

Role of Nationalism in the Disintegration of the Soviet Union: Employing a Constructivist Approach

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ABSTRACT

It is pertinent to understand why and how did the Soviet Union come into existence, what did it achieve and what not, was it or was it not an empire, how did it collapse and did it really collapse after all, should we regard the demise of the Soviet Union as end of the bipolar world and, why? The Soviet Union (especially its collapse) continues to baffle international relations theorists particularly the ones associated with the realist and neo-realist school of thoughts as they badly failed not only to predict the disintegration of the Soviet Union but their prediction that very soon other actors in the international arena such as Japan and Germany will surface as powerful counter-weights to the US and the world will thus turn into a multipolar world. This has not happened yet since 1991. On the other hand, the major or core ethnic group of the former Soviet Union, the Russians, continue to challenge US hegemony in space, waters, air and on earth. Thus I wonder how exactly and if the so called Soviet collapse has really happened. Therefore, I am applying the recently developed (middle to late 1980s) constructivist school of thought (both the social and IR constructivism) to the Soviet collapse to figure out if it has really collapsed in terms of its political ends and ventures.

Keywords: *Cold War, Communism, Constructivism, Disintegration, Empire, Nationalism, Polarity*

Introduction

The Soviet Union consisted of 15 constituent or union republics (also known as satellite states) which included; Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. These states were led to believe by Lenin that they were sovereign and independent and into a voluntary union with each other under the umbrella of communism. Thus, the Soviet Union was a large multinational and multiethnic state which was a combination of 15 prominent nationalities. These union polities had in fact a limited degree of sovereignty as they could not deal with matters of defense, foreign policy, religion, marriage and so on; as opposed to the fact that there can be either sovereignty or no sovereignty but nothing such as “less sovereignty” (Lake, 2003). But to the world, Lenin and later on his comrades would deny the imperial existence of the Soviet Union as they would claim to be consisting of modern nation states out of pure volition. This was actually what blurred the fine line between multinational state and empire, in the Soviet case as opposed to the former empires that would make tall claims and would boast about their imperial strengths.

The Soviet Union after its emergence in October 1917 started to project itself as a powerful antagonist to the United States, the most powerful nation on earth and

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which was then living in a state of self-imposed international isolationism (neutrality especially in military terms). It started challenging the U.S. culturally, politically, militarily and ideologically. This anti-American approach by the Soviets had its roots in the former Tsarist Russia and was thus not a new phenomenon at all, although some trace its root back to the contemporary history of the 20th century. However, this antagonism reached to its supreme peak after the Second World War and especially after the Soviet's shattering of the U.S. monopoly on nuclear weapons technology by conducting nuclear explosions in 1949. This nonetheless led the world into a bipolar system.

The Soviet collapse which began in the late 1980s in the era of Mikhail S. Gorbachev but had its roots in the immediate aftermath of the Brezhnev period (1964-1982) culminated into a peaceful and bloodless disintegration of all the former union republics and into their successful emergence as modern nation states on the world political chessboard. As a serious researcher and as an ardent student of political phenomenology, I continue to be flabbergasted like many others at the accelerated rate of an unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union in the manner it happened.

This paper seeks to answer the three questions and address the one counter-factual that I have raised earlier in the beginning of this research paper. For that matter of fact, I will divide this paper into three sections; A, B, and C and will shed light on the counter-factual in light of the overall discourse on the substance of this research.

Section A

Imperialism and Nationalism and Their Impact on the Russian Empire and Soviet Union:

Most of the republican politics that constituted the Soviet Union were earlier part of the Russian empire. However, the latter was much larger in territorial size unlike the former. The Russian empire had had its roots in the Muscovite state, which emerged as a principality during the medieval times; in the middle of the mixed forest vegetation in what is today famous as the European Russia and which centred upon the historical city of Moscow (Shaw, 1995). Having said so, I want to make it clear that the Muscovite state was not the first which was characterized as "Russian."

