

Chapter 4

The Soviet Collapse and the Charm of Hindsight

Rodric Braithwaite

Those on the spot always get some things wrong: memory later betrays them. Those who subsequently try to disentangle the story always miss part of the context. In politics, perceptions and emotions are as important as reason. The theme of what follows is that we cannot understand the causes and consequences of the Soviet collapse unless we take every account of its deep roots in the past and the strong emotions that accompanied it. It is of course imprudent, or even impertinent, for foreigners to pontificate about how “most Russians” think or feel. But it is an essential part of the story.

In this deliberately personal account I attempt to recreate how the collapse looked to me at the time and in the aftermath, drawing on a detailed diary, my reporting to London, and on later writings.

I. How it Looked at the Time

A Kind of Democracy

Poland shows the way

I witnessed two attempts to bring a kind of democracy to the communist world. The Polish experiment of the late 1950s and the Soviet experiment of the late 1980s are now largely forgotten or ignored. Both are significant for the history of the time, and for an understanding of the events of today.

In October 1956 the Poles expelled their Soviet advisers, abolished the collective farms, allowed people to travel abroad, and gave a degree of freedom to the press. They were encouraged by Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin, and driven by a combination of patriotism, a

liberal faction inside the Party, and an alliance between students and workers. When I arrived in Warsaw in February 1959 the secret police were still demoralized. We had almost complete freedom to make Polish friends. Even the communists among them talked about such hitherto taboo subjects as the Soviets' massacre of Polish officers at Katyn, their betrayal of the Warsaw Rising, the ruthless way they had imposed their rule in Eastern Europe.

Our friends hoped that Poland would lead the way to a social-democratic communism they could live with. But as my wife Jill and I left Warsaw in Summer 1961, they told us sadly that their achievements would wither unless their "neighbors" to the East changed in fundamental ways. They watched aghast as the Russians suppressed reform in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. But they did not give up. In the late 1970s students, workers and intellectuals formed a new alliance in the Solidarity movement. Martial law in 1981 failed to snuff it out. By autumn 1988 Solidarity was maneuvering towards a power-sharing deal with the communists.

The East Europeans were unconvinced when, at the 19th Conference of the Soviet Communist Party in June 1988 Gorbachev clearly indicated that they could find their own way: "The imposition from outside, by any means, let alone military force, of a social system, or a way of life, is a dangerous trapping [доспехи] of the past." Even in Poland formal negotiations between communists and opposition began only after the Soviet elections of March 1989 demonstrated that the "neighbors" were indeed changing. The Poles held free elections in June, the communists were comprehensively defeated, and Poland formed the first non-communist government in the bloc. By the end of 1990 the other countries of Eastern Europe had followed, and the bloc dissolved.

The Russians Catch Up—Slowly

By the time I arrived in Moscow in September 1988, Gorbachev had launched a whirlwind of political reform. The press was transformed, almost scurrilous in its attacks on public abuse though still careful to spare the top leadership. Nothing, it seemed, was sacrosanct. The Chairman of the State Bank remarked to me that October: "I'm a Party

member of forty years standing. But I don't see how we can have proper guarantees as long as the Party has a monopoly of power." My official drivers, Sasha and Konstantin, freely criticized Gorbachev to me in private (I naturally assumed that both reported on our conversations to the authorities. After the Soviet collapse Konstantin told the Russian press that for seventeen years he had reported to the KGB on successive British ambassadors).

History became a national obsession. People joked that the Soviet Union was a country with an unpredictable past. Individuals burrowed in hitherto closed archives to reveal the details of Stalin's crimes. Almost everyone, after all, had lost friends and relatives under his brutal regime. Now at last they could find out what had happened to them, and discuss their fates in public without fear of the consequences.

In his chapter in this volume, Roderic Lyne describes the emotional reaction of audiences at *Krutoi Marsbrut*, the dramatized version of Evgenia Ginsburg's memoir of the gulag, which premiered in March 1989. After one performance the young son of a Russian friend of ours had nightmares in which he heard the women prisoners screaming as they were beaten by the guards. Such memories do not go away: *Krutoi Marsbrut* is still running in Moscow.

Some thought that the process of uncovering the past was going too far: it was becoming impossible for people to take pride in their country's history. Others thought it was not going far enough. In December 1988 I called on Yuri Afanasiev, the Rector of the State Historical Archives Institute, and an organizer of the massive street demonstrations which followed. He was firm: the process was still entirely inadequate. It would not be complete until Lenin and the Revolution as well as Stalin had been demythologized. Afanasiev accepted that Gorbachev could not simply set the myths aside: that would give his enemies a lever against him. But any attempt to ban the public debate would now be harder to impose. There would be resistance and probably bloodshed.

It seemed like Warsaw all over again, a place where one could live and work and talk almost as if it were a normal country. It was a time of exhilarating hope, but also of deep apprehension. Like Afanasiev, most of our friends worried that Gorbachev's experiment could end in bloodshed and civil war: fears exacerbated by the massacre on Tiananmen Square in Peking in June 1989, and the bloody end to the Com-

munist regime in Romania the following December. It was hard for any of us to keep a proper sense of detachment: Jill and I found ourselves emotionally committed to Gorbachev, and I may have been less than fair to his rival, Yeltsin, in consequence.

