

Chapter 6

Bonfire of the Vanities: An American Insider's Take on the Collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia

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Setting the Stage

As the Cold War ended, the Berlin Wall was demolished, and Central and Eastern Europeans freed themselves from communism, the demise of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia would be just a matter of time. Yet, the stunning speed of events left Western policy-makers, not to mention Eastern ones, in catch-up mode. Each of these two multi-national communist states was held together by autocratic rule, thuggish security services, and ideological vanity. The glue had gotten brittle, owing to economic failure, pervasive cynicism, and heightened public awareness of how badly living conditions compared with those in the West, and it gave way when last-ditch efforts at reform only fed demands to discard communism altogether.²

The bonfire of communism in the Balkans and Eurasia caught the U.S. administration of George H. W. Bush pretty much by surprise. The strategic goals of the United States at the time were clear and steady enough: end East-West confrontation, spread liberty, and extend the Western liberal order. The Gulf War of 1990 underlined the potency and value of American leadership and, dare to say, the prospect of unipolarity. However, even as Berliners danced on the Wall, the swiftness and extent of revolution in the East were not anticipated.

As if a pause button could be pressed on the rush of change in the East following German unification, the United States and its European partners shifted attention to adapting their institutions to the end of the Cold War. Toward the end of 1990, they began debating in earnest the future of NATO, the rationale for U.S. troops in Europe, the nature of a “European pillar” of the Alliance, the next phase of European

political and economic integration, and the mission of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The Atlantic allies were not braced for the approaching crash of communism's multinational states.

When it dawned on the Bush administration that developments in the East were out of control, its lofty notion of a whole, free and peaceful "Euro-Atlantic community" was made to compete with heightened anxiety over the dangers of havoc, conflict, mass migration, and loose nuclear weapons. At the same time, there was no interest in seeing communism endure. As secessionism intensified in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, U.S. policy-makers had one foot on the accelerator and one on the brakes, as well as (mixed-metaphor alert) a left-hand/right-hand problem.

While concerned about the potential for violence in the communist East, Western policy-makers were lulled by the fact that the revolutions until then in Central and Eastern Europe had on the whole been of the velvet variety.³ Internal support for the old regimes melted away, as did their politicians. The Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev had become too concerned for the Union's own survival to continue the policy of using force to save communism in neighboring states: The "Brezhnev Doctrine," invoked to justify military intervention since the Czech Spring of 1968, had been replaced by the "Sinatra Doctrine," which allowed any country wishing to leave Soviet orbit to "do it my way."⁴

Still, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in 1991 were different than Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia (which would soon break in half without much hassle, let alone bloodshed). It could be assumed that Belgrade and Moscow would use force to prevent secession by any republic. Also, each state had several republics with minorities of the most powerful nationality, Serbs and Russians respectively, supplying kindling for civil war in the event of breakup.⁵

Within three years of the fall of the Wall, both states had gone out of existence, one peacefully and the other in a paroxysm of killing. While Yugoslavia's mayhem, ethnic cleansing and mass murder were horrific on their own terms, Western governments observed that similar flammable materials existed in the Soviet Union, made far more dangerous by the deployment of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Belarus and

Kazakhstan. Yet, the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 proved to be remarkably well-ordered. The reasons for this contrast are worth examining.

Events leading to the collapse of Yugoslavia and of the Soviet Union, as well as the violence in one and the absence of violence in the other, were largely beyond the control of the United States and its European partners. Whether things could have been different had the Atlantic allies been more proactive, purposeful and coordinated is unknowable, but doubtful. As we will see, the United States and its NATO allies reacted more jointly to the break-up of the Soviet Union than to the break-up of Yugoslavia. The hypothesis here is that events were governed by the character, outlooks and actions of peoples and leaders of these states, with Western allies often ambivalent or at odds, capable at most of nudging events by saying how they might react to steps taken by actors in the East.

In addition to geopolitics, important principles of international law were at issue in both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The right of self-determination was in tension with the prohibition of unilateral (non-consensual) change of international borders. Relatedly, Western states were generally respectful of the norm against interference in the internal affairs of recognized sovereign states. In the end, though, such precepts did not determine Western policy. Support for self-determination was accepted insofar as peoples used democratic means to escape undemocratic rule. As for non-interference, there were ample grounds for forcible humanitarian intervention in Yugoslavia, whereas intervening in the Soviet Union, still a superpower, was never under consideration. In both cases, the policies of the United States and its European allies were dictated by constraints of feasibility and hard-headed calculations of interests.

