

# Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State

Mark R. Beissinger



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the Collapse of the Soviet State*

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## *Acknowledgments*

This project began in 1988 as the Soviet Union was first enveloped by large-scale protest; it concluded thirteen years later in a world largely unimagined at its inception. Indeed, in the course of this investigation what began as a comparative study of protest among multiple nationalities within a single country ended up as a cross-national study of nationalist mobilization within fifteen countries (or more, depending on who does the counting). Not only did the object of research transform, but my approach to the subject necessarily altered as well. I learned a tremendous amount throughout this project – not only from the object of my study, but also from the many colleagues who graciously shared their ideas and expertise with me. I have no excuse for the prolonged production other than the empirical and theoretical aspirations contained herein.

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# Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	page ix	
<i>Tables</i>	xi	
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii	
<b>1</b>	<b>FROM THE IMPOSSIBLE TO THE INEVITABLE</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>THE TIDE OF NATIONALISM AND THE MOBILIZATIONAL CYCLE</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>STRUCTURING NATIONALISM</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>“THICKENED” HISTORY AND THE MOBILIZATION OF IDENTITY</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>TIDES AND THE FAILURE OF NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>VIOLENCE AND TIDES OF NATIONALISM</b>	<b>271</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>THE TRANSCENDENCE OF REGIMES OF REPRESSION</b>	<b>320</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>RUSSIAN MOBILIZATION AND THE ACCUMULATING “INEVITABILITY” OF SOVIET COLLAPSE</b>	<b>385</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>CONCLUSION: NATIONHOOD AND EVENT</b>	<b>443</b>
Appendix I	PROCEDURES FOR APPLYING EVENT ANALYSIS TO THE STUDY OF SOVIET PROTEST IN THE <i>GLASNOST</i> ’ ERA	460
Appendix II	SOURCES FOR THE COMPILATION OF EVENT DATA IN A REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT	472
<i>Index</i>		489
		vii

## *Illustrations*

2.1: Demonstration Activity, Mass Violent Events, and Convictions of Dissidents for Anti-Soviet Activity, 1965–87	page 71
2.2: Ethnonationalist and Liberalizing Streams of Mobilization Within the <i>Glasnost</i> ' Mobilizational Cycle, 1987–92	77
2.3: Ethnonationalist and Economic Streams of Mobilization Within the <i>Glasnost</i> ' Mobilizational Cycle, 1987–92	78
2.4: Periods of Significant Institutional Change and Protest Mobilization Among Ten Major Nationalities of the USSR, 1987–91	84
3.1: Demonstration Activity in the Former Soviet Union, 1987–92	105
3.2: Ethnonationalist Mobilization and the Soviet Ethnofederal System	120
3.3: Kaplan-Meier Estimates of the Probability of the Occurrence of the First Ethnonationalist Mobilization Among Forty-Seven Non-Russian Nationalities, January 1987–August 1991	128
4.1: Pre-Existing Structural Facilitation, Emboldening vis-à-vis Institutional Constraints, and Event-Generated Influences in the Mobilization of Collective Identity	156
4.2: Aggregate Patterns of Demonstration Activity in Favor of Secession from the USSR, 1987–91	163
4.3: Demonstration Mobilization in Favor of Secession from the USSR among Balts, 1987–91	167
4.4: Demonstration Mobilization in Favor of Secession from the USSR among Georgians, Armenians, and Ukrainians, 1987–91	183