It had not been like that when we lived in Khrushchev's Moscow in the 1960s, still largely closed to us despite his attempts at reform. Then too there was hope. Khrushchev understood that something needed to be done about the obvious and growing weaknesses in the Soviet system. He permitted a genuine though limited economic debate. But his ill-considered remedies failed to deliver. In October 1964 he was overthrown without warning by a combination of the barons in the Party, the army, and the KGB. *Pravda* reported laconically that he had asked to be relieved of his duties "in view of his advanced age and the deterioration of his health."

Under Khrushchev's successor Brezhnev the Soviet Union enjoyed nearly two decades of apparent domestic stability and international success. But the weaknesses ran deep. Sakharov told Brezhnev in 1970 that unless the "bureaucratic, ritualistic, dogmatic, openly hypocritical, and mediocre style" that governed Soviet life were replaced by "democratization, with its fullness of information and clash of ideas," the Soviet Union would become a second-rate provincial power. In 1974 the Chairman of the State Planning Committee warned that the economy was in serious trouble. A decade later the Soviet Union was in seventy-seventh place in the world for per capita consumption.¹

Such facts could not be ignored. In March 1985 the Politburo chose Gorbachev—young, energetic, effective, and apparently orthodox—to put things right.

But Gorbachev had more radical ideas, many rooted in the debate which flourished briefly under Khrushchev. He believed that the economy was being strangled by bureaucratic central planning. Defense expenditure was a crippling burden. It would have to be reduced. That would only be possible if the Cold War, hideously dangerous in itself, could be brought under control.

Gorbachev spoke with unprecedented frankness and at first people flocked to hear him. But his initial policies were rooted in the Sovi-

et past. The economy continued to decline. People increasingly complained that he was doing nothing to halt it.

Then in 1988 he set out on what amounted to a revolution in Soviet politics. Soviet elections had been mere rituals: electors voted in droves for the only available candidate lest they be penalized at work. He now persuaded the Party that new elections should be held at which voters could choose freely between at least two candidates for each post. There would be restrictions: for example, seats would be reserved for the Central Committee, academicians, and others. (This is, of course, a gross simplification of Gorbachev's complicated proposals).

The intense campaigning which followed involved lively public meetings, noisy TV debates, dirty tricks, and other trappings of genuine democracy. We attended a rally in support of Gorbachev's critic Yeltsin, who was standing for a large Moscow constituency. It mustered perhaps forty thousand people carrying nationalist flags and banners attacking the Party. One slogan was "Bread and Freedom," the traditional cry of Russians on the verge of rebellion.

The vote took place peacefully on March 26, 1988. The results were spectacular. One in four of the powerful Obkom (Regional) Party Secretaries were defeated. The local leaderships in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev were massacred. Senior military commanders lost the seats they had always held by right. Yeltsin was elected by four fifths of the voters in his seven million strong constituency. By contrast Gorbachev was only elected by the six hundred-odd members of the Central Committee. His political legitimacy began to crumble.

"It was not," I told London, "a genuine democratic election as we understand it. The overwhelming majority of the candidates came from one party, the Communist Party. In one constituency in four there was only one candidate... Yet the election has aroused genuine public interest and participation in the political process unprecedented since the 1920s."²

The Congress of People's Deputies opened on May 25, 1988. The deputies relentlessly lambasted the leadership, including Gorbachev himself. They accused the Party of corruption, the government of gross mismanagement. They called the invasion of Afghanistan a shameful crime and assailed the KGB for murder and torture. The proceedings

were broadcast live. For two weeks people were glued to their TV sets and transistors. The national economy suffered accordingly.

The euphoria soon dissipated as the economy continued to spiral downwards and strikes spread across the country. But people were still determined to make their voices heard. Tens of thousands demonstrated against the Party's political monopoly: Konstantin and Jill marched with them. The communists yielded. In March 1991 the constitution was changed. Political pluralism was no longer illegal.

A kind of fragile democracy had arrived, thanks not least to the sustained pressure of ordinary people. But the gloom and apprehension continued: one Russian friend told us after the annual Victory Parade in May 1991 that the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany was the only occasion on which the Soviet people could still feel happy and proud of their history.

The Failing Economy

Gorbachev never got a grip on the economy. He took advice from good economists, but may not have fully understood it, and took no decisive action because he feared that a botched reform would simply lead to widespread hardship. The unreformed Soviet economy began to enter free fall. Even basic commodities failed to reach the shops. By the autumn of 1990 there was a real surge of sympathy among ordinary people in the West for their counterparts in the Soviet Union—though most Russians still do not believe that. Dutch TV organized a charity telethon to produce food. Private citizens in Britain collected a million books for Soviet libraries. Western governments organized technical aid programs and arranged to supply food directly to Soviet consumers. Bypassing the central Soviet government, which they regarded as incompetent and corrupt, they sent teams of monitors to check that the aid was reaching its destination. Some of the monitors were former or current soldiers: inevitably the Russians suspected they were spies. Soviet ministers forced themselves through gritted teeth to accept these conditions with gratitude. But by 1992 the Commander of the Northern Fleet, Admiral Gromov, was asking the Norwegians to supply his sailors with humanitarian aid.³ Humiliation could go little further.