During the late 8th or early 9th century AD, Kievan Rus, a loosely organized socio-cultural polity emerged and centered upon Kiev, the present day capital of Ukraine. Due to internal strife between the various princes of Kievan Rus, the polity grew fragile and thus became vulnerable to foreign invasions. The first invaders of Kievan Rus were the 13th century AD barbaric Mongols (Shah, 1995). The Mongols under Genghis Khan were the most tyrant generation of warriors who invaded and ruled more than half of the world; Russia, China, Central Asia (Russian and Chinese Turkestan), Persian Empire and most of the Middle Eastern regions. They ruled Kievan Rus for nearly 240 years (1237-40—1480) (Bacon & Wyman, 2006). Then the Kievan Rus got bifurcated toward end of the 15th

century AD into two parts; a western or Ukrainian and Belorussian part which depended upon Lithuanian and then the Polish state, and an eastern part which depended on the Mongol-Tatars but gradually united by Moscow (Shaw, 1995).

My primary concern here is not gleaning over the history of Muscovy exactly but to try to figure out how it expanded over the course of time at an unbelievably higher rate. According to the Russian historian V.O Klyuchevsky, the principality of Muscovy claimed around 15,000 square miles in 1461; however, in 1914 the Russian empire occupied more than eight and a half million square miles of the total liveable land of the earth. This gives us a clear window into the expansionist rather imperialist designs of the principality of Muscovy which thus got transformed into the Russian empire over the course of few centuries from the 15th century AD onward. Invasions and irredentism by the Russian empire became more pronounced during the rule of Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible (1533-1584). Most of these were said to be based on two reasons; exploiting natural resources, and checking the British influence especially in the British India and Afghanistan in what is famously known as the Great Game. This is how the Muscovy state emerged from a loosely organized (rather disorganized) polity into a well-established empire.

The Soviet Union on the other hand was established ostensibly as a counter-regime to the Russian empire; both in structure and in ideology. When the Russian empire was weakened along its eastern border at the peak of World War One, the Leninists materialized on the opportunity in October 1917 by overthrowing the “provisional regime” (pro-democratic), which earlier in February of the same year came to power after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II (Bacon & Wyman, 2006), and declared the establishment of the Soviet Union; as a federation of republics and ethnic territories. This October revolution, also known as Bolshevik revolution (workers and peasants revolution too), was considered the driving force behind the establishment of the Soviet Union and that thus subsequently paved ways for a communist regime; as espoused by Marx and Engels (western Europeans).

Lenin, being a staunch communist, deemed the ruling Bourgeoisie ruling class as a leech sucking the blood of the proletariat (industry workers) and the peasants. However, he too, erected the tower of his communist confederation through the use of naked force by the Red Army in capturing much (not all) of the territories that was initially under the Tsarist Russia. He forcibly banned religion and abolished family structure thus leading to extreme secularism (and exploitation of and by women). The Soviet Union was a highly centralized multinational state and the constituent republics had little if any say in controlling their republics.

In the Communist Soviet Union, workers were under the monopoly of the state as market system was de-legitimized. They were underpaid and impoverished. Most of the money that the industry would generate would go to imperial expansionist ventures and would thus get devoured by the Soviet armed forces.

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Lenin died in 1923 which paved the way for and led to the beginning of the darkest era in the Soviet communist history when the brutal dictator Joseph Stalin rose to power in the late 1920s. Stalin persecuted nearly 20 million of his own Soviet population most of them industry workers for shirking or fears of shirking their working responsibilities.

Whether the Soviet Union was an imperial power is open to extensive intellectual debate and perhaps the key to unraveling this lies in the very concept of “empire”. The word empire had totally different meanings in different time periods. The term “empire” (imperium) is derived from Roman language which means “the legal power or authority to issue laws.” It is in many ways similar to the conception of sovereignty. This concept then entered the European political discourse to mean “any supreme political dominion”, which was in total contrast, in the pre-modern world, to the “more diffused systems of authority”. It however did not mean any “illegitimate rule” though it did imply to “a sovereign power over multiple and diffuse political societies.” When Henry VIII in the 1530s, declared England “an empire”, he meant to assert his sovereignty against the pope and to make it clear to the world that he would not tolerate any interference in the socio-political affairs of his state from the pope’s Rome (Beissinger, n.d.).