5.1:	Average Predicted Probabilities for a Failure of Action (Zero Separatist Outcome) for Separatist Nationalism in the USSR, 1987–92 (Monte Carlo Simulation)	219
5.2:	Kaplan-Meier Estimates of the Probability of a Nonzero Separatist Outcome Among Forty Non-Russian Nationalities, 1987–92	234
5.3:	Average Predicted Probabilities for a Failure of Action, Failure of Mobilizational Effect, or Successful Mobilization for Separatist Nationalism in the USSR, 1987–92 (Monte Carlo Simulation)	248
6.1:	Frequency of Mass Violent Events in the Former Soviet Union, 1987–92	284
6.2:	Intensity of Mass Violent Events in the Former USSR, 1987–92	286
6.3:	A Comparison of Patterns of Violent and Nonviolent Mobilization over Interrepublican Border Issues and over Secession from the USSR, 1987–92	288
6.4:	A Classification of Forms and Families of Nationalist Violence	306
6.5:	The Evolution of Major Forms of Violence in the Former USSR, 1987–92	308
6.6:	The Sophistication of Weaponry Used in Mass Violent Events in the Former Soviet Union, 1987–92	313
7.1:	Government Repression at Protest Demonstrations, 1987–92	336
7.2:	Backlash Mobilizations against Acts of Regime Repression, 1987–92	363
8.1:	Patterns of Russian Mobilization, January 1987–December 1992	391
8.2:	Russian Mobilization over Conservative and Liberal Demands within and outside of the RSFSR, 1987–92	395
8.3:	Russian Liberal Mobilization in Support of Russian Sovereignty or the Separatist Demands of Other Nationalities, 1987–91	420
AII.1:	Development of an Independent Press Sector in the Soviet Union, 1987–91	475

## *Tables*

3.1:	Negative Binomial Regression of Total Number of Protest Demonstrations Concerning Ethnonationalist Issues by Nationality (January 1987–August 1991)	<i>page</i> 110
3.2:	Tobit Estimations of Total Number of Participants in Protest Demonstrations Concerning Ethnonationalist Issues by Nationality (January 1987–August 1991)	114
3.3:	Weibull Regressions of the Relative Risk of a Nationality Engaging in Its First Protest Demonstration Raising Ethnonationalist Issues (January 1987–August 1991)	126
3.4:	Negative Binomial Regression of Weekly Count of Protest Demonstrations by Nationality (January 1987–August 1991)	136
3.5:	Regression of Weekly Count of Participants in Protest Demonstrations by Nationality (January 1987–August 1991)	138
3.6:	Summary of Shifts in Causal Patterns over Time	144
5.1:	Mobilizational Parameters and Mobilizational Outcomes for Separatist Nationalism among Forty Non-Russian Nationalities, 1987–92	210
5.2:	Logistic Regression of the Probability of a Nonzero Separatist Outcome by Nationality, January 1987–December 1992	212
5.3:	Comparison of Conditional Fixed Effects Negative Binomial Regressions of Weekly Count of Separatist Protest Demonstrations among Successful and Unsuccessful Separatist Mobilizers (January 1987–December 1992)	240

5.4:	Comparison of Fixed Effects Regressions of Weekly Count of Number of Participants in Separatist Protest Demonstrations among Successful and Unsuccessful Separatist Mobilizers (January 1987–December 1992)	241
5.5:	Ordered Logit Regressions of Mobilizational Outcomes of Separatist Nationalism (Failure of Action/Failure of Mobilizational Effect/Mobilizational Success) by Nationality, January 1987–December 1992	244
6.1:	Ordered Logit Regressions of Violent Mobilizational Outcomes (No Major Violence/Sporadic Violence/ Intermittent Violence/Sustained Violence) by Nationality, January 1987–December 1992	278
7.1:	Negative Binomial Regression of Effects of Government Repression on Weekly Count of Protest Demonstrations by Nationality, Controlling for Other Causal Processes (January 1987–August 1991)	356
7.2:	Regression of Effects of Government Repression on Weekly Count of Participants in Protest Demonstrations by Nationality, Controlling for Other Causal Processes (January 1987–August 1991)	358
7.3:	Comparison of Negative Binomial Regressions of Weekly Count of Protest Demonstrations Protesting Government Repression and Protest Demonstrations Not Protesting Government Repression, by Nationality (January 1987–August 1991)	365
AI.1:	Size of Protest Demonstrations in the Former USSR, 1987–92	464
AII.1:	Coverage of Demonstrations and Mass Violent Events in the Former USSR by More Commonly Used Sources	477
AII.2:	A Comparison of Coverage of Demonstrations in Two-Source and Multiple-Source Media Samples, September 1985–August 1989	479
AII.3:	A Comparison of Published Police Statistics on Demonstrations with Coverage in a Multiple-Source Media Sample	486

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## *From the Impossible to the Inevitable*

... we travel abroad to discover in distant lands something whose presence at home has become unrecognizable.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

On May 18, 1991, two Soviet cosmonauts blasted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome for a routine four-month mission aboard the Mir space station. While aloft in weightlessness, below them one world died and another was born. By the time they returned to Earth, they no longer knew whether the country that had dispatched them still existed and to which state they and their spacecraft belonged.