Even as the United States lacked the means to manage the demise of communism's two multilateral states, its domestic politics and bureaucratic misalignments hindered policy-making. Americans of Croatian descent urged taking Zagreb's side, whereas Serbs had no such lobby.⁶ Support within the United States for Baltic independence, waiting fifty years for this moment, brooked no delay. There was zero domestic affinity for the Soviet Union. President Bush's proclivity toward restraint in both cases did not go down smoothly at home. The State Depart-

ment and the Defense Department pulled in different directions in both cases (for reasons and in ways detailed below), handicapping efforts by the National Security Council (NSC) to broker policy. Meanwhile, the West Wing of the White House was not convinced that being proactive was politically wise in either case. Thus, the inherent limits of U.S. influence in the Balkans and Eurasia were reinforced by presidential prudence and political contention.

If the United States neither caused Yugoslavia to break up violently nor enabled the Soviet Union to break up peacefully, what did?

Yugoslavia

Serbia had been the cradle of World War I. After the war, the “Union of South Slavs” was organized out of Balkan fragments of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. The founding agreement among Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was for the most part voluntary, though the victorious allies pressed hard for it in hopes of stabilizing this ethnic crazy-quilt. Serbia, having been a state, had the upper hand in negotiations and named Aleksander I to head a constitutional monarchy. There ensued feuding and skirmishing among Croatian fascists, Serbian royalists, and communists, which burst into civil war during World War II, until communist strongman Josip Broz Tito put a lid on it.

In view of Tito’s central role in controlling the South Slavs, the U.S. Government drew up contingency plans for what might follow his death, anticipating civil war and possible Soviet invasion to end Yugoslav independence. Yet, for ten years following Tito’s death in 1980, Yugoslavia held together: a new rotating presidency functioned more or less well, interspersed nationalities lived more or less harmoniously, and the monster of ethnic warfare remained in the closet.

As communism buckled elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, however, Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević and Croatian leader Franjo Tuđman, among others, ditched that discredited ideology in favor of ultra-nationalism. As a way of saving themselves politically, they dredged up ancient grudges and stoked enmity among ethnic groups.⁷ The Yugoslav case suggests that diverse ethno-sectarian peoples can co-exist unless incited to hate by demagogues.

As Serb-Croat tensions increased, Slovenes plotted to remove themselves from undemocratic Serb-dominated Yugoslavia and to follow the trail toward Western freedoms and institutions blazed by their Central European neighbors. With 90% of its population ethnic Slovene and only 2% Serb, Slovenia had less to fear from Serbia than did Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, with their large Serb populations. Yet, it became apparent, including to Western governments, that Slovenia's secession would trigger a Croatian decision to bolt. With over a half-million Serbs in Croatia (of 4.7 million people), and Croat nationalism whipped up by Tuđman, there was a high potential for sectarian violence between Roman Catholic Croats and Greek Orthodox Serbs. Croatian independence would in turn make it difficult if not dangerous for other republics, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its million ethnic Serbs, to stay inside a rump Yugoslavia increasingly dominated by Serbs and governed by an autocratic Serb nationalist. Though with few Serbs—but many Albanians—Macedonia would also break free. Domino Theory may not have applied to Indochina, but it described the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Anticipating this scenario, the European Community (EC)—on course to become the European Union (EU), in adjusting to German unification with deeper economic and political integration—insisted on taking the lead in handling the Yugoslav crisis. Such European hubris coincided with a French-led effort to create an EC-based alternative to NATO. Yugoslavia was seen in Paris and at EC headquarters as a chance to exercise newfound EC unity and clout. The U.S. Government, which was more alarmed than European governments were of Yugoslav dangers, was only too glad to defer, thinking the Europeans would either succeed or, by failing, be reminded of the importance of American leadership.⁸

In early 1991, the administration of George H. W. Bush was wrapping up a spectacularly successful war to liberate Kuwait from Iraq and, with the president's approval rating hovering at 90%, hesitant about getting drawn into another, far riskier conflict. With history in mind—deep Balkan enmities, Nazis' difficulty in gaining control of Yugoslavia, and U.S. experience in the quagmire that was Vietnam—Bush, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, Secretary of State James Baker, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell opposed military intervention in what seemed to be a lost cause. The administration

defended its hands-off posture publicly by explaining that Yugoslavia's rows were too complicated, immutable, and removed from U.S. vital interests to warrant U.S. involvement.

Washington was right to see the Europeans as naïve about Yugoslavia's chances and their ability to exert unified and effective influence. For one thing, Germany was predisposed to recognize the independence of both Slovenia and Croatia, mainly for domestic political reasons, whereas the UK and France were hesitant. Recall that the British and French had had reservations about German unification, whereas that same experience turned Germans into cheerleaders of self-determination. In the event, all would follow Germany's lead in order to avoid a rupture that would derail the move toward a more common European foreign policy.