Later on, in the mid-20th century especially after the Second World War (roughly the times between 1945-1975), de-colonization formally materialized and imperialism got transformed into and defined as “an illegitimate and non-consensual control by a powerful polity over a weak and defenseless polity; overseas, overland or within”, and thus was looked upon with sheer detestation by the international community. Speaking technically, an empire consists of a supreme or core dominion and a peripheral polity, being dominated. Thus, an empire has two parts.

Unlike the former empires (Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman etc) who continued to proudly claim being imperial in political and structural outlook, the Soviet Union came into being with a surprisingly peculiar element of branding itself “anti-imperial” and a modern nation state with due regard for sovereignty and national self-determination of all its constituent ethnic groups. As a matter of fact, the Soviet Union played a key role in the history of empires by blurring the fine line of differentiation between empire and state and in devising the forms of non-consensual control by which culturally and ethnically distinct polities within and or beyond the borders could be controlled. As Dominic Lieven has noticed “A Russianist by definition comes to the study of empire from a strange angle (Beissinger, n.d.)” This strangeness of empire is slapped upon us because of the strikingly unique way in which the Bolshevik leader Lenin deliberately and quite consciously utilized the tools of national self-determination and state sovereignty as the vehicles of structuring non-consensual control over other fragile dominions, thus obfuscating the line between empire and state and coercion and consent. This political farsightedness and ingenuity of Lenin (and of course of other Bolshevik

leaders) was a conscious and well calculated effort to avoid following the footsteps of empires in the past that underwent colossal devastation and ultimate disintegration. Lenin and Stalin were well aware of the inevitable perils of being branded as an empire especially in the revolutionary world of nationalism. In fact it is here where the real connection between the Soviet Union's national constitution and the collapse of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires actually begins. The nationalist crisis and the disastrous collapse of the Habsburg Empire had a tremendous impression on both Lenin and Stalin. Both of them had had their lessons in this and thus chose to avoid being conceived of by their population as imperial in designs. As a consequence, the Soviet Union became the first multi-ethnic (or multinational) state in the world that defined itself "anti-imperial", and the Bolshevik leaders were not only just indifferent to the world "empire" but they rejected it bluntly (Beissinger, n.d.). However, according to Ronald Suny, "the Soviet Union did not begin as an empire, rather it became one" (Beissinger, n.d.) It became quite evident especially when Joseph Stalin forcibly incorporated the Baltic States under the fold of Soviet Union in 1940 (Beissinger, n.d.).

The "wild" tide of nationalist mobilization, that was interconnected and coordinated in almost all of the union republics of the Soviet Union and which got more traction in the period of 1987-1992 (Beissinger, 2009), following the introduction of Glasnost in 1986, played a key role in leading the Soviet Union toward its ultimate and inevitable demise in 1991. The nationalist movements in the USSR also got their impetus after the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Interestingly and ironically enough, the Russian nationalism (core ethnic group) was long regarded as the major linchpin of the Soviet power, helping the Soviet regime sustain since 1930s (when Lenin had already gone in 1923) and mobilizing support within the Soviet society for the for the Soviet political domination throughout Eastern Europe and Eurasia, this time however, the Russian nationalism did not come to the rescue and preservation of the either the Soviet communism or the Soviet state itself in the late 1980s. It rather became a source of de-legitimization of the Soviet empire. Roman Szporluk perhaps has rightly called it the "de-Sovietization" of Russia (Beissinger, 2009). Soviet Socialist Republic of Russia finally felt that it was wise to get rid of the burden of an ailing and an erroneous Soviet Union which was driving it backward vis-à-vis the West especially the U.S. It got more prominence after the independence of the Baltic states (starting from Lithuania in March 1990) when a coup d'état (famously known as the August coup) was orchestrated by the conservative elements in the upper echelons of the Soviet Communist party. They had had Gorbachev house-arrested while he was holidaying in Crimea. Heavy military movements were seen in Moscow for to close down the "Congress of people's deputies", a parliamentary structure which was introduced by Gorbachev's pro-democratic initiatives and which for the first time in the Soviet history allowed multiple party elections and on democratic basis. While Gorbachev was house-arrested, it was Boris Yeltsin, a charismatic Russian leader who called upon his