The shattering of the Soviet state was one of the pivotal transformations of the twentieth century. It fundamentally altered the world in which we live, provoking an end to half a century of communist domination in Eastern Europe, breaching the Cold War division of the planet, and prompting new disorders with which the twenty-first century will long grapple. But the breakup of the USSR also presents us with many paradoxes that challenge our understanding of politics. The Soviet Union was a nuclear superpower with global commitments and a seventy-four-year record of survival – a polity which had endured two devastating wars, several famines involving millions of deaths, the mass annihilation of its own citizens by its rulers, and a social revolution that brought it into the industrial world. It was a state which launched the first human into space, whose founding political ideas inspired millions throughout the world, and which was widely regarded by many social scientists as a model of successful transition to modernity. From 1988 to 1991 that state exploded, largely under the pressure of its ethnic problems.

## Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was also one of the most notoriously unanticipated developments of modern history. Had Western experts been polled in 1987, the near-unanimous opinion would have been that the dissolution of the USSR was highly unlikely, if not impossible. Indeed, some prominent experts refused to recognize the demise of the USSR even after it happened! As Jerry Hough later recalled about the period, “[t]he flow of events was so rapid and so unexpected that no one had time to step back and reflect upon what had transpired. Observers tended to retain their interpretations of events even after they had been proved incorrect and to combine them with interpretations of later events in contradictory ways.”<sup>1</sup> Those few experts who before 1988 had entertained the possibility that the Soviet Union might disintegrate as a result of its nationality problems largely did so for the wrong reasons, believing that the breakup would be precipitated by a Muslim uprising in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> In reality, Central Asia played little role in the entire affair and was conspicuous for its quiescence. Western experts on ethnicity fared no better. In a book of essays written in 1990 and published in 1992 in which leading theorists of nationalism and ethnicity were asked to place the ongoing upheavals in the USSR into a comparative perspective, not a single author anticipated the imminent breakup of the country, and many openly argued against the idea that the Soviet Union was disintegrating.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1980). Even Richard Pipes, who in 1984 correctly concluded that the Soviet Union was facing a “revolutionary situation,” did not predict the breakup of the USSR, but thought that the likely outcome of crisis was reform. As he wrote: “There is no likelihood that the Soviet government will voluntarily dissolve the Soviet Union into its constituent republics, but genuine federalism of some sort, with broad self-rule for the minorities, is not inconceivable; it calls only for making constitutional fiction constitutional reality. Such a step would go a long way toward reducing the ethnic tensions that now exist.” Richard Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 1 (Fall 1984), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, ed., *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Among those who argued that the breakup of the USSR was unlikely were Ernest Gellner, Crawford Young, Donald Horowitz, David Laitin, and Michael Hechter. Anthony Smith, Paul Brass, and Kenneth Minogue expressed no opinion on the issue, while only John Armstrong and S. N. Eisenstadt noted the “uncertain” future of the USSR. In an article written on the eve of the August 1991 coup, David Laitin similarly decried “the unjustifiable assumption” that the USSR was on a course toward dissolution; after the August coup, a postscript was added in which Laitin confessed that recent events had made “the image of a rotting empire, discredited in . . . [the] essay, seem intuitively correct.” David D. Laitin, “The National Uprising in the Soviet Union,” *World Politics* (October 1991), pp. 139–77.

## From the Impossible to the Inevitable

Although many of the accusations against Sovietologists for their defects of vision are deserved, they must be understood in context: Even the vast majority of Soviet dissidents in 1987 (including most non-Russian dissidents) could not imagine the collapse of the USSR.<sup>4</sup> Before 1990 the breakup of the Soviet Union remained outside the realm of the conceivable for the overwhelming mass of Soviet citizens, irrespective of ethnic background.