Predictably, European diplomacy was no match for the secessionist momentum of Slovenia and Croatia. So, on the eve of Slovenia's declaration of independence, Secretary Baker visited Yugoslavia to warn against unilateral secession and urge pursuit of a middle ground, e.g., a loose confederation proposed by Macedonia and Bosnia. Baker's appeal for Yugoslavs to avoid abrupt and complete dissolution was based on the American assessment—correct, as it turned out—that Yugoslavia's disintegration was sure to be bloody, given the nationalist baiting of unprincipled politicians, the aim of Milošević to create a “Greater Serbia,” and the potential for civil war where large Serb minorities lived. A 1990 CIA analysis showed that if Yugoslavia disintegrated into its constituent states, half the population would be left as minorities in the “wrong” place. Critics of Baker's plea for Slovenia and Croatia to postpone independence overlook the fact that the prospect for a peaceful breakup of Yugoslavia was a mirage.

As forces of secession gathered strength, the EC offered sizeable emergency assistance and debt relief on the condition that the Yugoslav republics settled their differences peacefully and consensually. Given conditions in Yugoslavia, the European aid package was dead on arrival, and economic intervention was abandoned. Worse yet, EC mixed-signals regarding unilateral pursuit of independence by Slovenia and Croatia—Germany in favor, France and the UK against—aggravated Yugoslav divisions. The United States, once a source of economic aid to anti-Soviet Yugoslavia, formally suspended its support when fighting

erupted and violence began to spread. Against the centrifugal forces of Yugoslavia, neither offers nor denials of economic assistance had any effect.

In late 1990, 88% of Slovenes voted in favor of independence, which was declared the following June. Serb-dominated Yugoslav armed forces under Milosevic's control made only a perfunctory, unsuccessful effort to thwart Slovenian independence. But they reacted ferociously when Croatia promptly followed suit. With Serb militias inside Croatia taking the lead, that republic burst into flames.

Certain American officials, including Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and his protege and friend at the NSC (this author), argued that NATO military intervention—if only U.S. air strikes—might stop the killing in Croatia and its spread to Bosnia, Macedonia and eventually the Serbian province of Kosovo. They reasoned that the appearance of U.S. air power could be enough to persuade the Serbs to back off and permit independence, and that if the United States had any chance to nip Yugoslav warfare in the bud, it was early in the fighting.⁹ Their superiors and Pentagon colleagues, however, felt the United States should not intervene in the Balkans—indeed, should never intervene anywhere—unless it decided in advance that it was prepared to escalate as needed to win. To these opponents, entering the Yugoslav war could prove open-ended, costly and unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, ethnic hatreds throughout Yugoslavia ignited the worst violence and forced human relocations in Europe since World War II. In Bosnia, Serbs targeted Croats and Muslims. Once leaders injected nationalist venom, people who had been living side-by-side now engaged in vendettas for acts committed generations ago. The demographic mixing-bowl of Bosnia made it all the more incendiary. Milošević, having become torch-bearer of Serb nationalism and pride, had no incentive to restrain Serbian militias, especially when it became obvious, early on, that NATO would not intervene and that he would keep control of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA).

A 40,000-strong UN peacekeeping force (UNPROFOR) was formed, mainly with European contingents, and inserted into Bosnia. But it could barely keep relief supplies flowing, much less stop the fighting and atrocities. Peacekeepers could not keep peace that the parties themselves rejected. It is conceivable that if UN forces in Bosnia

had had rules of engagement and armaments permitting use of force—peacemaking instead of peacekeeping—killing might have been less. But the Europeans sought no such mandate.

Hope for peace further dimmed when the EC, cued by Germany, recognized Slovenia and Croatia as independent in December 1991. By April 1992 Bosnia held a referendum, seceded and had its independence recognized by the Atlantic allies. Yet contrary to what the German Chancellor Kohl and Foreign Minister Genscher had wished, independence did not safeguard Croatia and Bosnia from descending further into war or stopping Milošević's relentless and worsening aggression. Western recognition contributed nothing to deterrence, as Europeans and Americans did nothing to back it up. There was grouching in Washington, London and Paris about Berlin's eagerness to recognize breakaway independence knowing that its allies, not Germany, would be the enforcers.

Even after President Bush proclaimed at the 1992 Helsinki CSCE summit that the United States would do "whatever it takes" to stop the bloodshed, the United States did not use force. Without the United States, the Europeans lacked the will and ability to stop the fighting in Yugoslavia even if they could agree to do so. As things got worse in the Balkans, Washington and most Americans (per Gallup polling) did not believe that U.S. interests at stake in the fighting or the fate of Yugoslavia warranted a protracted, and unpromising war, lacking public support. The case for intervening to salvage the credibility of NATO and U.S. leadership was not convincing enough.

