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The Reform of the Soviet System and the Demise of the Soviet State

Mark Kramer

In his illuminating essay, Stephen Cohen argues that the Soviet system could have been drastically reformed without precipitating the collapse of the USSR. He rightly takes issue with the many western authors who have succumbed to the “fallacy of retrospective determinism.” Although I disagree with Cohen’s characterizations of some of the western literature he cites, I heartily endorse the thrust of his argument. I have expressed similar views in my own articles and forthcoming book on the subject.¹ Cohen focuses only on domestic political and economic reforms, but the general point he makes could have been applied equally to Soviet foreign policy. Nothing more dramatically illustrated the capacity for fundamental change in the Soviet Union than the transformation of Soviet foreign policy under Mikhail Gorbachev.

Despite my acceptance of Cohen’s basic thesis, I want to clarify precisely what he is explaining—and what he is not. Cohen begins by asking a question that he says “will continue to torment” Russia for many decades to come: “Why did the Soviet Union . . . perish?” But in the remainder of his essay (apart from the final two sentences), he leaves this question aside and takes up a different one: Was the Soviet *system* reformable? Although the distinction between the two questions may seem trivial, it is in fact a crucial one to maintain if we want to understand the demise of the Soviet Union.

The System and the State

One of the reasons we should avoid conflating the two questions Cohen raises—why the Soviet Union ended and whether the Soviet system was reformable—is that the Soviet Union (that is, the Soviet state)² and the Soviet system were not identical. Because the Soviet state and the Soviet system (or Soviet regime) ended coterminously, it is often assumed that the

1. See, for example, my seven articles in three special issues under the general title “The Collapse of the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2003); 5, no. 4 (Fall 2003); and 6, no. 4 (Fall 2004). All the articles in these special issues, plus a few other essays I have written, will be published as a book, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union*, by MIT Press in 2005.

2. By referring to the “Soviet Union” or “Soviet state,” I am not implying that the name of the state had to remain unchanged. On the contrary, a new name would undoubtedly have been adopted if the state had survived beyond 1991. Among the proposed new names was the “Union of Soviet Sovereign States,” as Cohen notes. Even a new name that lacked the word *Soviet* would have been compatible with the continued existence of the state. (For example, even though Egypt was renamed the United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1972, this did not mean that the Egyptian state no longer existed, especially after the planned merger with Syria broke down in 1961.) In other words, my interest here is solely in the state itself, not in its name. Below, I will specify more fully what I mean by the “Soviet state.”

latter could not have survived without the former. But this assumption, which Cohen apparently accepts, is problematic. There is ample reason to believe that the Soviet *state* could in fact have continued to exist even if the Soviet *system* had disappeared.

To understand why this is so, we first need to specify what the “Soviet system” and the “Soviet state” were. Cohen points to four characteristics that “had to be preserved” for “a reformed system still to be Soviet, or to be regarded as such”: (1) official promotion of a “socialist idea that continued to memorialize antecedents in 1917 and the original Leninist movement”; (2) a “network of soviets” to provide “institutional continuity with 1917”; (3) a mixed (both state-owned and privately owned) market economy, with “enough social entitlements to be called socialist”; and (4) a “union” linking “Russia with at least several of the Soviet republics.”

Although it is doubtful that Cohen’s list would win approval from leaders like Iosif Stalin and Leonid Brezhnev who actually presided over the Soviet system, that in itself would not necessarily detract from his criteria. The real question is whether the criteria are analytically satisfying. In that respect, the list poses a number of problems. For one thing, there is nothing distinctively “Soviet” about Cohen’s third criterion: western social democratic systems are also characterized by mixed economies and generous social welfare programs.

Nor is there anything distinctively “Soviet” about Cohen’s second criterion. Competitive elections for the local soviets were introduced in 1990, providing a degree of democratic control and legitimacy unprecedented in the Soviet Union. Moreover, the revocation of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution in March 1990 helped ensure that the soviets would play a more meaningful role, rather than simply being dominated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). If the August 1991 coup had not intervened, the strong likelihood is that at the end of 1991 the CPSU would have fragmented into at least two “successor” parties, one of which (headed by Gorbachev) would have been roughly equivalent to a western social democratic party. Under this scenario—a scenario that Cohen himself accepts as the most plausible—the soviets would have been no different from the local government organs in western democratic systems.

Of the four traits listed by Cohen, only the first is truly distinctive to the Soviet system. Eliminating it would have meant the end of the Soviet system. But it is important to emphasize that traits of the Soviet *system* were not necessarily inherent features of the Soviet *state*, and vice versa. This particular trait of the system was not a prerequisite for the survival of the state. The Soviet state could have continued to exist even without an officially promoted “socialist idea.”

