate in full independence for the republics. The [End Page 379] rapidity of the Soviet process contrasts as well with the experience of the Habsburg Empire where, from 1848 to its collapse in 1918, “the nationality question dominated the politics of the Habsburg Monarchy.”⁹ The Ottoman Empire

declined over an even longer period of time, held together in part by the inability of the European powers to agree about its dismemberment.

Not only was the Soviet collapse remarkably rapid; it was also remarkably peaceful. There were no bloody wars of liberation such as those in Algeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, or Vietnam. Except for the Armenian-Azeri conflict, the Soviet collapse avoided “ethnic cleansing” and the kind of massive, uncontrolled, and violent movement of peoples that disfigured the break-up of British India and the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The August 1991 coup notwithstanding, the defenders of the Soviet empire put up an amazingly modest resistance to those who sought its demise. How might we account for this surprising feature of the Soviet collapse?

The declining “self-legitimacy” of the Soviet elite, opportunities that beckoned to them in the new order, Gorbachev’s unwillingness to countenance large-scale violence and his “freedom to choose” rhetoric — all of this surely contributed to the peaceful demise of the Soviet Union. But what distinguishes the terminal phase of the Soviet empire from most of its twentieth-century counterparts was the remarkable and quite rapid transformation of Russian national identity from imperial to separatist.

Many scholars have noted the difficulty for Russia in defining a national identity distinct from that of empire. “The British had an empire,” Geoffrey Hosking wrote, “but Russia was an empire.”¹⁰ Nor did the Soviet reconstruction of the Russian empire fundamentally alter this identification. Unlike the other Soviet republics, Russia lacked separate national institutions such as its own party structure, its own capital, or its own branch of the Academy of Sciences. Russians were to find expression through all-Union bodies rather than republic-based institutions. Polls in the early 1980s showed that 70 percent [End Page 380] or more of Russians considered the Soviet Union as their “motherland,” while the vast majority of Uzbeks or Georgians, for example, identified primarily with their own republics.¹¹

But the Gorbachev era undermined this previously firm association between Russia and the USSR, and pushed Russian national identity in an increasingly separatist direction. The anti-Russian character of many peripheral nationalisms contributed to this growing and distinctly Russian nationalism, as did the return of many Russians from other republics bearing stories of discrimination and persecution. Glasnost made it possible to discuss openly what many had long believed: that some of the Baltic and Caucasian republics enjoyed a higher standard of living than did Russia itself. And unlike India, where the nationalists argued that they had been “drained” by the imperial center, in the USSR the dominant Russians made that case with particular reference to Central Asia and Eastern Europe. And finally, the multiple historical revelations of the Gorbachev era provided Russian

nationalists with compelling evidence that the Soviet experience had badly damaged Russia and Russian culture.

This shift in Russian national identity registered all across the political spectrum.¹² The famous exiled dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn openly advocated the secession of the Slavic-speaking regions of the USSR, while Boris Yeltsin and the more radical democrats began to argue that Russia could enter the new world of democracy and capitalism more effectively unencumbered by the Union and its timid policies of reform. Even Gorbachev, while seeking to preserve the Union, catered to Russian nationalists in many ways. A variety of polls showed widespread willingness among Russians to accept the loss of empire and an overwhelming unwillingness to use force to preserve it. Though contested by the empire-savers, who ultimately launched the August coup, this growing Russian hostility to empire, albeit perhaps temporary, contrasts with the mere indifference that characterized much of British public opinion on the question of decolonization in the postwar era.¹³ And there was nothing like it in the Habsburg, Ottoman, or Russian empires as they fell apart in the wake of World War I. It was [End Page 381] both a distinctive feature of the Soviet collapse and among the most compelling explanations for the peacefulness of that dismemberment.

The immediate outcomes of the Soviet collapse likewise bear comparison with other cases of imperial disintegration. The successor states to the USSR bore the legacy of Soviet ethno-federalism in giving the titular nationality a favored position, and in defining the new states in ethnic terms. By contrast, most of the successor states to Europe's overseas empires were new and artificial units attempting to build an inclusive nationalism based on ethnic neutrality.¹⁴ And these Asian and African countries generally acknowledged the continuing utility of the language and culture of their former rulers, an impulse that has been largely absent in the former republics of the USSR.

The consequences of imperial disintegration for the core nation also varied considerably. Britain released its overseas empire with the least difficulty and with the fewest domestic political repercussions. A recent study concluded that empire and decolonization remained "a remarkably marginal issue" in British political life, and after 1918 never became a major issue in any general election.¹⁵ French political life was temporarily disrupted by debate over Algeria, resulting in the collapse of the Fourth Republic. But in the long term, according to one authority, the "shape of British and French politics seems to have changed little" as a result of decolonization.¹⁶ Among the European colonial powers, only Portugal experienced a regime change as a consequence of decolonization.

But the Soviet collapse, like that of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires before it, produced wrenching changes in the imperial metropole. It broke up what had been a single state; it fractured what had been an integrated economy; it stranded millions of Russians outside of their homeland; it gave rise to a new political regime based on wholly different principles; it meant the loss of a substantial part of the country's military forces.¹⁷ Like the new Turkish state that emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, Russia has been faced with the task of shedding a supra-national ideology and carving out a distinct [End Page 382] and non-imperial national identity.¹⁸ But the rapidity of the Soviet disintegration, the country's recent superpower status, the presence of sizable Russian population in the "near abroad," and Russia's continuing economic decline make this an extraordinarily difficult and highly contested task.

Some, of course, have argued that the Soviet empire might be reconstituted in some new form as was the Russian Empire under Soviet auspices following the imperial collapse of 1917. A certain nostalgia for empire in Russian political life, the logic of economic integration, the emotional issue of "stranded Russians," and the popularity of the second Chechen war suggest the possibility. But the factors that made that reconstitution possible following 1917 seem largely absent in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.¹⁹ The military weakness of the Russian armed forces, Russian recognition of the sovereign status of the CIS states, the illegitimacy of empire in global political discourse, widespread national consciousness in the former republics, and the perception of Russian economic backwardness – all of these new conditions mitigate against any repetition of an earlier pattern of imperial revival.