Meanwhile, at NATO's 1991 fall summit, the United States proposed a post-Cold-War "New Strategic Concept" for the Alliance: to preserve stability and, as needed, keep peace in the emerging "Europe whole and free."¹⁰ Of course, NATO's failure to stop the violence in Yugoslavia flew in the face of this concept. Questions about NATO's continued relevance resurfaced, though these were answered subsequently by the Clinton administration's use of airpower against Serbia (and some years later by the Alliance's stalwart response to the 9/11 attacks).

George H.W. Bush paid a political price for his hesitation to support the independence of Yugoslavia's seceding states, particularly where Croatian-Americans were concentrated and activated. Bill Clinton, his

Democratic opponent in the 1992 election, denounced Bush's inaction. But, as noted, the American public at large was hardly clamoring for a military intervention. And, with the U.S. economy in recession in 1992, opinion shifted against a president who seemed more attuned to foreign than domestic affairs. Bush's achievements in the Gulf War and in supporting East European liberation did not help his reelection prospects; intervention in Yugoslavia would at best have amplified criticism that he was inattentive to problems at home.

The instinctive wariness of U.S. leaders was complicated by the divergent views of the State Department and the Defense Department. State, concerned about the credibility of U.S. leadership and relevance of NATO, post-Cold-War, argued behind the scenes for U.S. activism if not military intervention. Pentagon E-Ring civilians and brass were strongly opposed, exercising a veto in effect because the NSC was in no position to push for intervention over the objections of a military establishment that had just liberated Kuwait with minimal casualties.¹¹

One cannot exclude that the United States and its allies might have been able to prevent the violent break-up of Yugoslavia by acting early. However, that presumes that they could have foreseen the magnitude of horrors to come if they did not act. The longer the United States delayed, the harder it became for those who favored intervention to claim that it would succeed. And it was never obvious what U.S. forces' objectives would be or whom they would fight if sent in. Bush, Baker, Cheney, and Powell and Co. were staunch believers in having clear war aims.

The Soviet Union

Unlike Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union was formed by conquest—first by Red Army invasion, then by Stalin's edict. For much of its history, the USSR was maintained by force and relocation, combined with central control of republic governments by appointing and propping up Soviet hacks. Communism was imposed and with time became entrenched, as fewer and fewer Soviet citizens knew anything else. Again, unlike Yugoslavia, no other Soviet nationality had the wherewithal to challenge Russian domination (as Croats challenged Serbs). Even as uprisings spread through its satellite states, the Soviet Union's domes-

tic status quo held. Even with its economy in a tailspin and democratic dissidence on the rise, in Russia as elsewhere, neither revolution nor dissolution appeared inevitable, much less imminent.

Starting with the Kremlin's 1981 decision not to intervene against Poland's Solidarity uprising, followed by Gorbachev's attempt at reforms, acceptance of German unification, and withdrawal from Afghanistan and then from Eastern Europe, the main goal of Soviet leaders was to save the Soviet Union, and themselves.¹² They were helpless in preventing decomposition, however, due to inexorable political-economic decay. Toward the end, Gorbachev was on the defensive both from hard-liners, who despised reform, and Russian president Boris Yeltsin, who demanded democratization and free markets—thus, the end of communism.

The end came more dramatically than anyone expected. The abortive coup against Gorbachev in August 1991 by old-line party and military bosses exposed not only his political weakness and but also that of the very figures and forces opposing him. Gorbachev may have been rescued by Yeltsin during the attempted coup, but the "Center" was finished.

Even as the United States and its European allies cheered the coup's failure and democracy's brighter prospects in the Soviet Union, they had misgivings: Would the Soviet Union's disintegration turn bloody, as Yugoslavia's had?¹³ Would elements of the Red Army use force against secessionists? Would turmoil cause a tsunami of refugees? Would the Soviet Union's huge, far-flung arsenal of nuclear weapons remain under firm, accountable control? How large would the bill for economic aid be? Would food distribution fail and hunger follow?

The Bush administration's proactive role in German unification within NATO, followed by its Gulf War victory, raised expectations that the United States would take the lead in the more momentous process of Soviet disintegration. Moreover, the stakes were higher in the Soviet case than they were in Yugoslavia. Would Washington, despite the perils, insist on independence for peoples who sought freedom—something it had done grudgingly in Yugoslavia? At the same time, apprehensions about instability, control of nuclear weapons, and implied aid obligations held back Washington—and London and Berlin and Paris and Brussels. Although Bush's handling of the collapse

of communism in Europe and then of the Soviet Union was his most important legacy prior to the coup, he had been criticized at home for tardiness in recognizing Baltics' independence and for his "Chicken Kiev" speech warning Ukraine against "suicidal nationalism" and saying that "freedom is not the same as independence."