The reverse holds true for the fourth trait in Cohen’s list. This trait was a defining element of the Soviet *state*, but it was not an attribute of the Soviet *system*. The Soviet system would not necessarily have been any less “Soviet” if the state had been reduced to the size of, say, Soviet Russia in 1918. By the same token, the systems imposed in eastern Europe after World War II were quintessentially “Soviet” (or Soviet-style) systems and were regarded as such, even though the east European countries were not incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Cohen's fourth criterion, then, does not belong on his list. It applies only to the Soviet state, not to the Soviet system. The existence of the Soviet state, unlike that of the Soviet system, depended on the maintenance of a "union" (perhaps only a loose federation or even a confederation) that included Russia and "at least several of the [other] Soviet republics," particularly Ukraine. If Boris El'tsin had displaced Gorbachev as president of the USSR and had done away with the official "socialist idea," this would have meant the end of the Soviet system/Soviet regime, but it would not necessarily have meant the end of the Soviet state. Indeed, in the aftermath of the aborted August 1991 coup, El'tsin initially hoped to keep the Soviet state largely intact, albeit under his rather than Gorbachev's leadership.³ Although El'tsin made good on his oft-expressed willingness to accept the independence of peripheral republics like the Baltic states, Georgia, and Moldova, he believed that the departure of these small republics would be compatible with the preservation of the union (under whatever new name and configuration it might be given).

What deprived El'tsin of this option was not the "loss" of a few marginal republics (something he willingly accepted), but the surge of pro-independence sentiment in Ukraine after the failed coup. Sentiment in favor of independence had gradually been building in Ukraine even before the attempted coup, but it might well have been containable if the putsch had not intervened. After the coup plotters were rebuffed, the dynamic of the situation in Ukraine changed irrevocably. The overwhelming vote for independence in Ukraine's referendum on 1 December 1991 brought matters to a head. El'tsin could have tried to preserve the Soviet state through the massive use of force against Ukraine, but he wisely chose instead to codify the dissolution of the union by signing the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords on 8 December 1991.⁴ It is misleading to depict these accords as a "coup," as Cohen does. If El'tsin was unwilling to threaten or resort to large-scale repression to try to hold the union together, it made sense from his standpoint (and from the standpoint of others) to pursue a reasonably orderly breakup of the state.

Of course even if El'tsin *had* tried to hold the Soviet state together through large-scale force, the odds of success at this late date would probably have been meager. During the first several years of perestroika, when separatist groups were beginning to press their demands, the consistent and decisive use of force undoubtedly could have forestalled more serious threats to the integrity of the Soviet state. But when Gorbachev did not

3. On this point, see Marc Zlotnik, "Yeltsin and Gorbachev: The Politics of Confrontation," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 156–58.

4. In November 1991, after the newly elected Chechen president, Johar Dudaev, declared independence, El'tsin proclaimed a state of emergency in Chechnia and sent Russian troops to the airport near Grozny, but he failed to win support for these moves from the Russian parliament. As a result, the Russian troops were quickly and humiliatingly pulled out. Even in the unlikely event that El'tsin did contemplate the massive use of force against Ukraine in the fall of 1991 (there is no evidence to suggest that he did), the debacle in Chechnia would undoubtedly have helped dissuade him from even attempting it. By December 1994, of course, El'tsin *was* willing to undertake a large-scale military operation against Chechnia, but the reasons for that (to the extent they are known) lie well outside the scope of this discussion.

use force consistently enough and on a large enough scale to convince fledgling separatist groups that their efforts to fracture the state would be crushed, the challenges he faced quickly intensified.

The longer Gorbachev delayed in resorting to all-out force, the more difficult it became for him to use violence as a means of regaining control of the situation and deterring further challenges. Nonetheless, even as late as mid-1991, a general crackdown might have been feasible. Although Mark Beissinger has claimed that “force could not have saved the USSR,”⁵ it is worth remembering that in the spring of 1989 many western observers insisted that events in China had gone too far for the Chinese Communist Party to reestablish full control.⁶ The brutal crackdown near Tiananmen Square in June 1989 put an immediate end to that line of argument. Because the Chinese authorities were willing to tolerate enormous bloodshed, they were able to restore public order remarkably quickly. If hard-line elements had seized power in Moscow in 1990–1991 and had engaged in repression on a comparable scale against any shows of defiance, a similar result might well have obtained.