This book is about the disintegration of the Soviet state – and specifically, about how within a compressed period of history the seemingly impossible came to be widely viewed as the seemingly inevitable, turning a world once unthinkingly accepted as immutable upside down. Ironically, though few thought it possible only a few years before it happened, the prevailing view of Soviet disintegration today is that the breakup was inevitable – the manifestation of inherent qualities of the Soviet state and of processes set in motion long before the actual events which brought it about. Often underlying assertions of the structural predetermination of Soviet disintegration is an implicit teleology, defined by Isaiah Berlin as the assumption that history contains an inherent logic, nature, or purpose beyond control of the individual that is revealed in the movement of history itself. Berlin argued that teleological explanation obfuscates the role of human action in the history that we make and takes as the goal of explanation the *ex post* revelation of the essential character of things which makes the present unavoidable. As Berlin asserted, in teleological reasoning “[w]e are plainly dealing not with an empirical theory but with a metaphysical attitude which takes for granted that to explain a thing . . . is to discover its purpose. . . . Teleology is a form of faith capable of neither confirmation nor refutation by any kind of experience; the notions of evidence, proof, probability and so on, are wholly inapplicable to it.”<sup>5</sup>

Several types of teleological explanations predominate in scholarly and folk accounts of the collapse of the Soviet state. Some authors, such as Martin Malia, assert that the total disintegration of the Soviet state was inherent in the very logic of Leninism because its totalitarian essence bred an incapacity to reform. As Malia puts it, “the intrinsic irreformability of communism is no longer a question of opinion; it is now a matter of

<sup>4</sup> Writing in 1969, Andrei Amalrik was one of the few who foresaw the breakup of the USSR along national lines, although he believed it would be precipitated by a war with China, not by internal reform. See Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 62–65.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 12–17.

historical fact.”<sup>6</sup> Malia’s is not a probabilistic explanation of Soviet collapse. It is rather an essentialist understanding. Yet, if this were true and the breakup of the USSR was inevitable, why did so many come to believe only a short time before its collapse that the Soviet state was fundamentally stable? It was widely argued on the eve of *glasnost*’ that Soviet institutions had achieved a degree of broad-based legitimacy within the Soviet population, irrespective of the national context within which Leninism appeared, and that persuasive methods of rule had replaced state-sponsored intimidation.<sup>7</sup> In retrospect, Soviet legitimacy was an illusion, but at the time seemed real enough to inspire the decisions of Gorbachev and others to introduce *glasnost*’ in the first place. As one Western expert on Soviet nationalities issues put it at the time, *glasnost*’ was above all “an expression of confidence in the legitimacy of the Soviet system” and “a recognition that the pretense of infallibility is no longer necessary to command popular allegiance and support.”<sup>8</sup> This popular support eventually faded in the wake of the subsequent onslaught of events. Nevertheless, Gorbachev’s reforms cannot be accounted for by arguments which view the disintegration of the Soviet state as emerging only from the system’s inherent logic, for why should a system whose very logic doomed it to failure give rise to the confidence that seemed to underlie political liberalization? The very fact that Soviet leaders risked liberalizing reform tells us that something critical is missing from explanations of Soviet collapse that make reference only to the “logic” of the system.

There is also the fundamental problem of how the Soviet state came to be recognized as irreformable – that is, how its irreformable quality became the “historical fact” that Malia observes. Obviously, when viewed from the present, the past contains no contingency in the sense that it took place. The choices embodied within it are irreversible and buried in history’s immutability. But as Marc Bloch described the way in which we

<sup>6</sup> Martin Malia, “Leninist Endgame,” in Stephen R. Graubard, ed., *Exit From Communism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), p. 60. For a critique of what he called this “essentialist” argument, see Alexander Dallin, “Causes of the Collapse of the USSR,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1992), pp. 279–302.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Peter Hauslohner, “Politics Before Gorbachev: De-Stalinization and the Roots of Reform,” in Seweryn Bialer, ed., *Politics, Society, and Nationality: Inside Gorbachev’s Russia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 41–90.

<sup>8</sup> Gail Lapidus, “State and Society: Toward the Emergence of Civil Society in the Soviet Union,” in Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus, eds., *The Soviet System in Crisis* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 140.