Even under these conditions, Western aid was not always efficiently distributed or gratefully received. We spent a night in May 1992 as guests of Father Oleg, an ill-disciplined priest who had been exiled by his bishop to a muddy parish north of Moscow. Oleg told us that there had been a great local scandal over aid brought in by the Germans, who had thrown sweets to the local children and then filmed them scrabbling over the handfuls. Aid from Exeter in Britain turned out to consist of flea-ridden old clothes. The only successful operation was when a French group sent the aid to Oleg directly, and he was able to distribute it through the parish. Such stories multiplied in the Russian press, and were naturally resented.

As Soviet finances spiraled out of control in 1991, Gorbachev pressed the Americans and the rest of the Group of Seven (G-7) for money to plug the gap. The G-7 consists of the major capitalist countries, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and the United States, whose leaders meet annually to discuss political and economic questions. Although the Japanese and to some extent the Americans were initially opposed, the British, who held the chair, successfully pushed for Gorbachev to be invited to the G-7 meeting in London in July 1991. Prime Minister John Major sent a senior British Treasury official beforehand to explain to Gorbachev that the G-7 could not help him effectively until his government adopted a plausible plan of economic reform. There would be no money on the table in London. If he asked for it, he would be rebuffed: a political humiliation. He ignored the advice and sent his own senior official to London to promote his case on the British media. The G-7 leaders turned him down just the same. They sugared the pill with a vague promise to facilitate Russian access to advice from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund: bricks without straw which all concerned had to present as a success.

The coup took place within weeks of Gorbachev's return from London. A few days after it failed, he called me into the Kremlin late at night. Still clearly in a state of shock from his experiences in the Crimea, he told me that the country was on the brink of financial collapse. It needed \$2 billion new credits in the next two-three weeks, the rescheduling of its debt, and urgent help with food and pharmaceutical supplies. The West had spent \$100 billion on the Gulf War that spring: now he was asking it to make a small insurance payment against the failure of his reforms and a return to the aggressive Soviet Union of

the past. I could only tell him what he had already heard in London: no money without a viable plan. It was a harsh line but, I still think, inevitable. John Major repeated it a few days later, when he became the first Western politician to visit Moscow after the coup.

By January 1992, however, Yeltsin was in charge of Russia, and his Deputy Prime Minister Gaidar was trying to implement a courageous reform program. He too asked for financial support: \$13 billion. My American colleague Bob Strauss and I sent eloquent telegrams to our governments, pointing out that the G-7 condition had now been met, and that we should come up with the money. Our advice was ignored: the Americans argued that they were having their own economic problems and that Congress would inevitably oppose the request.

Encouraged by Britain's apparently greater sympathy for Russia's plight, Gaidar then asked the British to sponsor its application for membership of the IMF and the World Bank. I and my Treasury colleagues from London found ourselves in the bizarre situation of sitting with Gaidar in the former offices of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, coordinating tactics to get around continued opposition from the Americans and others. We succeeded. On April 2 the Moscow press announced the "Sensational success of the Russian Government: Russia will ... be accepted into the IMF."⁴

The previous day President Bush had finally announced a \$24 billion aid package, backed by other G-7 countries. It was less generous than it looked, because much of it consisted of repayable loans already promised.

It didn't work. By the end of 1992, as he had predicted, Gaidar had lost his job and inflation was approaching 3000%. Army officers, doctors, teachers and pensioners went unpaid for months at a time. Factory workers were paid, if at all, in kind not cash: we saw women workers lined up along one of the main roads out of Moscow trying to sell carpets produced by their factory, some carrying pornographic designs. Old ladies sold their family possessions on the sidewalks in the capital. Russian newspapers reported that conscripts in the navy had died of malnutrition.⁵

The Lurch to the Right

It was always obvious, not least to Gorbachev himself, that unless he was cautious and lucky he might easily go the way of Khrushchev.

In January 1989 Sakharov told the German press that Gorbachev was about to be overthrown. I wrote to London that Gorbachev's political and economic difficulties were piling up. He might have to trim his policies. We might have no advance warning of his fall. Russian nationalists, backed perhaps by the military, might attempt to reassert national discipline, and imperial power. A return to repression or even bloodshed was not impossible. The ascendancy of these people would nevertheless be nasty and brutish, but short. The underlying reasons for change would not go away. Eventually reform would have to be resumed. The Foreign Office thought I was too complacent.