As the Soviet Union started to split at the seams, the highest priority of American diplomacy was to build arrangements to control nuclear weapons, which it eventually did. In addition, Bush and Baker stressed with their Soviet counterparts the special importance of finding a graceful path for independence, or something resembling it, for the Baltic states. This reflected domestic U.S. politics and appreciation that the nationalities most likely to fight and die for freedom from Soviet rule were the Balts. Whether Washington's entreaties dissuaded Moscow from using massive force to prevent Baltic secessionism is unknown. Anyway, the most dangerous corner of the Soviet Union did not erupt in violence.

The Bush administration did offer economic support of sorts, though that also was fraught with internal contradiction: how to assist materially without propping up a failed system. Washington helped organize emergency distribution of food, though it was clear to those of us involved at the time that the only sustainable solution to food distribution was creation of markets. In addition, the Departments of State and Treasury supported reformers in planning the shift from central planning.¹⁴ But leading reform economist Grigory Yavlinsky, who authored a 500-day transition plan, lost out to party heavies (e.g., Yevgeny Primakov), and Gorbachev's ignorance of how markets work left reformers to twist in the wind. Some Americans—even Richard Nixon!—called for massive aid, but the government rightly argued that that would be a colossal waste without transition, which aid could actually delay.

After the failed coup of August 1991, the end of the Soviet Union came quickly. Ukraine promptly declared independence from the USSR, and there was nothing the remnants of the Soviet state could do about it. In December, Russian president Boris Yeltsin called George Bush to inform him that he and Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk had agreed that both states would immediately leave the Soviet Union. Of course, Russia's departure meant the Soviet Union's extinction. In a

dazzlingly creative career move, Yeltsin promoted himself by eliminating his boss's job, which required eliminating the Soviet Union. When Bush asked what would happen to his friend Mikhail, Yeltsin explained that he would be out of work but otherwise fine. Bush thanked Yeltsin for the heads-up. Without fuss, Gorbachev resigned at Christmas and turned out the lights.

What followed was nothing like the warfare then engulfing Yugoslavia. The Union dissolved along the boundaries of its republics, albeit with some sporadic fighting over certain territorial disputes, namely Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Red Army was intact but demoralized, its top leaders having been implicated in the farcical coup attempt. Moreover, whereas Serbia opposed with force other republics' secession from Yugoslavia, Russia in the end took the lead in precipitating the breakup of the Soviet Union. Former Soviet Republics, except the Baltics, formed a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) around Russia. (Recall that the attempt to reconfigure Yugoslavia as a confederation had failed, leaving no ties at all among the warring ex-republics.) Creation of the CIS, with Russia the unquestioned leader, quelled fears of what would happen to Russian minorities in other independent states. Russia would not need to use force to protect fellow Russians, as Serbia felt it had to do when Croatia and Bosnia broke away with some one-and-a-half million ethnic Serbs. Russians were not attacked in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, or anywhere else, including the Baltic states.

Western concern about control of Soviet nuclear weapons stationed outside Russia was allayed by U.S. intelligence reporting that officers in the chains of command of all such weapons were all Great Russians. In addition, Russia was recognized as the sole successor-custodian of Soviet nuclear weapons, and non-proliferation assurances were secured from other former republics. Force was never needed to secure the Soviet arsenal.

With President Bush setting the tone, U.S. policy-makers reacted cautiously and tactically as the Soviet Union self-destructed. One false step, they feared, could ignite a conflagration with nuclear risks. They walked a fine line between discouraging reckless unilateral moves toward independence, which could strengthen hard-liners in Moscow, and encouraging those who sought freedom. In the end, U.S. officials

exhaled when the Soviet Union's dissolution proved peaceful, given what could have been.

As in the Yugoslav case, the State Department and the Defense Department (DoD) were of two minds regarding the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but their positions toward the latter were a mirror-image of those toward the former. Simply put, doves and hawks swapped sides. DoD policy-makers, taking what they said was a strategic view, saw such opportunity in the demise of the USSR that they argued for unqualified support for secessionist republics, breakage be damned. State argued for promoting a soft landing, as well as for not alienating Soviet transition leaders or giving ammo to remaining hard-liners. Although U.S. domestic politics, still anti-Soviet, resonated with the Pentagon's view, the President was cautious—more so than he had been toward German unification in 1989 or the Gulf War in 1990. Having sided with Defense in the Yugoslavia case, Bush sided with State in the Soviet case—and with restraint in both cases. His hallmark of prudent pragmatism prevailed as the Soviet Union crashed. Although he never bullied his advisors and agencies with his own views—preferring instead to foster debate, options and consensus—the President's views set the tone and limits of U.S. policy.