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supporters to throng the streets of Moscow and to oppose the military coup. The coup fell in three days without any massive bloodshed. Only three people were killed in this military adventure as the Red Army refused to open fire on their own citizens, in open shirking of their duties vis-à-vis the orders of the coup plotters (Sebestyen, 2011).

It thus appears in light of the above contemplation and discourse that had the Soviet Union maintained the open version of Ethno-federalism (and to be more precise, the outright absence of Ethno-federalism) that it practiced during the mid-1920s, perhaps it could have avoided the fateful disintegration, that it humiliatingly suffered. On the outside, the Soviet Union appeared a somewhat normal Ethno-federalist or multi-ethnic state, however, on the inside; it was perhaps the most highly centralized state in the history of modern nation state system. It was thus a unique model of empire in the modern world.

The fact that the Soviet Union's demise came about so bloodless and peaceful (unlike former empires) has in part its explanation in the very ingenuity with which it was erected and engineered on the ruins of the Russian empire in 1917. Lenin (first Soviet leader) established the Soviet Union quite different than other empires in the past as alluded to in the preceding discourse in this paper. Gorbachev (last Soviet leader) may well have let it disintegrate in a stark contrast to how empires disintegrated earlier in the past. The latter appears to have done so in order to avoid bloody revolution and colossal devastation. However, one cannot simply infer that Gorbachev just let it happen. He may have unintentionally prompted the collapse of the Soviet Union (as he did not want to use force because it was futile if not totally irrelevant to stem the interconnected wild tide of nationalist movements within the Soviet Union) by the introduction of his famous radical reforms towards liberalization; Perestroika (structural reforms at party and state level) and Glasnost (openness and or liberty for people to speak and write without fear). It was argued in the light of Perestroika that the Soviet institutions had accumulated a degree of legitimacy within the Soviet population and that persuasive methods of rule have replaced and state sponsored intimidation. Indeed, it was actually the fertile soil that led to the introduction of yet another radical reform, Glasnost. Quite contrary to the expectations, at least of Mr. Gorbachev, this backfired as whatever legitimacy the Soviet Union had garnered crumbled under the influence of Glasnost as people openly revealed the horrors of the era of Joseph Stalin, which ignited the conflagration of massive anti-Soviet nationalist movements, both by the Russians and non-Russians alike as they came to realize their victimization at the hand of a Soviet empire (Beissinger, n.d.). This wave of nationalism grew multiple times and integrated more deeply especially when Gorbachev gave a green signals to the East European states (Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania etc.) to decide and choose their own destination. Gorbachev refused to provide military help to the ruling communist regimes in Eastern Europe for quelling the nationalist movements in their polities. The

question of the “Gorby factor” whether he was a bloody genius or traitor (as most of the conservative elements of the communist party would call him) and which will further clarify the fact of the bloodless disintegration of the Soviet Union is being left for the next section to follow. However, in the hindsight, it was a great idea, whether intended or intended, not to use military force to snub the wave of nationalist movements in the Soviet Union. However, if it was a different leader, particularly one on the style of Stalin, I strongly doubt the collapse would have been as peaceful as it was under Gorby (Mikhail S. Gorbachev). Thanks to the genius of Gorbachev that he avoided using force otherwise it would have been a massive catastrophe in terms of both human and material losses.