Rumors of coups continued to succeed one another, stoked by sensational reporting in the West. In autumn 1990 troops maneuvered around the capital, for reasons never satisfactorily explained. Two disaffected army officers publicly called Gorbachev a traitor. Fifty-three senior deputies to the Congress called for Presidential rule to hold the Union together. The head of the KGB warned that the CIA was trying to disrupt the economy. The forces of law and order, he said with menace, would prevent chaos and anarchy.

Russia's liberals increasingly switched their support to Yeltsin. Gorbachev began to lose his closest allies. He sacked his liberal interior minister. His foreign minister Shevardnadze resigned, and warned of impending dictatorship. Gorbachev recruited replacements from among the reactionary barons of the KGB, the army, and the Party.

Under their influence, he put increasing pressure on the obstreperous Balts, who had been massively demonstrating for independence since 1988 at least.⁶ In January 1991, Soviet special forces killed thirteen people in Vilnius. The liberal press in Moscow bitterly blamed Gorbachev. He must have known, I told London. Either he had backed the attack, or he had acquiesced in an initiative of the reactionaries, or he had lost control. But he could not escape the responsibility.

Two months later Yeltsin called a massive demonstration to demand that Gorbachev step down. Gorbachev banned it. Troops massed on

the Moscow streets. Bloodshed seemed imminent. Gorbachev blinked and withdrew the soldiers. He then tried to regain the political center. But his authority declined still further.

Gorbachev's priority was now to get the Union republics to agree to a treaty to preserve the Union. But the Ukrainians, the Balts, and the Caucasians were adamantly opposed to any hint of federalism. The hard men were opposed to any weakening of centralized rule. Gorbachev maneuvered desperately between them to find a text that would gain general support.

His time had run out. On August 18 conspirators from the Party, the army, and the KGB—the combination that had overthrown Khrushchev—put him under arrest in his Crimean holiday home, moved tanks into Moscow, and formed an emergency administration.

Their coup turned into a fiasco. They failed to arrest Yeltsin, who defied them from the Russian government building, the White House. His supporters flocked in their thousands to defend him: they included my two official drivers and my wife. Perhaps because Gorbachev had allowed them to think independently, the soldiers and secret policemen were divided among themselves. Unwilling to shed blood, they lost their nerve and withdrew the tanks.

Gorbachev returned to Moscow. But it was Yeltsin who won the game. Throughout the autumn he ruthlessly whittled away at Gorbachev's authority. He claimed until the last, perhaps genuinely, that he wanted some kind of Union to survive. But he had long been exploring—perhaps as a lever against Gorbachev—a draft treaty between the Slav republics, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. On December 8, 1991, without warning, he, the Ukrainian leader Kravchuk, and their Belarus colleague Shushkevich met to declare that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. On Christmas Day 1991 Gorbachev resigned and we watched from the embassy window as the Soviet flag was replaced over the Kremlin by the flag of Russia.

Ironically, in attempting to preserve the Union the conspirators had accelerated its final collapse.

The End of Empire

Once the idea of national independence takes hold it is almost impossible to eliminate, as the British discovered in the last decades of their empire. Gorbachev's loosening of political constraints enabled the republics to express their discontent with Russian rule.

These trends were visible to domestic and foreign observers alike. Soon after my arrival I wrote myself a note: "We are witnessing the breakup of the last great European empire...The key could be the Ukraine. It has remained comparatively—and ominously—quiet so far. If it is now on the move, the consequences could be grim indeed."

Ukraine was slower off the mark than the Balts. But its eventual defection sealed the fate of the Soviet experiment. In autumn 1988 it was still run by Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, a hardline disciplinarian. Soon Gorbachev ejected him for someone more flexible. Before our eyes hitherto orthodox Ukrainian Communists began to shift their views. The foreign minister and the ideology secretary told a visiting British minister in January 1989 that Ukrainians wanted autonomy, but no more. But the nationalists with whom we dined that evening talked of outright independence.

That summer thousands of demonstrators carrying the Ukrainian national flag picketed the Supreme Soviet in Kiev and denounced the Party leadership. I asked Konstantin if it was a revolution or only a rebellion. The people are just getting into practice, he replied. In July 1989 the Supreme Soviet passed a Declaration on Ukrainian Sovereignty, for the time only symbolic.

In September 1990 we visited Lvov, in fiercely nationalist Western Ukraine. The nationalists had taken control. One of them asserted that an independent Ukraine would reject the unpleasant Ukrainian tradition of anti-Semitism. I was skeptical, but he was right. Ukraine now has a Jewish President and a Jewish Prime Minister.⁷ The local communists, by contrast, were thoroughly demoralized, huddling in a couple of rooms that they had been allowed to keep in the palatial former Party Headquarters. At the end of October student demonstrators forced the resignation of the Ukrainian prime minister.

By March 1991 Kravchuk, the self-confident new Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, still claimed to favor the Union. But he and his colleagues were already determined that it should be their kind of Union, where the Republics controlled their own resources, and delegated only the most limited powers to the center.

After the failure of the coup against Gorbachev, the Ukrainians announced that their country would become independent in December 1991. Throughout that autumn they refused to cooperate in talks with Russia on long-term political and economic links. The Union was doomed.