Comparison

Why was the breakup of Yugoslavia violent and that of the Soviet Union not? They were comparable in political structure and multi-national composition, and both were bulwarks against forces of democracy. Yet one exploded and the other more or less petered out. Although important situational differences can be found, two differences—both internal to these states—stand out: attitudes of people and qualities of leaders.

Great Russians were largely disliked by other nationalities and in other republics of the USSR. Often, Russian minorities and functionaries had power and perks indigenous peoples did not (unless they were lackeys of Moscow). Moreover, the Soviet Union came into being largely through conquest and imposition of the conqueror's ideology. It was sustained for three-quarters of a century by central power, security services with tentacles everywhere, appointment of local leaders be-

holden to Moscow, and a massive Red Army that the Center was liable to use. While there was a long history of animosity between Russia and other nationalities, Russians and Ukrainians had common racial roots (“Rus”), common culture, and general affinity. Also, Stalin’s terror was not discriminatory: even during the worst of his purges, forced collectivization, mass relocations, show trials and executions, Russians were not spared.

Soviet cohesiveness, imposed at first, was reinforced by World War II. Soviet defense against and then defeat of Nazi Germany was both unified and unifying. Most peoples rallied to the Soviet cause, cheered Soviet victories, supplied soldiers and casualties, and saw Stalin, the Georgian, as a hero. Although German forces got some support from non-Russian partisans, the Red Army that defeated them was multinational.

Yugoslavia went through no such “Great Patriotic War.” Quite the opposite: pro-Nazi Croatian fifth column (Ustashe) and anti-Nazi Serbian partisans (Chetniks) tore at each other lustily during World War II. What German troops did in Yugoslavia was mild compared to the unspeakable atrocities Croats and Serbs committed against each other. While it is true that Croats and Serbs, as well as other nationalities, lived together in relative quietude under Tito and in the years after his death, it did not take much dog-whistling by Milošević and Tuđman for killings to resume, often in revenge.

Yugoslavia’s fault lines were essentially religious—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Muslim. There are only minor if any racial (Slavic) or linguistic (Serbo-Croatian) variations. Although historically religious differences are often compounded by political and/or economic grievances (think Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Iraq, and lately Yemen and Syria), Yugoslavia is not the first place, nor will it be the last, where whipped-up religious fervor motivates extreme violence. Where Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam brushed up against each other in the Soviet Union, the former had, and has, the upper hand (think Chechnya). That there was no dominant religion in Yugoslavia made it inherently more unstable and more violent than the Soviet Union.

If Yugoslavia’s nationalities were more predisposed toward violence than those of the Soviet Union, the same can be said about their respective leaders. Generally speaking, Milošević, Tuđman and other Yu-

goslav despots were not interested in stability—indeed, they feasted on conflict. In contrast, Soviet transitional leaders dreaded the destabilization of the Soviet space, and they made clear to Western counterparts their desire that change be peaceful. The Soviet Union's ethnic problems had largely been settled, though often brutally, through internal and external wars, purges, gulags, and mass dislocations. With minorities (e.g., Muslims and Armenians) living on the fringes, the Soviet Union was largely segregated, except where Russians lived outside of Russia. Nothing had been genuinely resolved in Yugoslavia, leaving ethnic problems to fester and tempting leaders to exploit these problems for their own power.

Leaders matter, even when their days are numbered. Indeed, handling failure and transition can test a leader's moral principles differently but no less stressfully than can power. As communism's two multi-national states were on their last legs, Soviet leaders conducted themselves for the most part responsibly and humanely. Gorbachev tried his level best to make the Soviet state authentically legitimate and viable via *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and he revoked the Brezhnev Doctrine and worked to end the Cold War. When it was clear that these moves were too little too late—indeed, had released a revolutionary genie—he ordered the use of force reluctantly and sparingly. For tactical reasons—in hopes of saving reform—he accepted the return of hardliners in the fall of 1990, which led foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze to resign.¹⁵ Once the Soviet Union was formally dissolved in later 1991, Gorbachev resigned with dignity. He has since then been a voice of moderation and paragon of statesmanship, though still an avowed socialist.

Though he could have, Gorbachev did not order a full-bore Red Army offensive to crush dissidents, satellite states, separatists or republics that were abandoning his beloved Union. He could have incited Great Russians in and out of Russia to use force against other nationalities, but he never did. Unlike his Yugoslav contemporaries, Gorbachev did not embrace and exploit nationalism as communism failed. Indeed, he was anti-nationalist.