If the end of empire provides one global context that late Soviet history can be cast, another is the worldwide growth of political democracy since the mid-1970s. In this "third wave" of democracy,²⁰ dozens of countries have made a transition from highly authoritarian or military rule to multi-party systems with contested elections. Spain, Portugal, and Greece in southern Europe; most of Latin America; the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia in Asia; and a number of African states testify to the extent of this trend. Western-style democracy has become widely viewed as a universal value, losing much of its earlier identification with the West. Under Gorbachev's leadership in the late 1980s, the Soviet Union, too, began to move in that direction. The language of democratic practice – pluralism, a "law governed state," "checks and balances" – began to circulate. And the institutions of political democracy – multi-candidate elections, competing [End Page 383] parties, a free press, and a real working parliament – made their appearance as well, albeit in a limited and restricted fashion.

How then did the Soviet process of democratization compare to those in other parts of the world, particularly in non-communist societies? In the latter, the initiative for democratic change often came from within the established political order, though from somewhat different segments of that order, and under varying degrees of pressure from civil society. In Spain remnants of the Franco regime initiated the democratization process under pressure from opposition groups involving workers, students, and middle-class elements following Franco's death. In Portugal, it was the military, radicalized in the anti-colonial struggle and operating against and outside of the Salazar-Caetano government, that installed a democratic regime in a quite revolutionary fashion. In Greece and Brazil, military governments initiated the army's withdrawal from the political arena and a return to civilian democratic rule, fearing sometimes that prolonged governing responsibilities, especially in the context of economic failure, would undermine the order and discipline of the army.²¹ In many places, including the Philippines, South Korea, Indonesia, Nigeria, Bolivia, and Peru, substantial public pressure or an overt crisis in the old regime preceded and stimulated the transition to more democratic rule.²²

In the Soviet case as well, the initial opening to democratic change came wholly from within the established system, in this case from the topmost level of the Communist Party following Gorbachev's ascent to power. That initiative, however, was much less influenced by the social pressures that operated in non-communist states, as independent social groups barely existed in the Soviet context. A variety of developments in the Brezhnev years – the growth of an educated professional class, a spiraling “second economy,” massive official corruption, a fascination with Western popular culture, and the mildly subversive work of poet-bards like Vladimir Vysotsky and the “village prose” writers – certainly conditioned the reception of Gorbachev's reforms, but they did not directly provoke those reforms. Far from being triggered by an actual crisis, the Gorbachev program, including democratization, had **[End Page 384]** been preceded by several decades of post-Stalinist stability, despite declining rates of economic growth. Rather it was the leadership's perception of an impending or potential crisis that motivated the reform process and placed democratization on the agenda of the Soviet Union. Social pressures to enlarge the democratic opening came only after the process had been initiated by the Party's top leadership.

The initial Soviet opening toward democratization also differed from many of these others in its highly instrumental character. Gorbachev came to believe that a measure of political liberalization – though certainly not full Western-style democracy – was necessary to prod a recalcitrant and entrenched party bureaucracy toward economic reform by making it accountable to a broader, mobilized, and politically engaged public. Political reform thus served

economic change in a more direct fashion than in non-communist democratizing states. And despite Gorbachev's efforts to present democratization as a revival of Leninism and "all power to the Soviets," that process marked a fundamental break with previous Soviet experience, especially as Communist Party monopoly on political activity was finally abolished in 1990. But in much of southern Europe and Latin America, where authoritarian and democratic rule had long alternated, democratization could be more credibly represented as a return to an earlier and valued tradition.²³

An enormous literature on the transition process itself has emphasized in recent years contingent elements of choice, strategy, and leadership policies as opposed to structures, conditions, and prerequisites.²⁴ In non-communist countries of southern Europe and Latin America, this has put the spotlight on "transitions through pacts" that authoritarian leaders negotiated with opposition elites to "craft" a more democratic polity while retaining some of their power. Such an approach invites attention to Gorbachev's quite remarkable feat in engineering a substantial democratization process including competitive elections, a functioning parliament, the end of the party's political monopoly, and the creation of a powerful executive presidency – all of this within a few years and with the party's reluctant consent.

How had it happened? A widespread recognition of the need for **[End Page 385]** some change, a deeply ingrained deference to the General Secretary of the Party, the conceptual ambiguity of the reforms themselves, the leverage provided by Gorbachev's international popularity, and by the rise of a significant democratic movement – all of this contributed to launching the democratization process during the late 1980s. But Gorbachev's personal role was crucial as well. Prior to the Nineteenth Party Congress of June 1988, which formally initiated a more democratic structure for Soviet political life, Gorbachev met personally with most of the 300 members of the Central Committee, charming them at his dacha, while persuading them to adopt measures that stood to limit their own power. In the process a set of strategic compromises with the "old guard" took shape. Thus Soviet democratization left many old structures intact including the party, security forces, and much of the command economy, and no purge of the state took place. By many accounts, the chief political beneficiaries were not the democratic activists but elements of the old nomenklatura elite. Thus elements of a "pact" also accompanied the Soviet process of democratization.

But the Soviet transition differed from all of the non-communist processes in that the advocates of democracy confronted an unparalleled degree of state and party control, and the almost total absence of civil society. Elsewhere, even in the most highly authoritarian states, a variety of social and economic institutions had maintained at least a semi-autonomous existence: chambers

of commerce, labor groups, peasant associations, churches, newspapers, universities, and sometimes political parties. And in most of these states, private property was an established institution. None of this prevailed in the Soviet Union. This meant that pro-democracy forces in the Russian republic took shape as amorphous, highly fragmented “movements” rather than a set of institutional or social “interests.” Dozens – even hundreds – of organizations and parties, most of them hyper-democratic in structure, given to endless debate, and lacking any clear connection to distinct social groups, gave rise to no unified opposition.²⁵ The contrast with the role of Solidarity in Poland is sharp. So, too, is the case of Chile where the popular movement against the Pinochet regime involved organizations representing informal sector workers, shantytown residents, squatters groups, poor women, street and neighborhood groups, as well as an array of established parties coming together in a reasonably [End Page 386] unified opposition.²⁶ And in the non-Russian republics, democratization generated “popular fronts” that focused largely on issues of national autonomy and soon, on independence. This too was unique to Communist democratizing regimes such as the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, for nowhere else has the democratizing process been the vehicle for such a comprehensive disintegration of a territorial state.