Section B

Disintegration of the Soviet Union: The Conflict between Theory and Practice:

The Soviet Union officially ceased to exist on December 31, 1991. It was a completely unexpected phenomenon; the rapid unraveling of events in its last six years seemed to take by sheer surprise its citizens, leaders, and others around the world. As late as the mid-1980s, when the inadequacies and inefficiencies of the Soviet system versus the capitalist system became exceedingly apparent, few predictions of the state’s impending collapse were made. It was however only after the rapid fall of Soviet controlled socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 (Kalashnikov, n.d.), that the future of the Soviet Union in terms of stability became uncertain and doubtful. With the collapse of the Socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many were taken aback and questions were raised; both specific and general. For students and teachers of politics and political science, it brought with it a pressing need for revisiting the theories of imperialism (imperial structure), totalitarianism, centralized economic planning, multinational and multicultural states, and international politics. The unfortunate Soviet collapse nonetheless challenged historians and historiographers alike to explain the closing note on Soviet history in a systematized and causal perspective. Forget about Ivory tower, the failure of the “greatest socialist experiment” brought with it severe, sometimes disorienting repercussions for the political culture of the left. Most important, citizens and leaders of the Soviet Union’s successor states found themselves immersed into a new reality in which they were obliged to make sense of their 74 years Soviet heritage and history. Thus, the Soviet Union’s dramatic collapse keeps on thriving on our excitement and curiosity for further inquisition and for genuine academic research.

The Baltic States (especially Lithuania which got freedom in March 1990) (Kalashnikov, n.d.: 78) were the first among the union republics to seek independence from the Soviet rule in the late 1980s. It got its much needed impetus from the fall of communism in Eastern Europe which began in early 1989. All these political developments ignited the massive conflagration of a deeply entrenched and well integrated wave of nationalist movements that swept

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throughout all the union republics of the Soviet empire including its core ethnic group, the Russian republic. However, they were relatively less severe in the Central Asian Republics as pointed out earlier. Finally and officially, on December 31st in 1991, the Soviet Union crumbled after the signing of the Belavezha Accords, a semi-legal document, between Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia (Kalashnikov, 1978).

So, we reach the “simple” conclusion, as is evident from the pages of history, that the Soviet Union was a tall and towering multinational empire masquerading as an open ethno-federalist state in the modern world of nation state system. We also quite easily come to the “simple” conclusion that the Soviet Union became officially defunct after the three Eastern Slavic cousins; Belorussia, Ukraine and Russia signed its death in the Belavezha Accords. In other words, when it comes to the “world of words”, the Soviet Union is officially a dead horse. However, in practice, and through a keen and observing eye, we can still see and feel the authoritarian and imperialist aura blanketing the neighbors of the Russian Federation in its near abroad. Such a geo-political disposition has always historically characterized both the Soviet Union and its predecessor, the Tsarist Russia. However, why the Tsarist Russia, Soviet Union and now the Contemporary Russian Federation behave in this peculiar manner is not without any cogent reasons but simply lies beyond the narrow scope of this particular research. In brevity, Russia has always felt threatened from foreign invaders be it the Mongols, the Nazis and or lately the Americans in the modern world. They mostly react in self-defense but the world at large and its neighbors toward the “near abroad” perceive it “acts of Russian intervention and aggression”. However, that discussion is intentionally left out here owing to the limited scope of the research outcomes right now.

I will elaborate all this by first bringing out the various possible techniques of measuring the dependent variable of this research (disintegration) and then applying the constructivist school of thought to make sense of the “disintegration” of USSR in December 1991. These measuring techniques are:

a) **Need and Role of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS):**

The Soviet Union disintegrated on December 31st 1991. Disintegrated, in terms physical sense; territorial break, to be more precise. In other words, it was reduced to 14 of its constituent republics in addition to its core ethnic group, Russians. Whether the “disintegration” also happened in terms of its “essence” is going to be debated here.