## From the Impossible to the Inevitable

should approach history, “[w]hen the historian asks himself about the probability of a past event, he actually attempts to transport himself, by a bold exercise of the mind, to the time before the event itself, in order to gauge its chances, as they appeared upon the eve of its realization.”<sup>9</sup> In this case, several years before the events in question, they seemed highly improbable to most participants and observers. Did the Soviet state break apart because it was inherently incapable of survival, or do we now see it as having been incapable of survival precisely because the Soviet state broke apart? In history winners take all, including the explanation of their own victory. As daunting as the structural obstacles to reform were (a subject about which many scholars, including myself, wrote well before the events of the late 1980s), ultimately the argument of the fundamental inevitability of Soviet collapse can only be meaningless, since any judgment concerning the inability of the Soviet state to survive cannot be extracted from the very events which caused the Soviet Union to disintegrate in the first place. As Berlin noted, teleological explanation cannot be proved or disproved; it rests rather on faith. In this instance there are good reasons to inject some doubt into teleology’s faith. The fact that within a relatively short but very intense period of history the idea of the disintegration of the Soviet state moved from the wholly unimaginable to the completely inevitable within the popular mind – both within the USSR and outside – does not breed confidence in ascriptions of the Soviet collapse solely to an inherent logic of Leninism, for this fails to explain how such a tremendous transformation in attitudes toward the state took place within such a short period of time.

Similar problems beset other widely accepted explanations of Soviet disintegration. It is commonplace to argue that the Soviet Union broke apart because it was an empire. From this perspective Soviet collapse was inevitable – determined perhaps even as far back as the creation of the Soviet state – due to the inherent imperial quality of Bolshevik rule.<sup>10</sup> In this view, all empires are destined to disappear in a world in which national self-determination has become the accepted norm, and because the Soviet Union was an empire, it too could not escape its preordained fate. A similar

<sup>9</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Alexander J. Motyl, “From Imperial Decay to Imperial Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Empire in Comparative Perspective,” in David Good, ed., *Nationalism and Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 15–43.



dilemma confronts these arguments: Did the USSR collapse because it was an empire, or is it now routinely referred to as an empire precisely because it collapsed? A sudden profusion of empire imagery accompanied the demise of the USSR. On the eve of *perestroika*, relatively few observers employed a discourse of empire to depict the nationality problems of the USSR. Crawford Young expressed the attitude prevailing at the time toward the use of the term “empire” to describe the Soviet Union:

States perceived in international jurisprudence and dominant political discourse as colonial have been dismantled, but this imagery – however serviceable as cold war lexicon . . . is unlikely to govern the unfolding dialectic between the central institutions of the Soviet state and its non-Russian periphery. . . . [A]lthough there is an undeniable element of “exceptionalism” to the Soviet case, it belongs on balance in the contemporary universe of polities founded on the doctrinal postulates of the “nation-state,” and is therefore susceptible of interpretation according to the same empirical inferences as other members of the contemporary body of states.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the Cold War the dominant image used by scholars to describe the Soviet Union in its internal dimensions was that of state rather than empire. To be sure, the countries of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe (and to a lesser extent, the Balts) were frequently referred to as “captive nations.” But the imperial analogy was only occasionally extended beyond this to cover the multinational character of the Soviet state. Rather, as the Soviet Union collapsed, it came to be widely recognized as a multinational empire. In this sense, the real issue that needs to be explained is how a polity once almost universally construed as a state came to be universally condemned as an empire. The critical question that those interested in understanding the disintegration of the Soviet state need to answer is not whether the Soviet breakup was inevitable, but rather how it came to be widely viewed as inevitable by a population that, only a short while before, could barely imagine such an outcome.

Teleological explanation violates one of the fundamental attributes of social causation: Causation always flows through the beliefs and actions of individuals, even if the actions produce unintended results. Indeed, teleological explanation can be defined as “the attribution of the cause of a historical happening neither to the actions and reactions that constitute the happening nor to concrete and specifiable conditions that shape or constrain the actions and reactions but rather to abstract transhistorical

<sup>11</sup> M. Crawford Young, “The National and Colonial Question and Marxism: A View from the South,” in Motyl, ed., *Thinking Theoretically*, pp. 91, 97.