A further unique feature of the Soviet transition lay in the multiple tasks that confronted the reformist leadership. Not only was the Soviet Union attempting political democratization and the disentangling of party and state, but also, and at the same time, it was partially dismantling an elaborate centrally planned economy, introducing elements of the market, disassembling an empire, and managing the country’s decline from great power status.²⁷ And all of this was taking place during a sustained economic decline that surpassed even that of the Great Depression, and had no parallel in southern Europe or Latin America. The simultaneous timing of these various transformations, amounting in some ways to a revolution, sharply distinguished the Soviet case from the more modest non-communist “regime transitions.” And those processes seem to have damaged the basic operating capacity of the successor Russian state far more than in most other democratic transitions or imperial collapses. The inability to preserve law and order, to collect federal taxes, to maintain effective armed forces, and to overcome Chechen resistance all point in this direction.²⁸ The task of Russian democrats has involved not only building democracy from the ground up, but rebuilding their state structures and reconstructing a national identity as well. And a significant part of this task was cultural – reviving or creating notions of work, responsibility, and action in the public sphere that had been associated in the communist era with “the realm of oppression and slavery.”²⁹ That too had little parallel in non-communist democratic transitions.

The literature on democratization speaks not only about variations in the initial opening to political reform and in the transitional process [End Page 387] of regime change, but also in the prospects for democratic “consolidation.”³⁰ Among the suggested criteria for consolidation are regular elections, the removal of prospects for rival systems, “affective links with that democracy . . . on the part of elites and public alike,” and the establishment of clear linkages between parties and social groups.³¹ On this basis, the southern European consolidations seem relatively far along, Latin American ones less so, and Africans least of all. How might the post-Soviet regimes, especially Russia, fare in this comparison?

Repeated national elections plus dozens of gubernatorial elections suggest that popular voting has become the only legitimate means to power. Since 1993, when Yeltsin forcibly dissolved the Russian parliament, all major political actors, including a revived Communist Party, have played by the rules of electoral democracy, albeit often roughly and for lack of a better alternative. Furthermore, these elections have resulted in considerable turnover both in the Russian Duma and in regional governorships.³² And despite much speculation to the contrary, the end of the Yeltsin era occurred in a constitutional manner.

But even apart from questions about the integrity of the electoral process, other elements of democratic practice have been much less firmly established. The 1993 constitution, hastily constructed by Yeltsin and his aides in the wake of a violent showdown with the old parliament, created a “super-presidential” regime, concentrating power in the executive branch. An independent judiciary is hardly in sight. The emergence of a highly concentrated and powerful capitalist class with close links to the “party of power” has given rise to a number of elite coalitions or “electoral clans” whose rivalries drive Russian politics.³³ Parties remain weak with little organization beyond the major cities, and many Russians view them all with deep distrust after seven decades of Communist hectoring about “party-mindedness.” Nor are these parties clearly connected to a weakly developed civil society. Continuing economic contraction and rapidly growing inequalities [End Page 388] have eroded the legitimacy of the regime and have ensured that state agencies, political parties, and civic organizations alike are strapped for cash and unable to operate effectively. Russian society has been described as “a-civil,” seeking to insulate itself from the state rather than to engage and influence the state.³⁴ And “affective links” with democracy are hardly universal as many people associate them with crime, disorder, cultural pollution, and impoverishment. A 1996 experiment by a Moscow newspaper found more contributors to a monument to Stalin than to one for his victims.³⁵ Unlike Latin America and Africa, where the military represents the greatest threat to democratic consolidation, in Russia it is

probably a beleaguered citizenry nostalgic for the securities of an earlier time and willing to support a less than democratic regime to achieve them again. Judging by the range of speculation about the Putin regime, continued uncertainty and vulnerability rather than clear consolidation seem to characterize Russian democracy.

If the Soviet Union's transformation in the Gorbachev years finds a place in the global democratization movement of the late twentieth century, it also joins a number of other communist states in efforts to reform, and thus preserve, those regimes. Party leaders across the communist world over the past several decades initiated economic and political changes intended to address long-standing problems and at times to respond to popular pressures. But the several transformations within the communist world have varied substantially as the experience of the Soviet Union and China so clearly demonstrates. In the Soviet case, the reform process was associated with the end of Communist Party rule, the dissolution of the state itself, the emergence in Russia of a quasi-democratic polity, the most profound peacetime depression in the twentieth century accompanied by a brutal decline in living standards, and a sharply reduced international role for the former Soviet Union as the Cold War drew to a close. In China by contrast – and notwithstanding many strains, much corruption, and continued political repression – the reform process generated a booming economy, widespread improvements in standards of living, a growing international presence, and an intact and in some ways strengthened state that the Communist Party maintained its political monopoly.

The very sharpness of the contrast obscures some common features **[End Page 389]** of these reform processes. In both countries reforms were initiated by a new group of party leaders, who had emerged following a succession struggle. In China, the new top leadership group associated with Deng Xiaoping were veteran Communists of Mao's generation returning from a political exile occasioned by the Cultural Revolution, while in the Soviet Union Gorbachev's team represented more of a generational change in the country's leadership. But both were concerned primarily with declining economic performance, though that condition was more sharply etched in the Soviet Union. They were responding to a range of widely recognized problems common to Soviet-style command economies – inefficiency, waste, a tendency toward hoarding, imbalances of supply and demand, declining productivity and growth rates – rather than to an imminent crisis or to popular pressure. These were leadership initiatives from within the party establishment; they were not driven by the streets. Both leadership groups saw their countries as lagging in international terms – China in comparison to the East Asian NICs, and the Soviet Union in contrast to flourishing capitalist economies in the West.