To begin with, the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) were indistinguishable as there was no Russian KGB, no Russian Academy of Sciences, no Russian radio etc unlike the other 14 republics. The reason behind this denial of structural parity to the Russian republic was to bind Russians, the lynchpin ethnos of the Soviet Union as closely as possible to

the USSR as a whole. Thus, as Yuri Arutyunyan rightly notes, “the concepts of ‘Union’ and ‘Russia’ in the minds of Russians are one and the same (Dunlop, 1997).

However, right before the collapse, on 8th December 1991, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus had just established yet another forum, the commonwealth of independent states, by signing the Creation of Agreement (Commonwealth, 1991), the Commonwealth of Independent States was formerly launched through the ratification of the Alma-Ata Protocol by the Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. The Balts understandably refused to be part of the CIS out of their loath for anything spearheaded by the Russians. This organization was believed to be built on the model of the European Union; ostensibly for the purpose of trade, defense, and social and cultural initiatives and development among a vast array of other similar programs. It is hardly surprising for one who is a student of Russian history to find out that none other than the newly established Russian Federation was the architecture of this new organizational set up. Although the CIS is largely a loose association of “independent states” without any formal supreme head of the association, yet being student of Russian history, one will have marked misgivings about the real intentions of the Russians, owing in large part to their history of doing things impressively different from how rest of the world pursues them. By establishing the CIS, does Russia want to make an invisible empire out of the so called newly independent states (former SSRs) or does it really want this organization for what it has been portraying it want for since 1991? This can be easily answered if one gets to know how Russia treats its neighbors.

Rafael Khakimov, one of the main advisors to the government of Tatarstan, summed up the Tatars fears of resuscitated empire as, “there is an imperial spirit arising again in Moscow. It’s very popular there right now to believe that empire is right, that we must put an end to the republics like Tatarstan (Beissinger, n.d.). This shows that the “disintegration” of the Soviet Union (Russia in subtle words) is not what most people think happened. There is no denying that it happened along physical lines, but it stays right there, the empire, in different shape and ideology; this time in a capitalist attire but with a socialist soul.

Post-communist Russia still carries with it the stigma of empire in respect to its relations with other post-Soviet states. Vladimir Putin, Russia’s newly elected prime minister said in 1999 “Russia is not nourishing imperial plans with regard to the CIS countries, though it intends to pursue its interests with regard to what it euphemistically refers to as its near abroad (Beissinger, n.d.). However, the boundary between a regional power and an empire is not always that fine, thus leaving a room for doubt. If we take the example of the Baltic States, the Soviet-era ethnic Russians who still live there are often referred to as “fifth columnists” for a fresh Russian imperialism. That the Russian Federation has at numerous

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times denied the forced integration of the Baltic States into the Soviet fold (in 1939-1940) as an act of “occupation”, perhaps to avoid any legal repercussions for the Russians (for what the Soviets had done), has nonetheless doubled such suspicions.

b) Fate of former republic communist leaders under USSR (still in power or dethroned by nationalists?)

Other than the Baltic States, Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia, most of the former Union republics (SSRs) continued to be under the leadership of communists, in the post-communist world, who ruled out of autocracy and resisted democratic reforms. None of so called newly established post-communist nation states were in essence new. They were simply fragments of the communist (pre-independence) state authority and the extent to which their bureaucracies and ruling elites were reconfigured in the post-communist period consequently depended on the degree to which they faced challenges and resistance from the lower stratum, the society, during the glasnost period (which began in 1986 under Gorbachev) mainly through nationalist mobilization (Beissinger, 2009). This trend is quite prominent in the 5 central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), where the nationalist mobilization was not much strong, and the communist leaders thus survived the devastating impact of the disintegration of USSR (Beissinger, 2009). The reason why these 5-stans are important is not difficult to comprehend as they are laced with huge reserves of natural resources particularly oil and gas and colored metals. So, if Russia is having pro-Moscow regimes in these countries, it will best serve Russia’s interests than either China’s or the West’s.