Paradoxically, Milošević, a Serb loyalist, was ready to use force to preserve multi-national Yugoslavia, but Gorbachev, a Soviet loyalist, was *not* ready to use force to preserve multi-national Soviet Union. One explanation is that Milošević was motivated by a nationalist vi-

sion of a “Greater Serbia” alloyed with concern for the safety of fellow Serbs stranded in seceding states, not by some attachment to the Yugoslav state per se. Milošević was also ruthless, egoistic, and quick to deflect blame. On trial in The Hague, he showed no hint of remorse for Serb atrocities.

In contrast, Gorbachev’s allegiance was to the Union—the history, the ideology, the Soviet ideal—not to Russia or Russians. Gorbachev had a romantic view of the Soviet Union. As a devout communist of mixed Russian-Ukrainian descent, he regarded the Union as organic, transcendent and, ideally, voluntary. Using force to save it should not be necessary, or else it would shatter the Soviet ideal to which he clung. In any case, he found the use of force repellent. Gorbachev had spent most of his career on domestic affairs, far from the organs of Soviet hard power. He was a relentless reformer, and he stridently supported Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization. Being a true child of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev had neither a vision of Greater Russia nor a fear of what would become of fellow Russians living in seceding states—again, Ukrainians and Russians had lived side-by-side peaceably for centuries and fought side-by-side to repel the Nazis.

In any case, force was a less practicable option for Gorbachev than for Milošević, especially after the failed coup had sapped his authority and discredited the army’s leadership. Once Ukraine left the USSR right after the failed coup, it was too late for Gorbachev to hold the state together with force. Recall that the Red Army depended heavily on non-Russian soldiers and officers, and Ukrainians were integrated into combat forces.

Gorbachev’s foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, played an especially principled role. A Soviet career success-story, like Gorbachev, Shevardnadze knew nonetheless that sweeping change was coming, perhaps better than Gorbachev did. He explained in 1990 to his American counterpart, James Baker, that he would not resist change provided it did not lead to “catastrophic destabilization,” and he assured Baker that Moscow would not use force against those peoples and countries that wished to leave communism and Soviet rule.¹⁶ The Shevardnadze-Baker relationship was critical in managing the end of the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact, and the Soviet Union. Shevardnadze

counselled against the use of force, and he resigned when Gorbachev reluctantly turned to hardliners in late 1990.¹⁷

Then there is Boris Yeltsin, another alumnus of the Soviet system. For all his flaws and failures, Yeltsin neither fomented Russian unrest in former non-Russian republics nor called out the security forces to crush opposition. He may have ruled ineffectively, but he ruled more or less democratically. Like Gorbachev, he maintained a rapport with George H. W. Bush, and his foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev, stressed cooperative relations with the West (much to the dismay of Russian nationalists and revanchists). Outgoing and transitional Soviet leaders had a sense of history, humanity and decency.

Compare these Soviet figures to those of Yugoslavia, especially Slobodan Milošević (compared to whom Tuđman was mild). Milošević instigated ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs in Bosnia and elsewhere, and he condoned if not inspired such atrocities as the murder of eight thousand Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica. He was the author of genocide, for which he was brought to justice in The Hague, where he died in prison. Milošević's associates in Bosnia, notably Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, were the ones with fresh blood on their hands; both were tried for genocide and war crimes. One European statesman opined to a U.S. diplomat that Yugoslav leaders "are all killers." Another added, "they are all liars."¹⁸ Both comments ring true to this author.

The diplomacy of President Bush and Secretary Baker neither caused violence in Yugoslavia nor prevented it in the Soviet Union. But they were more directly and continually engaged in contacts with their Soviet counterparts than with Yugoslav leaders, which is understandable given the enormous risks of collapse of a superpower. Other than Baker's unsuccessful visit in 1990, the only substantive contact either had with Yugoslav leaders was when Bush met in 1992 with Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović, who appealed, in vain, for American help to stop the holocaust in Bosnia. Those who met with Milošević during the crisis, including this author, knew that presidential diplomacy would have had no real effect. Left to leaders who wholesaled hate, the peoples of Yugoslavia resorted to violence to avenge acts of earlier generations, as Western leaders, diplomats and armies watched.

In both cases, the caution of "Bush 41" shaped U.S. policy. Gone was the boldness he had shown during German unification in 1989 and Ku-

wait's liberation in 1990. But those cases were comparatively easy and well aligned with U.S. domestic politics. The breakup of Yugoslavia and, all the more, of the Soviet Union involved daunting complexities and presented huge risks. Given what we knew then, it is hard to argue that the policy of non-intervention in either collapsing communist state was wrong at its core.