Furthermore, both countries began their reforms with quite “traditional” measures. In the immediate aftermath of Mao’s death in 1976, Chinese authorities sought to recentralize the planning process following the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution. They returned over 1,000 large enterprises to central control in 1978 and increased the number of commodities allocated by the central government. A new ten-year plan gave clear priority to heavy industry and a Maoist-style mobilization of rural labor once again set armies of peasants to work in the countryside.³⁶ Likewise, Gorbachev’s earliest efforts, following the lead of Andropov, featured the creation of new “superministries,” a series of disciplinary campaigns focusing on product quality, alcoholism, absenteeism, and “unearned income,” and altered investment priorities favoring machine building, automation, computerization, and robotics in a new five-year plan. It was the apparent failure of these approaches – drawn from the grabbag of Communist planning tools – that triggered more serious reformist measures, the Chinese Four Modernizations in 1978, and the Soviet Union’s perestroika by late 1986.

In their specifically economic dimension, these policies likewise shared a similar direction and emphasis. Both were gradualist and [End Page 390] experimental, without a clearly articulated end point. Certainly neither imagined a transition to capitalism or even, at that point, a socialist market economy. As reforms unfolded both attacked the dogmatism of earlier thinking and practice. In the process they considerably stretched and diluted the meaning of socialism while justifying these ideological innovations by referring to valued elements of their heritage. Deng Xiaoping and his supporters invoked the Maoist criterion of practice as the sole guide to truth in their struggle with Hua Guofeng, much as Gorbachev called upon the Lenin of the New Economic Policy and the revolutionary slogan of “all power to the soviets” in his contest with party conservatives.

In their economic policies, both sought to energize enterprise managers by decentralizing economic decision making; both offered long-term leasing opportunities to family households in the countryside; both created space for nonstate actors to enter the economic arena; both sought foreign investment. And neither was willing, at least initially, to consider rapid liberalization of prices or the privatization of state assets. The great divergence between Russian and Chinese economic policies occurred only after the collapse of the Soviet Union as Boris Yeltsin implemented elements of a “shock therapy” approach. A dramatic overnight liberalization of prices in early 1992, and the world’s most rapid process of privatization over the next few years sharply distinguished the Russian path (“crossing the chasm in a single bound”) from the continued gradualism of Chinese practice (“touching the stones to cross the river”). Earlier, however, the Soviet Union had followed “a path of reform

comparable to that of the Chinese” according to prominent Gorbachev advisor Feodor Burlatski.³⁷

But it has been the differences – in policy choice, in social response, and in outcomes – that riveted world attention on the two Communist giants in the final decades of the twentieth century. The most obvious divergence lay in the relationship of the economic and political dimensions of their respective reform programs. For the new Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping, democratizing political reform beyond the local level threatened the strong state and party structures believed to be absolutely necessary for successful economic reform. “Talk about democracy in the abstract,” Deng declared, “will inevitably lead to the unchecked spread of ultra-democracy and anarchism, to the complete disruption of political stability, and to the total [End Page 391] failure of our modernization program. . . . China will once again be plunged into chaos, division, retrogression, and darkness. . . .”³⁸ And when reform led to popular pressures toward greater political openness, the Party cracked down, most notably in Tienanmen Square in 1989 and most recently against Falun Gong practitioners. Thus the CCP has maintained its central political role throughout the reform process to date.

The Soviet posture to reform differed fundamentally from this more limited Chinese approach. While Gorbachev began his economic reforms with policies of “acceleration” and then “perestroika,” these initiatives were soon joined and overshadowed by the spectacular cultural and political openings known as *glasnost* and democratization. Together they produced an explosion of debate, cultural expression, nationalist assertion, and political mobilization, which led to competitive national elections, and by 1990 to the formal end of the Communist Party’s monopoly on political power. They were also associated with a far more profound critique of Soviet socialism – its history, its theoretical basis in class analysis, and its current practice – than China’s reformist leadership was willing to contemplate.³⁹ From at least 1987 on, the Soviet leadership argued that political and economic reform were inextricably connected. Without democracy, Gorbachev declared flatly, “perestroika will fail.”⁴⁰ How can we account for this sharp divergence in reform strategies?

One answer lies in the arguably more serious obstacles to economic reform in the Soviet Union. Despite the extensive personnel changes that Gorbachev engineered upon coming to power, few of these new people had deep personal loyalties to their leader. And some, Ligachev in particular, soon became highly critical of the reform process. New faces in the Central Committee of the CPSU did not necessarily mean new ideas, and conservatives continued to dominate that powerful body. Both the ministerial network and the party *apparatus* generated serious opposition to the formulation and implementation of Gorbachev’s economic reforms.⁴¹ It was,

Gorbachev wrote in his memoirs, like “cutting . . . through jungle undergrowth” to get anything accomplished. ⁴² [End Page 392] In this context, glasnost and democratization reached out to a larger public through elections, sought to create allies among professional groups by broadening greatly the possibilities of free expression, shifted power from the Party to the state by the creation of an Executive Presidency, and thus tried to put pressure on a recalcitrant bureaucracy. It was a high risk strategy and ultimately it backfired badly. But by 1987 Gorbachev had concluded that “there is only one way to accomplish [economic restructuring] – through the broad democratization of Soviet society.” ⁴³ A controlled democracy, in short, was necessary to push through the economic reforms that remained the central priority of the Gorbachev program.

In China, by contrast, such an effort seemed far less necessary, and thus did not warrant the enormous risks involved in the attempt. In the first place, the succession process in China, beginning with the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, put reformers in control of the Party rather more decisively than did Gorbachev’s accession to power in the USSR. A conservative wing of the party contested many specific aspects of the reform process, ⁴⁴ but clear economic success and the absence of a serious threat to party control or to the integrity of the state gave them less traction than Soviet conservatives had. By 1990–91, conservative critics of Gorbachev’s reforms, using increasingly apocalyptic language, denounced the entire reformist enterprise rather than raising specific policy disagreements, and they did so in terms of its practical outcomes – spiraling lawlessness, endemic corruption, declining standards of living, and an imminent threat to the continued existence of both the party and the Soviet state itself.