Admittedly, this sort of strategy was inherently easier to apply in China than in the Soviet Union. In China, political liberalization had barely begun in 1989, whereas in the Soviet Union political liberalization was far advanced by 1991, and splits had begun to emerge within the central Soviet institutions, including the army and the state security forces. Following the rebuff of the August 1991 coup, which gravely weakened the Soviet regime and caused even greater rifts within the security apparatus, the prospect of successfully relying on massive repression essentially disappeared.⁷ Although both Gorbachev and El'tsin hoped to preserve the union in the immediate aftermath of the aborted coup, neither of them could prevent it from disintegrating once the momentum in favor of independence in Ukraine had become overwhelming.

In the final analysis, all states, particularly multinational states like the Soviet Union, are held together by the threat—and, if necessary, the use—of coercion. To be sure, the degree of coerciveness varies from state

5. Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York, 2002), 371.

6. Jim Hoagland cites some telling examples of these erroneous predictions in his “As If It Never Happened,” *Washington Post*, 1 June 1997, C09. Many of the Chinese demonstrators were equally culpable of underestimating the regime’s ability to launch an all-out crackdown. See Tang Tsou, “The Tiananmen Tragedy: The State-Society Relationship, Choices, and Mechanisms in Historical Perspective,” in Jon Elster, ed., *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism* (Chicago, 1996), 232–33. Indeed, even as the Chinese army began moving in to crush the demonstrations, many of the protesters were still convinced that the soldiers would use only tear gas and rubber bullets. The onslaught that actually ensued came as a shock to the protest organizers.

7. It is worth noting, however, that, even after the aborted coup, some western observers still believed that an all-out crackdown was not only feasible but almost inevitable. As late as October 1991, Jerry Hough predicted that the Soviet Union would not disintegrate because “the Soviet military, like the armed forces in most countries, is willing to initiate the bloodshed to stop the disintegration.” Within weeks, his assertions had been thoroughly undercut. See Jerry F. Hough, “Assessing the Coup,” *Current History* 90, no. 558 (October 1991): 310.

to state, and the use of large-scale repression can be submerged for long periods. As time passes, the norms of legitimacy, consent, and cooperation can supplement the role of force in the survival of the state. These norms, however, never displace the role of force altogether. The capacity to use violence, as Reinhard Bendix pointed out in his classic study of monarchical regimes, is an essential feature of a state: "Wherever a mandate to rule is to sway the minds and hearts of men, it requires the exercise of force or the awareness that those who rule are able, and will not hesitate, to use force if that is needed to assert their will."⁸ The loss of this option in the Soviet Union by December 1991 ensured the state's demise.

Was Sweeping Reform Necessary to Preserve the Soviet State?

The other reason we need to distinguish between the dissolution of the Soviet state, on the one hand, and the reformability of the Soviet system, on the other, is that a failure to do so would imply that the state could not have survived unless the system had been fundamentally reformed. The implication is that if Soviet leaders had chosen a "muddling-through" approach after 1985 instead of adopting drastic changes, the Soviet Union would still have been doomed.

In retrospect, many observers do assume that the Soviet system required comprehensive restructuring. Gorbachev began with only limited reforms, but when these proved to be of little efficacy, his program shifted in a much more radical direction. He explicitly justified his reforms by arguing that the Soviet Union was in crisis when he became general secretary of the CPSU in March 1985 and that the country would have continued to spiral rapidly downward if he had not pursued far-reaching changes. Many western observers came to share this view, and indeed it took on the status of conventional wisdom. But whether it is accurate is far more debatable.

The Soviet Union was certainly encountering problems in the early to mid-1980s, as western scholars (and Soviet officials) were well aware at the time.⁹ In many countries, however, problems can persist for years or decades without spurring leaders to undertake wholesale, systemic reforms. Gorbachev's rhetoric aside, there is no reason to believe that the problems confronting the Soviet leadership in 1985 were so severe that they demanded urgent and drastic action. In a recent analysis of the Soviet collapse, Stephen Kotkin rightly argues that when Gorbachev took office "the Soviet Union was not in turmoil. Nationalist separatism existed, but it did not remotely threaten the Soviet order. The KGB crushed the small dissident movement. The enormous intelligentsia griped incessantly, but it enjoyed massive state subsidies [that were] manipulated to promote overall loyalty."¹⁰ The Soviet economy had been lagging since the early 1970s,

8. Reinhard Bendix, *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule* (Berkeley, 1978), 27.

9. For a cataloguing of many of these problems, see Robert F. Byrnes, ed., *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s* (Bloomington, 1983).

10. Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford, 2001), 27.

compared to its earlier performance, but the economy was not in crisis in 1985 and could probably have continued functioning (albeit with lackluster results) for many more years even if far-reaching reforms had not been implemented.¹¹ Gorbachev's own policies, which soon led to macroeconomic imbalances, soaring inflation, rampant shortages, the stripping of assets of large firms, and a rapid buildup of foreign debt, destabilized the economy and produced a genuine economic crisis by 1990 and 1991, but these conditions were not present when Gorbachev came to power in 1985.¹²

It is certainly true that under Gorbachev's predecessors in the 1980s—Leonid Brezhnev, Iurii Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko—the Soviet Union was not a thriving or highly prosperous country. Brezhnev's final few years were a period of near-stasis; Andropov was ill during most of his brief tenure and accomplished very little; and Chernenko's thirteen months in office were even less noteworthy. Even so, this does not mean that the Soviet Union was in the throes of a "systemic crisis" that left Gorbachev with no choice but to undertake fundamental political and economic reforms if more limited measures proved inadequate. The alternative of doing nothing (or almost nothing) did exist.¹³ The fact that

11. On this point, see Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System* (New York, 1992); and Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insiders' History* (Armonk, N.Y., 1998).

12. Cohen's discussion of economic reform is the only part of his article that I find unconvincing. Although I fully agree that Gorbachev's success in "discrediting long-standing ideological dogmas" was crucial in fostering *opportunities* for economic reform that would previously have been impossible, I do not agree that Gorbachev made good use of these opportunities. Cohen argues that "actual marketization, privatization, and commercialization of the Soviet economy were under way" by 1990–1991, but this assessment glosses over the highly adverse economic impact of Gorbachev's policies. The Soviet leader's mismanagement of the economy was evident from the very start. In May 1985, Gorbachev launched an anti-alcohol campaign that not only embittered much of the population and sparked a surge of bootlegging, but also had a grave effect on Soviet budget revenues. The resulting fiscal imbalances spurred soaring inflation. In the spring of 1986 Gorbachev led the Soviet Politburo in adopting a resolution "O merakh bor'by s netrudonymi dokhodami" (On measures to combat nonlabor income) that prohibited all private economic transactions, including even the most innocuous activities, such as the sale of fruit, vegetables, and flowers grown on tiny private plots. At this early point it would have made great sense for Gorbachev to encourage entrepreneurialism and small business, but the Politburo resolution did just the opposite, nipping any such activities in the bud. These early blunders got the process of economic reform off to a bad start, paving the way for many subsequent mistakes, as in the fall of 1990 when Gorbachev devised a half-baked "compromise" between the so-called 500-Day Plan (a far from perfect document) and the program favored by Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov (an even worse document). If, as Cohen argues, "privatization and commercialization of the Soviet economy were under way" by 1990–1991, this had less to do with Gorbachev than with the efforts of well-placed elites (and a few others) to seize what they could before the opportunities for self-enrichment were foreclosed. See, for example, Simon Johnson and Heidi Kroll, "Managerial Strategies for Spontaneous Privatization," *Soviet Economy* 7, no. 4 (September–December 1991): 281–316.

13. Far too much has been made of a conversation that Gorbachev and his future foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze reportedly had when strolling along the Black Sea coast in 1979. According to Gorbachev's recollection, Shevardnadze supposedly said that "everything [in the Soviet Union] is now rotten [*vse prognilo*]," and Gorbachev supposedly agreed (*ia s nim byl soglasen*). Even if the conversation did take place as alleged, its sig-

Gorbachev chose instead to “do something”—and that the scope of what he did expanded rapidly over the next few years—should not lead us to assume that drastic reform was preordained in 1985 irrespective of who had taken over the top post.

We know, from memoir accounts as well as declassified documents, that alternatives to Gorbachev did exist in 1985. Contrary to a widely held view, Gorbachev’s emergence as general secretary in 1985 was not a sure thing. Shortly before Chernenko died, his aides drafted numerous documents—speeches, a political program, and a CPSU Politburo resolution—that designated Viktor Grishin, a longtime member of the Politburo and close associate of Leonid Brezhnev’s, as the next general secretary.¹⁴ Gorbachev was just barely able to outflank Grishin by furtively opening a channel to Andrei Gromyko through Aleksandr Iakovlev and Gromyko’s son, Anatolii.¹⁵ There was no guarantee that Gorbachev’s maneuver would succeed, and if Gromyko had not given Gorbachev his backing, Grishin would indeed have emerged as the next leader. Had that been the case, it is inconceivable that any major reforms would have been implemented. Most likely, Grishin would have stuck with a “muddling-through” strategy.