Epilogue

What became of former Yugoslavia and former Soviet Union thirty years on could be viewed as surprising. Following NATO intervention, peace agreement, and removal and war-crimes prosecution of Serbian leaders, each ex-Yugoslav state went its own way. Most of them experienced economic recovery and adopted democracy. Croatia, Montenegro and Slovenia have become NATO members. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia are members of the Partnership for Peace. Croatia and Slovenia are EU members, and North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are official candidates for membership. The EU has recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as potential candidates. All have signed Stabilization and Association Agreements with the EU. At present, none of the Balkan's territorial disputes or inter-ethnic flashpoints seems capable of re-igniting war.

Given that Yugoslavia broke apart violently while the Soviet Union did so peacefully, it is ironic that what was the latter is now mired in conflict. Some of those conflicts, such as in the Caucasus, have been ethno-territorial. Some have had religious undercurrents, such as in Central Asia. But the worst have been caused by Russian revanchism. Prior to Vladimir Putin, Russia's economy sputtered, investors stayed away, oligarchs flourished, democracy frayed, and the military deteriorated; but at least Russia did not threaten its ex-Soviet neighbors. Under Putin, democracy has been deep-sixed, old oligarchs have been replaced by Putin's new ones, the economy has improved—owing to high oil and gas prices (not to investment)—and the military has been rebuilt. Under Putin, Russia has threatened or attacked a number of ex-Soviet states: Georgia was invaded and effectively partitioned; Crimea was taken; Ukrainian territory and sovereignty are under assault; and the Baltic states look anxiously to NATO for protection. A common theme is Russia's intent to protect Russians residing outside of

the motherland, if not to expand the motherland or even to re-assemble the Soviet Union. The conflict that did not occur when the Soviet Union disintegrated—when Russia did not try to control the former Soviet space by force—is now occurring wherever Putin see a chance.

Russia's economy is now in a prolonged funk, thanks to deflated prices of oil and gas, lack of investment, and Western sanctions. Yet its belligerent foreign policy and reliance on threats and force persist. Although Russia may not be able to finance such an expansive external strategy indefinitely, Putin finds it useful if not essential to continue trying in the interest of rallying patriotic support despite poor domestic conditions. While post-Soviet violence was delayed for two decades, there is no sign that it will end soon—not while Russia is ruled by a man who lacks the humanity of the Soviet Union's last leaders.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Raymond Seitz, Robert Hutchings and Robert Zoellick for their inputs to this chapter.

2. For an excellent and efficient explanatory narrative, I recommend Robert L. Hutchings' *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins Press, 1997).

3. Romania was the exception, and violence there was brief and limited to the execution of the communist dictator.

4. Coined by Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gerasimov on October 25, 1989, though first explained by Gorbachev to the UN General Assembly in December, 1988.

5. About 2 million Serbs lived in other Yugoslav republics, and 15 million Russians lived in other Soviet republics.

6. It is estimated that Croatian-Americans number 500,000 to one million; Serbian-Americans are only a small fraction of that.

7. Apart from anti-Croat sentiment, Serbs saved their deepest, racial, and sectarian animosity for ethnic Albanians of Kosovo Province, whose separatism was seen as a desecration of fallen Serb heroes at the Battle of the Field of Blackbirds six hundred years earlier—a point Milošević found to have political traction.

8. In early 1990, the United States called for NATO to take up the Yugoslav crisis. The French reaction was to claim that the United States was exaggerating the problem in order to demonstrate the importance of NATO.

9. This argument surfaced around the time of Serbian bombardment of the treasured Adriatic city of Dubrovnik in October of 1991.

10. Rome NATO Summit, 1991.

11. President Bush's National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, was to become a role model in part because he did not permit his staff to make policy on its own.

12. At a meeting of Soviet leaders during the Polish crisis, then-KGB chief Yuri Andropov said, "Even if Poland falls under the control of Solidarity, so be it...We must be concerned above all with our own country." Mark A. Kramer, Working Paper No. 1, from the Cold War History project, cited in David Gompert, et al., *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2014).

13. Bush administration officials also could not forget the 1989 crushing of democratic forces in Tiananmen Square.

14. Treasury's push for Soviet debt refinancing proved unhelpful by taking the focus off of internal transition to markets.

15. Author was present at a conversation between Bush and Gorbachev during which the Soviet leader explained that Baltic separatism put him under heavy pressure to lean toward a hard line, though he intended to make this temporary.

16. Hutchings, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

17. Shevardnadze returned as foreign minister of the Soviet Union for the final month of its existence.

18. Thanks to Raymond Seitz, then-ambassador to the Court of St. James, for this telling anecdote.