A further factor distinguishing the capacity for reform in China from that of the Soviet Union lay in the relationship of party and state bureaucracies. In the USSR, according to Moshe Lewin, “the bureaucracy absorbed the party” ⁴⁵ and regularly frustrated the intentions of party leaders. But in China the Communist Party, substantially rebuilt following the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, exercised more effective control over a weakened state bureaucracy. Furthermore, agriculture, [End Page 393] where the most dramatic reforms took shape, had long operated under party rather than state control. ⁴⁶

In addition, the central institutions of the Chinese party-state posed a “less formidable threat to economic reform” than their counterparts in the Soviet Union. ⁴⁷ Chinese central planning had never been as extensive as that of the Soviet Union, covering only about half of the industrial economy with far fewer commodities allocated centrally. ⁴⁸ And during the Cultural Revolution a deliberate decentralization had strengthened local authorities at the expense of the center. A number of state enterprises were turned over to localities

together with a substantial percentage of their profits. And outside the state or planned sector of the economy, “collective” firms, likewise operated by local authorities, were then growing at almost twice the rate of the state sector. The fiscal resources, administrative expertise, and entrepreneurial experience that accumulated at the level of local government encouraged receptivity to reform and laid the foundation for one of the most remarkable aspects of the reform process in China – an enormous surge of rural industrialization in township and village enterprises (TVEs) that cast local governments as a surprising primary agent of economic growth. Nothing of the kind existed in the Soviet Union, where local governments, largely bypassed in the planning process, had few resources and little managerial experience or confidence. They were unable to play the dynamic role that was so instrumental in China’s economic boom.⁴⁹

But these structural factors alone may not entirely account for the remarkable speed with which Gorbachev moved toward political reform. Within just a few years of his accession to power, he was vigorously attacking the party and actively inviting popular pressure against it, while Deng Xiaoping was more quietly assembling a reformist coalition within the party without such a frontal attack upon it. A set of larger historical factors may help to explain this difference in policy approaches. Clearly the Cultural Revolution in China, which had [End Page 394] demoted tens of thousands of party and state officials, sent them to the countryside for re-education by Mao’s mobilized masses, and brought the country to the brink of civil war, decisively shaped Chinese attitudes toward political reform. While it created a large constituency for change, it also generated a strong aversion to disorder, almost an obsession with stability, and an abiding fear of mass participation in political life.⁵⁰ For the cohort that returned to power with Deng, that experience strongly mitigated against active democratization.

In the Soviet Union, the corresponding background experience for men of Gorbachev’s generation had been a post-Stalinist stability and stagnation that provided few warnings of the dangers of political reform and encouraged a belief, now widely seen as naive, that such reform was compatible with continued party control and Soviet unity. The Chinese had fewer such illusions. Furthermore, Western intellectual influences, particularly from the social sciences, were more prominent among the Soviet elite and shaped their thinking about reform far more decisively than in China. Particularly important was the idea that “political and economic reform were inextricably interlinked,” and that liberal democratic values were universally applicable regardless of circumstances.⁵¹ Alexander Yakolev, perhaps the most influential of Gorbachev’s early advisors, spoke of the “synergism of politics and the economy.”⁵² Such thinking reflected a more profound disillusionment with the Soviet system than was found at a comparable level

among Chinese policy makers. Yakolev referred to Bolshevism as “social lunacy” and described it as “an anti-human precept, hammered in with the ruthlessness of an ideological fanaticism that conceals its intellectual and economic nullity.”⁵³ Even Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had early agreed that “everything is rotten” in the Soviet system, and that “it’s no longer possible to live this way.”⁵⁴

This receptivity to Western thinking about the relationship of politics and economics perhaps reflected Russia’s historical involvement in European civilization and the desire of many of its Westernizing intellectuals for acceptance as Europeans. Certainly Gorbachev and [End Page 395] others spoke frequently about a return to “world civilization” or to “normal,” which is to say, Western, political life after wandering in the wasteland of Soviet Communism for seven decades. China’s long and distinctive Confucian tradition and its century of humiliation at the hands of Western imperialism generated no similarly widespread yearnings among the leadership for the political trappings of Western democracy. In short, differences in reform strategy in China and the Soviet Union are explicable in terms of variations in the perceived need for political support outside the party, in differing political-administrative systems, and in diverging historical experiences that shaped different postures toward democratization.

If China and the Soviet Union differed in their reform strategies, they varied also in the kind of social response that those reforms elicited. In his explicitly comparative study, Minxin Pei argues that both countries experienced a “societal takeover,” characterized by a dramatic, even revolutionary, shift in the relationship of state and society. Thus “societal forces, rather than the power of the state . . . determine the character, direction and pace of regime transition.”⁵⁵ In brief, the reform process moved beyond state control in both China and the USSR, but it did so in quite different ways.

In China, the most powerful social response to reform came from the rural areas, featured the country’s vast peasant majority, focused on agriculture, and was largely nonpolitical. Announced in late 1978, Deng’s agricultural reforms sought to boost rural productivity and support overall modernization. These policies, intended to operate within the existing commune structure, offered material incentives to peasants in the form of higher procurement prices and other measures, encouraged family sideline production, and authorized a smaller “work group” of a few families as the basic unit of production. Over the next few years, China’s peasants spontaneously and massively, though not uniformly, rushed through these limited openings and pushed them far further than the reformers had anticipated or desired. While party policy had actually forbidden individual family farming, that in fact is what developed as full decollectivization rolled over rural China. What began as limited household contracts with the

commune became something close to private property as peasants built houses on collective land, rented out portions of it, hired labor, and even bequeathed family plots to their children. Privatization of credit and a vast array of [End Page 396] rural entrepreneurial initiatives, most operated by local governments, soon followed.⁵⁶ And in the wake of all this, agricultural and industrial output boomed dramatically in the rural areas.