Gorbachev decided at the outset to do far more than muddle through. Although he began with limited reforms that had only a modest effect, he soon embraced a series of “revolutionary” changes, as he himself aptly described them. This strategy was motivated by his view that the Soviet Union was falling behind the leading western countries (especially the United States and Japan) in technological and economic prowess.¹⁶ The Soviet Union’s *comparative* standing in the world, rather than a looming threat to

nificance should not be overstated. Shevardnadze’s purported comment is similar to the rhetoric that up-and-coming officials in any number of countries (including the United States) use when they are frustrated by the lack of any near-term opportunity to replace older or more established leaders. In the United States, for example, Democratic presidential aspirants often warn in dire terms about the risks of electing (or reelecting) a Republican president, and vice versa. This sort of rhetoric does not guarantee that the aspiring leader will undertake drastic changes of the system if he or she is eventually elected (or appointed) to the top post. By 1985 it was generally known that Gorbachev wanted to pursue a number of steps to make the system run better, but no one in the Soviet leadership anticipated—or could have anticipated—just how radical the changes he implemented would soon prove to be.

14. Aleksandr Iakovlev, *Sumerki* (Moscow, 2003), 459.

15. *Ibid.*, 459–61. See also V. V. Grishin, *Ot Khrushcheva do Gorbacheva: Politicheskie portrety piati gensekov i A. N. Kosygina—Memuary* (Moscow, 1996), 69–70.

16. It is interesting to recall that many Americans at the time had come to the opposite conclusion. Far from believing that the United States was pulling ahead, they were concerned about the country’s purported decline. Joseph Nye summarized the prevailing mood in American society: “By 1989, half the American public believed that the nation was in decline. Only one in five Americans believed that the United States was the top economic power, even though it remained by far the world’s largest economy. After President Reagan’s military build-up in the 1980s, only a fifth of the people believed that the United States was ahead of the Soviet Union in overall military strength. About a third of the public believed that the country’s nuclear arsenal was weaker than that of the Soviet Union, and half believed that the United States was behind in conventional military strength. A rash of books and articles published [in the United States] in the 1980s described the decline of nations, and American decline in particular.” Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York, 1990), 2.

the viability of the Soviet system or of the Soviet state per se, is what gave rise to the measures encompassed by *uskorenie*, *perestroika*, *glasnost'*, and, eventually, *demokratizatsiia*. Gorbachev, in short, *chose* to pursue systemic reforms—this strategy was not forced upon him by the threat of imminent collapse. The leader of the Uzbek Communist Party, Islam Karimov (who is still the authoritarian leader of Uzbekistan today), made precisely this point in an exchange with Gorbachev during a Soviet Politburo meeting in January 1991: “Back in 1985, Mikhail Sergeevich, if I may say so, you didn’t have to launch perestroika. We could have gone on living calmly and reforming slowly, as we did during what they call the period of stagnation. We didn’t have to stir up huge masses of people. Everything would have continued as it was, and you would have thrived, and we would have thrived. And no catastrophes of any sort would have occurred.”¹⁷ The last thing Gorbachev wanted was to preside over the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but his decision to pursue a comprehensive restructuring of the Soviet system—after limited reforms proved inadequate—had fateful consequences for the survival of both the system and the state.

If Gorbachev had lost out to Grishin in 1985, the Soviet Union in all likelihood would have survived a good deal longer (and indeed would probably still exist today). To be sure, Cohen makes a persuasive case that drastic reform, democratization, and decentralization of the Soviet system need not have led to the demise of the USSR. If the August 1991 coup had not intervened, the course of events would undoubtedly have been much different (and presumably would have been more positive from Gorbachev’s standpoint). Moreover, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how Gorbachev might have avoided key mistakes and had a better chance of successfully overhauling the system. Of course it may well be that any other leader who had decided to pursue such an ambitious and radical program would have run into at least as much difficulty as Gorbachev did. But another option was available in 1985—the option of muddling through. That option, if adopted by Grishin, would not have done much to ameliorate Soviet economic performance or to rectify the problems in Soviet society. Nor would it have improved the Soviet Union’s standing relative to that of the United States. But the one thing that muddling through would have done is to preserve the Soviet system and the Soviet state. From the standpoint of the leaders who appointed Gorbachev the next CPSU general secretary in March 1985—leaders who were all deeply committed to the existence of the Soviet Union—Grishin might have been a better choice.

17. “Zasedanie Politbiuro TsK KPSS 30 ianvaria 1991 goda: Rabochaia zapis’,” 30 January 1991 (Top Secret), in Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii, f. 89, op. 42, d. 31, l. 9.