For example; Nursultan Nazarbayev, the president of Kazakhstan, was a staunch communist and in 1989 became the first secretary general of the Communist party of Kazakhstan (Soviet Union timeline, 2016). After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Nursultan Nazarbayev was re-elected as president of the republic of Kazakhstan in 1991. Then, he was re-elected president in 1999, 2005 and 2011. Most recently he was reelected president in 2015.

Nursultan Nazarbayev looks down on democratic reforms and continues to challenge any such threat to his long legacy. He is quite popular among the masses and still has an apparent pro-Moscow tilt.

Same is the case with most other leaders of the former SSRs (Soviet Socialist Republics) especially the ones in rest of Central Asia, Belarus, Tajikistan (the Tulip revolutions), and Uzbekistan and so on. Leaders and bureaucracies in these post-Soviet states continue to be pro-Moscow and pro-Socialism and have strained relations with the West especially the US and Europe. One striking example of this is perhaps the one quoted by the Stanford professor and first secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her book “No Higher Honors” in which she “chides then Uzbek leader Islam Karimov (late) for being too stiff and unpalatable when the

U.S. badly needed military bases in Uzbekistan in order to launch the Global War On Terror by starting to attack the Al-Qaeda hideouts in Afghanistan. Karimov refused. It was then the Russians especially Vladimir Putin who used his influence to prompt Karimov that the latter granted military bases to the U.S.” It was just an example of the extent to which these former Soviet constituent republics are still under the sphere of the Russian influence. Another example that characterizes the Russian influence on these so called independent republics is the fact that they continue to be backward and locked up in the past despite being literate. It is only because of the ruling elite who resist democratic changes and quell opposition movements. It was quite famous for Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan to get his opponents assassinated at home, and abroad (by his secret agents).

c) Russia’s relations with rest of the former union republics:

Russia has, according to the expectations of some of the Soviet experts, jumped on an aggressive foreign policy toward its former union republics in its near abroad in an effort to maintain and retain its geopolitical influence on the region for the pursuit of its national interests. Russia’s foothold is quite strong in the Central Asian republics, Ukraine, Belarus, and in the Nordic region. The Baltic States are in constant state of fear due to any potential aggression or threat of aggression from Russia; however they are somewhat safe since they are in the camps of the European Union and NATO.

Russia’s attempts to influence and interfere into the internal affairs of Georgia, its role in the Abkhaz rebellion, its continuing military presence in its Javekheti, and its threats to invade Georgia in pursuit of Chechen fighters have nonetheless resurfaced the claims that Russia is continuing an “imperial” policy toward the Transcaucasus region. One source ahs rightly noted, “The Georgian press is stuffed with anti-Russian publications, and ‘imperialists’ is the softest expression in them (Beissinger, n.d.).” Russia’s relations with Belarus are also seen suspicious domestically in Belarus. The Belarusian-Russian Union has been rejected by some of the Belarusian nationalists who have termed it a plan to ‘make Belarus a Russian satellite and to plunder its wealth and use its labor’.” The Belarusian president, Aleksandr Lukashenka has been snubbed by his nationalist leaders as pro-Kremlin and that his efforts at reintegrating Belarus with the Russian Federation leave the people of Belarus choosing between ‘living in a free and prosperous European state’ or ‘living in abject poverty on the outskirts of the Russian empire’.

When Russia took a strident stand against Ukraine’s \$3.7 billion energy debt by demanding it to pay for it by turning over some of its enterprises in the fuel, metallurgical, and machine building industries to Russia, fears that the Russian Federation is harboring imperial designs grew manifold (Beissinger, n.d.). Russia’s relations with Armenia are nonetheless similar. Russia’s increasing control over the Armenian sources of energy production and distribution as per deals to cover Armenian energy debts are not without grave misgivings. To Putin’s

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chagrin, the creation of an 'economic community' within the umbrella of the CIS, consisting of Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus in 2003, have brought about swift accusations from nationalists in these states that Russia was seeking to restore the Soviet Union (Beissinger, n.d.).