China's peasants had compelling motives for seizing the moment, for they were extremely poor. The government itself admitted in 1978 that 100 million peasants did not have enough grain to eat. And most rural areas had experienced little material improvement, despite generally impressive growth rates, as the state siphoned off much of the rural surplus for the benefit of urban industries.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Chinese peasants were excluded from the welfare provisions available to urban dwellers: pensions, medical care, child care, sick leave, and maternity leave.⁵⁸ And since only two decades had passed since collectivization, powerful family obligations and attachment to the ideal of family farming remained strong.⁵⁹

Though these peasant initiatives far outran the original intentions of the reformers, the state generally acquiesced and approved, persuaded by the enormous boost in rural production that they generated. Furthermore, the process involved no direct political challenge to the Party, and even provided the center with new allies in the form of successful farmers and rural entrepreneurs. And quite a number of rural cadres, originally opposed to decollectivization, soon found opportunities for personal enrichment in the process.⁶⁰

All of this contrasted sharply with the situation in the Soviet Union. There agricultural reform took a distinct backseat to urban industrial measures, understandable perhaps in a country with just 14 percent of its labor force in agriculture compared with 71 percent for China.⁶¹ But even more impressively, little rural response greeted the reform openings that were available. The authorization of small rural work units and agricultural leasing opportunities of up to fifty years (more generous than the initial fifteen-year leases in China) prompted [End Page 397] nothing remotely similar to the spontaneous and mass surge toward quasi-private farming in China. By the end of 1992, only 3 percent of Russia's agricultural land was in the hands of private farmers, and by mid-1997 only 6 percent.⁶² How can we explain this "non-response"?

In the first place, massive political opposition emerged from a small army of rural party officials, collective and state-farm chairmen, and their administrative and technical staffs, who had a vested interest in the existing system. Few of them smelled opportunity in the new possibilities as did numbers of rural cadres in China. They argued that only corrupt officials, the

“mafia,” and foreigners would be able to take advantage of private agricultural opportunities, thus dooming the majority of rural residents to ruin. And fiscal centralization provided no incentives for local governments to encourage private-sector growth as a basis for increasing their revenue, while in China new fiscal policies had granted township and village governments rights to certain “residual revenues” that markedly stimulated their entrepreneurial initiatives.⁶³

Perhaps even more important, few Soviet collective or state-farm workers themselves – only 10 percent according to polls – were inclined to seriously consider a plunge into private farming.⁶⁴ Soviet agriculture, after all, had been collectivized for sixty years. Its practitioners had become specialized agricultural workers with no direct experience or memory of what private farming meant. Furthermore, most of the energetic younger people had long ago fled to the cities, leaving an older, conservative, and primarily female labor force behind in the villages. And since the 1960s most collective farmers had become salaried employees whose wages and social benefits had substantially improved. While collectivized agriculture in China had widened the rural-urban gap in living standards, Soviet society had witnessed a narrowing of that divide in the several decades preceding Gorbachev. Unlike the impoverished Chinese peasants, who operated outside of the socialist welfare system, Soviet farmers were reluctant to forgo their newly won security for the vagaries of commercial farming. And policies that made access to machinery and capital highly problematic, and that sharply restricted the independence of “lessees” only added to their reluctance.⁶⁵

[End Page 398]

A Soviet breakthrough or “societal takeover” did occur, but it was urban based and took place in the political arena where it directly challenged both Soviet socialism and the integrity of the Soviet state itself. In response to the opportunities presented by Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and democratization, that breakthrough took the form of a democratic movement increasingly favoring capitalism and demanding an end to Communist Party dominance; a labor movement that loosely allied itself with the democrats and challenged the central premise of the “workers’ state”; and a growing array of nationalist movements seeking first “sovereignty,” and then independence. Much as Chinese peasants pushed agricultural reform far further than the leadership envisaged, the democratic, labor, and nationalist movements in the USSR took perestroika far beyond Gorbachev’s original intentions. A further set of allies took shape in the Eastern European movements that overthrew Communist rule and Soviet dominance in 1989. While the Chinese state could acquiesce in, and even benefit from the unorganized and non-political surge of rural initiative, the Soviet state and its Communist Party confronted a set of related, organized, and directly political

movements that wrenched control of the reform agenda out of the hands of the leadership.

How did the Chinese avoid such an outcome? In the first place, China's reformist leadership was intimately tied to the beginnings of Chinese communism, while Gorbachev represented the third generation of Soviet leaders. Thus the Chinese were more reluctant to break decisively with a past that directly provided their own legitimacy.⁶⁶ Furthermore, as a much less developed and urbanized society, China had a proportionately smaller intelligentsia and one that was more socially isolated from other segments of Chinese society than its Soviet counterpart. By 1990, less than 0.65 percent of the population were university graduates.⁶⁷ And the small democratic movement in China was disproportionately student based and made few efforts to connect to the peasant majority of the country in contrast to the much more broadly based democratic movement in the USSR. Thus Chinese democrats were unable to forge the kind of broad, though loose, oppositional coalition that Soviet democrats, nationalists, and labor leaders temporarily created.⁶⁸ In the Soviet Union it was the entrepreneurial [End Page 399] elites that were socially isolated, highly suspect, and unable to spark a broad movement of economic improvement such as had occurred in China. Widespread opposition to the small but growing "cooperative" movement of private businesses emerged from many local authorities, from elements of the central state, and from much of the broader public, a pattern that contrasted sharply with the entrepreneurial initiatives of local governments in China that were enabled by supportive central policies.⁶⁹

A further, and perhaps decisive, factor that enabled China to avoid the fate of the Soviet Union was its astonishing economic growth, a process that greased the skids of reform and provided at least some solvent for the tensions of that process. Rising standards of living, improved incomes, better diets, declining poverty, lower mortality rates, and a diminished rural-urban gap – all of this surely contributed to the legitimacy of the communist regime, despite regional inequalities, cadre-peasant conflicts, and widespread corruption. And initial economic success confirmed China's leadership in a strategy that separated economic from political reform. But in the Soviet Union the sharp contraction of the economy by 1990 – experienced as massive shortages, growing inflation, and fear of unemployment – pushed the leadership toward more radical political measures and exacerbated all of its other tensions.⁷⁰ It discredited the Communist Party as incompetent as well as corrupt; it fostered a regional and local protectionism that deprived the central state of needed revenues and shattered the highly interdependent Soviet economy; and it encouraged a weakened state to continue subsidies and to make wage settlements that were highly inflationary. A "virtuous" Chinese cycle of

growth and political stability stood in sharp contrast to a “vicious” Soviet cycle of depression and instability.⁷¹

And since the Soviet state, unlike its Chinese counterpart, had officially endorsed the new political opportunities, it was hard pressed to restrain them once they gathered force. The August 1991 coup attempt demonstrated that even the most conservative forces had lost the will, and perhaps the ability, to crack down decisively as Chinese authorities clearly had not. The PLA was ultimately responsive to Communist Party directives to crush the Tienanmen demonstrations [End Page 400] in 1989, while Soviet security forces were hesitant, divided, and unwilling to assume a similar role in 1991.