Yeltsin had publicly supported the Balts during their struggles against Moscow, and he quickly recognized their sovereignty. Immediately after the coup he called in the European ambassadors to meet Lennart Meri, Estonia's new foreign minister and later its president. Meri and his family had been deported to Siberia in 1940, but survived. He told us with much emotion that he had always opposed the Soviet regime, but had never abandoned his admiration for the Russian people, whose sufferings he had shared and whose culture was an integral part of his life. It was a moving occasion and seemed like a good omen.

But Yeltsin's handling of Ukraine was more scratchy. The coup was barely over before the Russians started quarrelling with the Ukrainians—over Crimea, the disposal of the Black Sea fleet, the division of responsibility for Soviet debt. They threatened to raise frontier issues. The Ukrainians accused them of old-fashioned imperialism. Yeltsin sent his people to Kiev to soothe things down: but he himself was making similar remarks in private.

Our Russian friends were increasingly distressed. Gorbachev's diplomatic adviser Anatoly Chernyaev, wise and liberal, told me that though Russia might be going through a bad time, the reality was that in a decade or so, Russia would reassert itself as the dominant force in its own huge geopolitical area. If the Ukrainians were too provocative—over Crimea for example—Yeltsin (whom Chernyaev did not admire) would have to assert Russia's position, perhaps even with force. As a Russian, Chernyaev could not imagine a future in which Ukraine and Russia were separated.

Chernyaev's feelings were widely shared. Gorbachev, Yeltsin and the Kazakh leader Nazarbaev all said in private that they believed something like the Union would eventually be reconstituted. One acquaintance said that the breakup of the Union profaned a thousand years of Russian history: no Russian could accept it. Others repeated an entrenched Russian view that the Ukrainians and their language were merely a peasant version of Russian. The Russian parliament condemned the cession of the Crimea by Khrushchev to Ukraine in 1954 as unconstitutional. A young couple told us they strongly agreed: Crimea had always belonged to the Russians, or perhaps to the Tatars, but never to the Ukrainians. In early January I warned the Prime Minister's office in London—with deliberate exaggeration, to make a point—that war between Russia and Ukraine was not impossible.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine that blew up two decades later had very deep roots.

II. The Charm of Hindsight

Despite the passage of time and the accumulation of new documentary material, there is still no consensus on the reasons for the Soviet collapse. Was the collapse inevitable? Could it have been averted by a more competent or ruthless Soviet government? How far was it the result of intense political and economic pressure from the Americans? Could better Western policy have eased Russia's path into the "Western" community, or were the later antagonisms between Russia and the West unavoidable?

Some argue that the Soviet Union could have staggered on, perhaps for decades. Others argue that the collapse was foreseeable and foreseen. Despite her reputation as an Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher was one of those who believed that the Soviet Union's days were numbered.⁸ One reason for Western failure to foresee the collapse was the systematic tendency of Western intelligence estimates to exaggerate the military and economic prowess of the Soviet Union, its stability, and the aggressive intentions of its leaders. Few, including myself, foresaw the timing of the collapse when it finally came.⁹

Such questions will never be finally resolved. We are, after all, still arguing about the reasons for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

Western Policy

The negotiations between the West and the Soviet Union in its last five years were not exchanges between equals. By the early 1980s the Soviet Union was suffering from imperial overstretch, domestic decay, and technical backwardness even in the military sphere, while its arch-rival, the United States, was richer and politically more resilient, had more powerful and widely-flung military forces, and an array of cooperative allies. Marshall Ogarkov, the Soviet Chief of Staff, lamented, "We cannot equal the quality of US arms for a generation or two. Modern military power is based on technology ... we will never be able to catch up ... until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we have an economic revolution without a political revolution."¹⁰

On the Western side the negotiations were driven by the Americans and the Germans, whose interests were directly involved. The British and the French played a lesser part, though they influenced the discussions within the Western alliance. Margaret Thatcher's role has been somewhat exaggerated in British myth. But she took a well-informed interest in Soviet affairs even before she became Prime Minister, she was very active in supporting dissidents in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s, she was one of the first to recognize that Gorbachev was an unprecedented factor in Soviet politics, and she was important as a link between Moscow and Washington at times when they were failing to communicate. Indeed, she developed something of an attachment to Gorbachev the man. In autumn 1988 George Bush Senior and Michael Dukakis were contending for the presidency of the United States. When I called on Margaret Thatcher that September before leaving for Moscow as ambassador, she remarked, "If Dukakis wins the election, Gorbachev will be my only friend left." Her international influence declined after 1989, partly because of her politically illiterate opposition to German reunification. But she remained an active supporter of Gorbachev and his project even after she left office.¹¹

President Reagan, too, recognized Gorbachev's quality early on. After being a vocal and effective opponent of Soviet policy, he underwent an epiphany in the winter of 1983-84. He realized that the Russians really were afraid of American aggression and that the nuclear confrontation was intolerably dangerous. Helped by Margaret Thatcher's

perceptions, and perhaps by the first-hand insights of Oleg Gordievsky, a Soviet double agent who had been working for the British, he concluded that something needed to be done, and that Gorbachev was the man with whom he could do it.¹²

