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The Soviet collapse: Contradictions and neo-modernisation

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ABSTRACT

Over two decades have passed since the dissolution of the communist system and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 yet there is still no consensus over the causes and consequences of these epochal (and distinct) events. As for the causes, it is easy to assume that the fall was 'over-determined', with an endless array of factors. It behoves the scholar to try to establish a hierarchy of causality, which is itself a methodological exercise in heuristics. However, the arbitrary prioritisation of one factor over another is equally a hermeneutic trap that needs to be avoided. Following an examination of the various 'why' factors, we focus on 'what' exactly happened at the end of the Soviet period. We examine the issue through the prism of reformulated theories of modernisation. The Soviet system was a *sui generis* approach to modernisation, but the great paradox was that the system did not apply this ideology to itself. By attempting to stand outside the processes which it unleashed, both society and system entered a cycle of stagnation. The idea of neo-modernisation, above all the idea that societies are challenged to come to terms with the 'civilisation of modernity', each in their own way, provides a key to developments. In the end the Soviet approach to this challenge failed, and the reasons for this need to be examined, but the challenge overall remains for post-communist Russia.

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Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the debate over the causes and consequences is far from over. The nature of the phenomenon is itself contested. What exactly ended in 1991? We know that the Communist order was formally dissolved, with the banning of the Communist Party in Russia on 22 August 1991, in the tumultuous days following the failed coup of 18–21 August. Yet the dissolution of Communist power had begun much earlier, and in effect the reforms conducted under the moniker of perestroika by Mikhail Gorbachev since 1985 had achieved an astonishing self-transcendence of the earlier political system. In other words, by 1991 the traditional Soviet-style communist system had already given way to something else. The organisational power of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had been destroyed by the abolition of the traditional branches of the Secretariat in September 1988, in the wake of the various reforms launched by the Nineteenth Party Conference in June–July 1988. Equally, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 had already been presaged by a qualitative change in the nature of the country, reflected in continuing debates over changing the name of the new entity to something along the lines of a Union of Sovereign States. The 'what collapsed' question could be indefinitely extended to include, *inter alia*, long-term processes such as the collapse of empire in Russia and the exhaustion of the communist ideal in the world at large.

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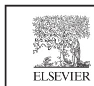

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In examining the Soviet collapse there is a permanent search for an interpretative framework. While there is no doubt that the Soviet Union collapsed as a result of its own contradictions, the nature of these contradictions needs to be explored, something that I will explore later. The contradictions that led to '1989' (taken as the symbolic date for the collapse of the Soviet 'empire' in Eastern Europe), moreover, were different from those that precipitated 1991 (the combined dissolution of the communist system and the disintegration of the Soviet state). It is now clear that the 'meaning' of 1989 is very different from that of '1991'. The 'revolutions' in 1989 in Eastern Europe shrugged off Soviet power and influence (even though by then the Soviet Union was reforming itself out of existence), the structures of communist rule, and reoriented the countries to the path of Western integration. The 'return to Europe' represented a powerful ideal, but it was a spatial rather than a philosophical programme (Judt, 2007). The meaning of 1991 is far less clear. The former Soviet republics could not share the spatial (geopolitical) orientation of 1989, except for the Baltic republics and possibly Moldova, and it was precisely the attempt of some other countries to shift from the problematic of 1991 to that of 1989 that in the end provoked conflict, notably the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. Russia always considered itself to be a distinct geopolitical pole of its own and later perpetuated '1991' as a separate project, while the countries in the 'new Eastern Europe' along the Soviet Union's western borders remain trapped between 1989 and 1991.

The fundamental contradiction that precipitated the Soviet fall was that between the attempt to create a 'modern' society, defined as one characterised by industrialisation, secularisation, urbanisation and rationalisation, and the simultaneous attempt to create an alternative modernity. The central features of this alternative modernity included the abolition of the free market, the attempt to achieve the direct expression of popular sovereignty as represented in the party-state, the inversion of typically modern forms of class hierarchy (which in the event allowed a bureaucratic class to predominate), and a permanently revisionist stance in international affairs, defined as the aspiration to revise the existing international order, even though in practice the Soviet Union became in effect a status quo power. The contradiction in international affairs, as in all other aspects, was never resolved. In the next section I briefly examine some of the immediate factors precipitating the fall, and then I turn to some of the broader questions associated with modernisation, democratisation and the larger phenomenon of the communist collapse.

The 'why' question

At the heart of debates over 1991 is the 'why' question. Why did a system that had defeated the world's most powerful military force in 1941–1945, that had launched the world's first artificial satellite (Sputnik 1) into earth's orbit on 4 October 1957, achieved the first circumlocution of the globe by Yuri Gagarin on 12 April 1961, gained strategic parity with the United States in the mid-1970s, and attained standards of living typical of a mid-level developed country, collapse so precipitously? The answers can typically be categorised into short, medium and long-term factors, but at all levels the various factors are contested. Let us look at some of the immediate factors.

a) There is no simple answer to the question about the economic viability of the Soviet order. Although by the late 1980s there were clear signs of economic strain, with a long-term decline in economic growth rates and stagnating standards of living, accompanied by declines in economic competitiveness, productivity and rates of investment and innovation. Very few sectors or industries were internationally competitive. Nevertheless up to 1989 growth continued at some 3 per cent. This may well have represented a fall from what had been achieved earlier, but in part the decline reflected a maturing of the economy. The sharp fall in the price of oil, from $66 a barrel in 1980 to $20 a barrel in 1986 (in 2000 prices), as Saudi Arabia released a surplus onto a saturated market, provoked a severe budgetary crisis. Yegor Gaidar in his *End of Empire* stresses the distorted nature of the Soviet economy, and in particular the catastrophically high proportion of resources devoted to serve the needs of the military–industrial complex (Gaidar 2006). The economy had become 'structurally militarised', with at least 18 per cent of GDP devoted to servicing its needs. However, Michael Ellmann and Vladimir Kontorovich take a more sanguine view, arguing that although under strain there was no terminal crisis of the Soviet economy (Ellman & Kontorovich, 1998).

Others refuse to contrast the Soviet and Western systems as two discrete orders. The status of the Soviet Union as an alternative was increasingly eroded. Immanuel Wallerstein notes that Western radicals after 1968 'attacked the role of the Soviet Union, which they saw as a collusive participant in US hegemony, a feeling that had been growing everywhere, since at least 1956' (Wallerstein, 2011: 76). Wallerstein and others argue that it was precisely Soviet, and even more Eastern European participation in the world economic system, that provoked their collapse (Gunder Frank, 1992). This would lead to the region becoming 'third worldised', which Frank intimated was the purpose of Western 'assistance'.

A different type of structural perspective argues that the Soviet system was unable to make the transition from a Fordist-Keynesian industrial system of mass production and mass consumption to what David Harvey calls a 'flexible accumulation regime', no longer dominated in the West by the old triad of big state, labour and capital or in the East by the monolithic planning system (Harvey, 1990; Verdery, 1996). In other words, the Soviet collapse was in part precipitated by the challenge of globalisation, although this could well be to confuse cause and effect: it was only after the fall of communism that globalisation theory became the dominant paradigm of our age (for a critique, see Rosenberg, 2001, 2005). Indeed, the removal of the European communist challenge allowed a triumphal capitalism to emerge, that was in the end beset by its own contradictions once bereft of the disciplining and constraining effect of the Soviet experiment.

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