Finally, of course, the clear demographic difference between a highly diverse and ethnically organized Soviet Union, that lay many aggrieved “nations in the making,” and a far more homogeneous China meant that China simply did not experience ethnic or national separatism to a point that seriously polarized the leadership or threatened the state. Regional conflicts, occasioned by differing levels of economic growth and competition for scarce resources, generally lacked the explosive dimension of ethno-nationalist assertion that proved the undoing of the Soviet Union.⁷² But the growth of such movements in Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and elsewhere on China’s northwest borderlands during the 1980s and 1990s suggests that the difference was one of scale, not of kind.⁷³

A third difference between Soviet and Chinese experiences with reform lies, of course, in their economic outcomes. Those differences are startling by any measure. China’s rates of economic growth hovered in the remarkable 9–10 percent range for most of the 1980s and 1990s with inflation largely in check, while Soviet/Russian growth rates, sharply negative since 1989, were accompanied by massive and worsening inflation into the 1990s, a pattern that represented the deepest depression of any peacetime economy in the twentieth century. In the international arena, Chinese trade boomed, while that of the USSR/Russia contracted dramatically. Chinese economic success has lifted out of poverty “a Japan, two Britains or half an America,”⁷⁴ providing much-improved housing and diet, while Soviet/Russian economic failure has clearly diminished the material quality of life for a substantial percentage of its population. China lowered its already impressive mortality rates, while life expectancy in Russia, especially for men, dropped into the mid- to high fifties, and Russia’s population contracted.

Efforts to explain these diverging economic trajectories, a far more difficult task than describing them, have generated a contentious debate, both academic and political, with no consensus in sight. One [End Page 401] approach has focused on a variety of prior conditions that allegedly enhanced China’s capacity for successful economic reform, while limiting that of the

Soviet Union. For example, some have cited China's location near the dynamic economies of East Asia and the presence of a large Chinese overseas community with money, entrepreneurial experience, and technical knowledge that was available to China's reformers. Others have suggested that China's largely agrarian economy and relative "backwardness" was an advantage, allowing it to make a quick agricultural breakthrough with little investment and to draw upon a large pool of rural and cheap labor as a source of economic growth unavailable to an "over-industrialized" Soviet Union.⁷⁵ China's Maoist legacy with its decentralized administration and history of rural industrialization may likewise have provided "more space for autonomous economic activity" once reforms began, as compared to the more rigidly centralized and more completely state-run Soviet economy.⁷⁶ China's less extensive social safety net, that applied to only about 20 percent of the population, represented a far lighter fiscal burden and a greater incentive for popular initiative than the Soviet Union's universal welfare system. And China's centuries-long entrepreneurial and mercantile tradition had little parallel in old Russia where the state, rather than private enterprise, had been the primary motor of economic change. Anders Aslund has taken this "preconditions" approach to its logical conclusion, arguing that the Soviet Union's longer experience under Communism, its consequently more serious structural deformities, and the ability of an entrenched bureaucracy to obstruct reforms from the top rendered the country "no longer reformable," and ensured the failure of piecemeal gradualist efforts.⁷⁷

The problem with such an approach lies in its selectivity, for it is possible to identify a set of Soviet advantages and Chinese disadvantages as well. The USSR, for example, had a far larger pool of highly trained scientists and engineers compared to a less-developed China, which had lost years of educational development during the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. And the experience of Eastern Europe, where the more highly developed socialist economies such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic have outperformed the less-developed [End Page 402] Albania or Romania, certainly does not suggest that "backwardness" is an automatic advantage. Furthermore, China's huge and growing population and its current age structure generated a very low level of farmland per capita, and required a very high level of economic growth simply to keep up with population increase. Finally, an exclusive focus on varying "preconditions" neglects fundamental similarities in the two countries. Both had enormous resources tied up in their military/defense sectors; both had incentive and planning systems that stifled economic initiative in relatively well-educated populations. In a thoughtful review of the whole "preconditions" approach, Peter Nolan concluded that both "possessed huge catch-up possibilities."⁷⁸

If varying preconditions alone do not explain differential outcomes, what about state policies and practices? Many scholars have credited China's startling performance to a distinct model of economic transition that evolved over the two decades after 1978. That model, characterized by Barry Naughton as "growing out of the plan," permitted the market to emerge gradually outside of the state sector in decollectivized farms, in township and village enterprises, in a private service sector, and in Special Enterprise Zones that welcomed foreign investment, all the while maintaining the state sector intact. A gradual decontrol of prices, a slow dismantling of the planning system, the maintenance of fiscal stability, and a refusal to actively consider outright privatization likewise informed the Chinese approach. On the political side, while the state loosened its control over society, the leadership's virtual obsession with order and stability meant a commitment to rebuilding a party structure badly damaged by the Cultural Revolution, a refusal to pursue democratization at the central level, and a willingness to use force to repress dissent.

Soviet policies, lasting only six years in contrast to more than twenty in China, ultimately departed from virtually every aspect of Chinese practice despite broad similarities at the beginning. Most fundamentally, the Soviet leadership – viewing the party/state bureaucracy as unalterably opposed to reform – deliberately dismantled major aspects of the socialist economic mechanism well before a functioning market system had emerged to provide essential coordinating functions. Even before the Party's legal monopoly was ended in 1990, Gorbachev had reduced the Central Committee Secretariat from twenty to nine departments, dropping all of those dealing with the economy except agriculture. And local party committees were told to stop meddling [End Page 403] in the economic affairs of their regions, thus losing their primary *raison d'être*. On the state side, the planning process was curtailed by the Law on State Enterprises in 1987, and by 1990 the number of products allocated centrally dropped sharply as the country's supply system disintegrated. In 1991, both Gosplan, with overall planning responsibility, and Gosnab, which handled supply relationships among enterprises, were abolished. At the same time, a radicalization of economic debate, enabled by the permissive policies of *glasnost* and stimulated by increasingly critical economic conditions, evolved rapidly among economists and intellectuals, generally in favor of a full and rapid transition toward capitalism. Although Gorbachev rejected the "500-Day Plan" that embodied this radicalization, he publicly embraced its central principles of price liberalization and widespread privatization of state assets. And many party/state officials, sensing the general direction of events, began to use their official positions, connections, and new opportunities to engage in foreign trade and to initiate the process widely known as *nomenklatura* privatization.⁷⁹ Gorbachev and Soviet reformist intellectuals have been much criticized for believing that a

market system would magically emerge if the old structures were dismantled, and for failing to appreciate “that a functioning market depends on government and law.”⁸⁰