But others in Washington and London saw Gorbachev as merely a more cunning version of his predecessors, not to be trusted. In December 1988 Gorbachev announced to the United Nations that the Soviet Union would withdraw a significant number of its troops from Eastern Europe, including six tank divisions and assault bridging units which had particularly worried the Western military. It was stunning evidence of his willingness to move. But it was initially dismissed as just another communist trick by senior security advisers to the incoming President, George H. W. Bush, such as Brent Scowcroft and Robert Gates.¹³ As late as April 1989 the CIA judged that the Soviet Union would be the main threat to American security for the next two decades.¹⁴

Such attitudes led to a temporary but damaging hiccup in the relationship between Russia and America. The new President suspected Reagan might have gone too far in his relationship with Gorbachev.¹⁵ On taking office in January 1989 he imposed a pause to allow for a thorough policy review. By April, Gorbachev's diplomatic adviser Anatoly Chernyaev told me that his boss was deeply worried about the prolonged silence from Washington. He was comforted by the knowledge that Margaret Thatcher, at least, genuinely wanted Gorbachev to succeed and was prepared to say so in public.

The relationship between Bush and Gorbachev recovered. At their summit meeting in Malta in December 1989 they developed a spirit of cooperation which enabled them to negotiate effectively on the central issues of arms control and German reunification.

Reagan and his successors naturally pursued America's interests relentlessly. They also genuinely tried to spare Russian susceptibilities and help Russia become a cooperative member of the world community, peaceful and prosperous.

But after the Soviet Union had collapsed Bush sounded a damaging note of triumphalism in his State of the Nation speech January 1992: "By the grace of God, America won the cold war.... A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent

power, the United States of America. Bill Clinton, who later developed a close relationship with Boris Yeltsin, also misspoke himself from time to time. At a meeting in the Hague in 2014, Obama slightly called Russia a mere regional power.¹⁶ Such incidents may seem comparatively trivial to outsiders. But they helped to feed a settled belief among many Russians that, whatever they claimed to the contrary, the Americans aimed to diminish or even destroy their country. Whether the feelings were justified or not is barely relevant: as always, they fed the politics.

German Reunification and NATO Enlargement

The Americans and the Germans led the negotiations over German reunification with tact, though the Germans occasionally irritated their allies by dealing directly with the Soviet Union: naturally enough, since their interest was by far the greatest. The Americans were determined that a reunited Germany should become a full member of NATO, an ambitious goal. Soviet officials warned us that ordinary Russians remembered the German invasion and would turn against Gorbachev and his reforms. But ordinary Russians to whom we talked, such as my driver Sasha, saw nothing odd about Germans coming together half a century after the end of the war. In August 1990 two cheerful Russian lorry drivers in Weimar—still part of East Germany—told us that they had been living there for four years. Life in East Germany had been pleasant enough: but it would get a lot better now that the locals would have a chance to get themselves organized.

Agreement was reached in September 1990, after a last-minute row over wording about the deployment of Allied forces into former East Germany. Some German officials concluded that Margaret Thatcher, unhappy at the prospect of German reunification, had given their British colleague private instructions to disrupt the treaty. The evidence is slight.¹⁷

This was the beginning of the subsequent bitterness over NATO enlargement. During the negotiations for reunification and later the Russians were given vague oral assurances by senior Western leaders that NATO would not enlarge. Gorbachev's Russian critics accuse him of feebly failing to get a written commitment.

The record of who said what to whom is well documented.¹⁸ The Russians got no commitment in writing, and have never claimed otherwise. Although Gorbachev's critics say it was weak of him not to insist, the Western allies would never have agreed to bind their hands formally for the future.

But ambiguous things were said by Western politicians, both in private and in public. During the negotiation of the agreement on German reunification some constructive ambiguity was perhaps inevitable. Afterwards the need to jolly the Russians along was less pressing. By the end of 1990 the President of newly independent Czechoslovakia was already arguing strongly for enlargement. I was present when, in response to a question, the British Prime Minister reassured his Soviet interlocutors in the spring of 1991 that there was no intention of enlarging NATO. That statement was true at the time it was made.

Still, it is not surprising that the Russians were upset when Western intentions changed in the mid-1990s and the enlargement process began. Their decades-old ambition to create a pan-European security system in which they would be equal members was rebuffed. Attempts to mollify them by offering forms of association with NATO that fell short of full membership were unsuccessful.

They were equally disconcerted by NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, which they saw as an illegal attack on a small sovereign European country, not sanctioned by the United Nations nor justified by Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovo (Legal advisers in major European foreign ministries were also uneasy about the legal justification for the bombing).¹⁹ They worried that their own country might be next. They were not soothed by the subsequent Western air campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some in the West believe that no assurances were given, and that Yeltsin at least acquiesced in the enlargement. They argue that the Russian reaction has been artificially stoked up by Russia's leaders for their own purposes. Here too the record is clear enough. Yeltsin was erratic and inconsistent. On a visit to Poland in 1993 he did indeed say that he understood Poland's desire to join NATO.²⁰ But he drew back. He warned Clinton that Russia would be humiliated by the expansion of NATO, and asked him to hold back from bombing Serbia, commenting prophetically that "our people certainly from now have a bad

attitude with regard to America and with NATO.” That is indeed what happened in the event.