In addition to these deliberate policies, which diverged sharply from the Chinese approach, the Soviet economy suffered from the indirect and unexpected effects of still other policies. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, clearly enabled by Gorbachev’s “new thinking,” disrupted a substantial amount of Soviet trade. Even more important, the growing autonomy of many Soviet republics and even cities, a process made possible by glasnost and democratization, meant an unwillingness to meet contractual obligations or even to submit prescribed amounts of revenue to Moscow. In large measure, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist as an integrated economic space well before it collapsed politically.

Nor was the Soviet Union able to maintain fiscal balance as a stronger Chinese state had done. A weakened state, especially one professing workers’ democracy, was ill equipped to restrain wage demands from an increasingly militant labor movement. Enterprises [End Page 404] partly freed from central control awarded their workers large wage increases. The country’s anti-alcohol campaign cut sharply into state revenues, as did the declining world market price of oil, revenue shortfalls from the republics, and Gorbachev’s unwillingness to raise prices. During 1989 to 1991, these factors combined to produce growing budget deficits, pervasive consumer shortages, and rapidly mounting inflation. The Soviet economy was spiraling downward, a descent that the subsequent policies of shock therapy only worsened.

And finally, unlike the Chinese, the Soviet leadership proved unwilling to use force to keep the reform process within the bounds of existing socialism. Why? Gorbachev’s desire to humanize and democratize Soviet socialism and make it consonant with Western values, his “freedom to choose” rhetoric, and the success of glasnost in discrediting the brutalities of Soviet history – all of this served to delegitimize the use of force as the basis for political order. It set a new standard for Soviet political behavior, that apparently affected even the leaders of the August Coup.

Beyond this, however, lies the declining “self-legitimacy” of the Soviet elite. Over the several decades preceding Gorbachev’s accession to power, a harsh Stalinist order had become a “corrupt and sloppy bureaucracy, full of cynicism and self-seeking”⁸¹ that real commitment to Marxism-Leninism was vanishingly rare. Influenced by the relative security of their own positions, more communication with the West, the moderating of the Cold War, and the growing discrepancy between ideology and reality, many among the Soviet elite simply ceased to believe.⁸² The revelations of the Gorbachev era only

diminished that belief further. Until virtually the end, defenders of the old order had the means to halt the reform process, for the structures of the party, the KGB, the internal security forces, and the military remained in place. What they lacked was the will to use them decisively.

Perhaps the need to use them was diminishing as well, for weakening state structures and a dawning capitalist society offered to many in the party/state elite the wealth and security of private property that neither the old Soviet order nor a reformed democratic socialism were likely to provide. A substantial majority of this Soviet elite had come to embrace capitalism, and most of the new business class by the early [End Page 405] 1990s had their origins in Soviet officialdom. The result was a “bank run” that party officials and industrial managers transferred state assets out of the state sector in a largely uncontrolled and corrupt process of “spontaneous privatization” that was well underway before the political disintegration of the country. For many in the Soviet elite, a change in the social system certainly did not mean a loss of social position. Little wonder they did not resist, and even led this “revolution from above.”⁸³ In China, by contrast, the emergence of Township and Village Enterprises, distinctively combining enterprise management and local governments, provided incentives for “cadre-entrepreneur” to pursue their new commercial interests within the state sector.⁸⁴ Thus China decentralized without disintegration, an achievement that the Soviet Union found impossible.

The Soviet collapse represented a singular phenomenon in the world of the late twentieth century. The extent and rapidity of that collapse was unprecedented, involving the simultaneous demise of a huge state, the disintegration of a ruling party, the breakdown of an economic system, and the exhaustion and repudiation of an official socialist world view – all within a few years. And the consequences of that collapse – both geo-political and ideological – have been enormous and global in their implications. But the terminal experience of the Soviet Union was also embedded in the larger patterns of a century that it had so decisively shaped. Like other empires, it too confronted the corrosive impact of anti-imperialist nationalism; like other authoritarian regimes, it responded to the increasingly prevalent discourse of democracy; and like other communist states, it attempted to address the accumulated dysfunctions of its command economy and highly intrusive party-based polity. Viewing these processes through the lens of comparative world history discloses both the distinctive features of late Soviet history, and elements of similarity with analogous developments elsewhere. In doing so, world history provides a rich context for what will surely be a long discussion about the meaning of the Soviet experience and its passing into history.

Notes

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6. Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 265.
7. Jerry Hough, "Understanding Gorbachev: The Importance of Politics," *Soviet Economy*, 7:2 (1991): 102; David Laitin, "The National Uprising in the Soviet Union," *World Politics*, 44 (October 1991): 139-77.
8. Ogonek, 43 (October 1989): 4-5.
9. John-Paul Himka, "Nationality Problems in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union: The Perspective of History," in Rudolph and Good, *Nationalism and Empire*, p. 82.
10. Geoffrey Hosking, "The Freudian Frontier," *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 10, 1995, p. 27. See also Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*,

- 1552–1917 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 41, and Roman Szporluk, “The Fall of the Tsarist Empire and the USSR,” in Dawisha and Parrott, *The End of Empire*, pp. 65–66, 70. Anatoly M. Khazanov, *After the USSR* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 239 compares the Russian identification with the USSR with the Turkish identification with the Ottoman Empire.
11. Leokadia Drobizheva, “Perestroika and the Ethnic Consciousness of Russians,” in *From Union to Commonwealth*, ed. Gail W. Lapidus et. al (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 101.
 12. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia*.
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 14. Mark Beissinger, “State Building in the Shadow of an Empire-State: The Soviet Legacy in Post-Soviet Politics,” in Dawisha and Parrott, *The End of Empire?*, p. 166.
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