NATO enlargement and the events surrounding it inevitably colored subsequent Russian policy making. Enlargement was, however, all but inevitable. The veteran American diplomat George Kennan and others predicted serious damage to Russia’s reform effort and to its relations with the West. But NATO countries, for reasons of domestic politics as well as international policy, could hardly refuse membership to newly independent Eastern European countries who still feared Russian aggression, fears that were reinforced by subsequent Russian bullying of the Baltic states and attacks on Georgia and Ukraine.

Aftermath

The dramatic events in Moscow and elsewhere in 1988-91 showed that Russians were well able to take to the streets in pursuit of political objectives. They did not need the later “color revolutions” in Tbilisi and Kiev to show them the way. But like previous Russian leaders, Putin feared what Pushkin had called the mindless and pitiless Russian mob²¹ He remembered the lesson and mixed carrots and sticks to ensure that no color revolution took place in Moscow.

The Soviet collapse was followed by a decade of economic misery and political dysfunction. Western experts with ill-adapted theories and little practical experience showered the Russians with inadequate advice about how to dismantle a Communist economy of continental scale. People later wondered why Poland was able to manage economic change fairly smoothly, while Russia was not. The answer lies partly in Russia’s vastly greater size, its lack of any recent free market experience, and the fact that the communist system in Russia was imposed by the Russians on themselves, whereas in Poland it was a comparatively recent alien import, more easily disentangled and jettisoned.

The net result was that many Russians became deeply suspicious of Western democratic and economic ideas, convinced that their country had been brought low not by its own weaknesses, but by the intrigues of domestic traitors and foreign spies.

The sense of humiliation over NATO enlargement and resentment over Ukrainian independence were reignited when NATO suggested that Ukraine should join NATO. Among the motives which led Putin to annex Crimea and destabilize eastern Ukraine was the prospect that Sevastopol, a major Russian naval base with a glorious place in Russian history and sentiment, might find itself on NATO territory.

Putin's action was condemned in the West as illegal and it cast an inevitable chill. Russia's vulnerable neighbors concluded that its intentions were as malign as ever. NATO deployed troops to support its eastern members. Europe and America imposed sanctions. Russia and its friends accused the West of double standards and provocative overreaction. But if Putin's advisers had not warned him of the likely Western response, they were not doing their job.

Russia today is attempting with some success to reassert its place in a world increasingly dominated by more powerful competitors. Russia's geographical size and position, the determined ingenuity and resilience of its people, and the growing sophistication of its armed forces are obvious and continuing assets. Its comparatively small population and economy are not.

Gorbachev: An Assessment

Gorbachev has been criticized for excessive caution, for lacking a strategy, and for letting himself be out-negotiated by the West. But he faced an unprecedented task: to reform a complex and authoritarian politico-economic structure in the grip of a deep crisis, while negotiating an equitable deal with a superpower rival which held many of the cards. He himself argued that there could be no simple blueprint for rejuvenating the Soviet system. Instead he claimed to set out broader strategic lines which pointed in the right direction.

No one has come up with convincing alternatives. Doing nothing was no answer. Disarray within the system had probably already gone too far to permit a disciplined "Chinese" alternative—tight one-party control over a new kind of state-dominated capitalism. An attempt to preserve the Warsaw Pact and hold the Union together by force was probably well beyond the Soviet government's strength, and would have risked civil war and an international conflagration.

Gorbachev made many mistakes. But his record is defensible. Future generations may judge him more kindly.

The Geopolitical Catastrophe

As the Soviet Union collapsed, we in the Moscow embassy wondered if feelings of humiliation among the Russians could lead to the rise of a revanchist right-wing regime, as it had in Germany after Versailles. Would such a regime exploit the Russian minorities who now found themselves living abroad, as Hitler had exploited the Sudeten Germans? It did not seem impossible, though we hoped otherwise.

In subsequent years a controversy has arisen in the West: did the Russians have legitimate grounds for their sense of humiliation, or were they being manipulated by the government for its own domestic and international political purposes? Commentators especially picked up on Putin's remark in 2005 to parliament that "[T]he collapse of the Soviet Union was a [or the] major geopolitical disaster of the century."²² Despite his failure to mention other even greater geopolitical catastrophes, such as Hitler's aggression and the Holocaust, Putin was not calling for a return to Stalinism. Indeed, he subsequently remarked to German television: "People in Russia say that those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart, and those that do regret it have no brain."²³

But the events Putin went on to list—the loss almost overnight of the Soviet Union's international position, the collapse of the country's institutions and its military, economic and social welfare systems, the impoverishment, the unemployment, and in some cases the near famine—were real enough. However the Russian government may subsequently have exploited them, the events surrounding the end of the Soviet Union were indeed perceived as a humiliation even by our Russian friends who had always been opposed to Communism.

Many Russians have retreated into a defiant nationalism. They exalt Stalin and strong leadership, though few would like to see the reconstitution of the Gulag. But there is no reason to think that their current political system, however much one may dislike it, will lurch towards the excesses of full-blown Nazism or Stalinism.

The Matter of Democracy: A Misplaced Optimism?

On leaving Moscow in May 1992, I wrote: “I do not think it is an act of mindless optimism to look forward to a future in which Russia has developed its own form of democracy, no doubt imperfect unlike those which have sprung up elsewhere, but still a vast improvement on what has gone before.”²⁴

Today that may look incautious. Some—Russians as well as foreigners—argue that democracy is not the Russian way, that reform in Russia has always failed, that Russia has authoritarianism and empire “in its genes.” That is pseudo-science. Countries are indeed conditioned by their geography and history. But they also respond to circumstance. Genes have nothing to do with it.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russians hoped that they could now live in what they called a “normal” country, a hope many of us shared. Russia has indeed become open and prosperous as never before. But it has returned to a form of authoritarianism, and is again at odds with the West, with opportunities missed on both sides. It seems unlikely that Russians will soon look to the West for a model. The possibility of “normality”—to be defined by the Russians themselves, not by foreigners—nevertheless remains. Other countries have successfully tackled an unpromising legacy. There is no compelling reason why Russia should not do so too.²⁵

Notes

1. Sakharov's letter is in Stephen F. Cohen, ed., *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984). See also Rodric Braithwaite, *Across the Moscow River: The World Turned Upside Down* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.128.

2. Braithwaite R, Telegram to London, Monday, 27 March 1989.

3. According to the Norwegian ambassador in Moscow (diary entry 24 February, 1992).

4. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Moscow, April 2, 1992.

5. I take these details from memory. But there is plenty of supporting evidence in contemporary newspapers and memoirs.

6. My embassy colleagues travelled regularly to the Baltic states to keep in touch with the opposition leaders, and Baltic politicians regularly met British ministers in our embassy in Moscow. But for legal reasons I was unable to visit the Baltic states myself, because we did not recognize the Soviet annexation of 1940. That changed once the Baltic states regained their independence in late 1991.

7. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey Ukraine is the least anti-Semitic country in East Europe and the former Soviet Union. The most anti-Semitic is Armenia.

8. Thatcher's views about the likely collapse of the Soviet Union are briefly described in Rodric Braithwaite, "Gorbachev and Thatcher," in I. Poggiolini and A Pravda, eds., *Journal of European Integration History*, vol. 16, no 1, 2010.

9. I discuss the reasons why Western intelligence analysts systematically overestimated Soviet capabilities in "Chapter 9: Know your Enemy," in Rodric Braithwaite, *Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* (London: Profile Books, 2017).

10. V. Zubok, *A Failed Empire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, pp. 277, 30).

11. Braithwaite, *Gorbachev and Thatcher*, op. cit.

12. Ibid.

13. Scowcroft was the President's National Security Adviser from January 1989 to January 1993. Gates was Deputy Director of the CIA from 1986 until March 1989, and then Deputy National Security Adviser.

14. US Government National Intelligence Estimate, April 1989, Cold War International History Project, at <https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/349>.

15. Braithwaite, *Gorbachev and Thatcher*, op. cit.

16. *The Guardian*, March 25, 2014, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/barack-obama-russia-regional-power-ukraine-weakness>

17. Klaus-Rainer Jackisch, "An einem runden Tisch mit scharfen Ecken," Deutschlandfunk, October 3, 2005, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/an-einem-runden-tisch-mit-scharfen-ecken.724.de.html?dram:article_id=98285. John Weston, the British official, gives his version at pp. 466-471 of the volume of British documents on German Unification 1989-1990, P. Salmon, ed., London 2012.

18. Rodric Braithwaite, "NATO enlargement: Assurances and Misunderstandings," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 7, 2016; "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard," National Security Archive Briefing Book #621, Washington, DC, March 16, 2018; "The Clinton-Yeltsin Relationship in Their Own Words," National Security Archive Briefing Book #640, Washington, DC, October 2, 2018; William J. Burns, *The Back Channel* (London: PenguinRandomHouse, 2019) pp. 91-2, 105-8.

19. Private information.

20. *New York Times*, August 26, 1993.

21. From Pushkin's short novel *The Captain's Daughter*, which all Russians have read.

22. Since Russian lacks the definite and indefinite articles the original can be translated both ways. The Russian text is at <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36354>.

23. Interview with German television channel ARD and ZDF, May 5, 2005. English text at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22948>.

24. Braithwaite R, Despatch to FCO, "The Obsession with Russia," May 17, 1992.

25. I have used a version of these two final paragraphs in a review of *The Russia Anxiety* by Mark Smith (to be published London July 2019) in the London-based journal *History Today*.