In the early 1990s, relationship between Ukraine and Russia were one of the most volatile in the post-Soviet period. In 1992-93, Boris Yeltsin, the newly elected first president of the Russian Federation invoked Moscow's right to protect ethnic Russians (minority) in all the former republics of the Soviet Union (not excluding the Baltic States). Yeltsin demanded that the international institutions and the West grant Russia "special powers" to maintain peace and security in its immediate neighborhood. This was exactly the period in which Moscow coined the term "Near Abroad," and for the rest of the 1990s, Russia exceedingly tried to reassert its influence in that region (Hill & Jewett, 2014). Yeltsin laid the foundation of successive foreign policy and military doctrines, prompting Russia to have the right to intervene in regional territorial and ethnic conflicts especially to protect ethnic Russians there and to counter any potential attacks on Russian military installations. However, Yeltsin's power to successfully materialize on such plans plummeted since he was faced with multiple quagmires at home in the form of economic troubles, secessionist movements and political turmoil etc and was thus unable to embark on a large scale military adventure in that regard. It is rather Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's successor and Russia's second president and former KGB spymaster who has invoked the "Yeltsin Doctrine" by moving into South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Georgia in 2008 and later on into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Hill & Jewett, 2014). Not just that, a powerful Russia under Vladimir Putin continues to remain a serious potential threat to its neighbors in the Near Abroad especially the Baltic States, Georgia (Transcaucasia), Ukraine, Central Asia and even the Nordic countries like Finland. Very recently, when there were reports that a neutral Finland was going to join the Western led NATO, Vladimir Putin paid an emergency visit to Helsinki and urged his country to continue to be neutral. Thus far, Finland is not in the NATO camp. We also need to be mindful of the fact that in the wake of the US's recently planned installation of the "US Defense Missile Shield project" in Poland and Romania, Vladimir Putin issued chilling warning to both of them, "Poland and Romania are in the Russian crosshairs," and that "if we find rockets in those countries, we will react. We will definitely react." In addition to all these, the resources-rich Central Asian republics are not free to sign any trade deals with other regional or international actors with a greater degree of independence as they are well aware of the wrath of their Russian counterpart. Russia continues to exploit their natural resources particularly gas at cheaper prices than it exports to Europe from its resources in the Siberian region. This is not an ordinary situation. It clearly shows that these former Soviet-influenced territories (and republics) do continue to be under the Russian sphere of influence even if the Soviet Union is proclaimed "dead on paper" at least.

In a nutshell, contemporary Russia is not acting like a normal country even though its major shell (covering); the Soviet Union, has had long crumbled into pieces. The answer to why Russia behaves like this is probably engrained in its long rich history of military confrontation and invasions and the threats and perception of threats that it has built over the course of centuries in its national mindset.

The social constructivist school of thought that guides us that reality and truth are not objective but rather subjective as they get filtered through human consciousness and that they therefore differ across spatial and temporal lines makes the case of the “Soviet Disintegration” really questionable and of contested nature. “Territorial disintegration of a state governed by unpredictable humans” cannot and should not be tantamount to the “shattering of a glass thrown against the floor,” rather we should take the former in fluid terms and the latter in fixed ones owing to the peculiarity of their natural dispositions.

IR constructivism on the other hand also guides us that nations get to know of and start pursuing their national interests once they interact with other such nations in the international arena. But if we look back in history, we are faced with the tough question; does Russia really need to interact with Ukraine, Central Asian republics and the Baltic States to determine its national interests and figure out ways to achieve them when it has a rich experience of interacting with them in the near past under the umbrella of the Soviet Union? And, one has to remember that Russia was Soviet Union and Soviet Union was Russia, as I have quoted it from the description of John B. Dunlop in the preceding discourse. Thus, we need to open our eyes to this changing face of the “Russian reality” that not just the Soviet Union but also the Tsarist Russia are there, high and tall, different in form and ideology though, even if communism has failed; either through its inherent flaws or through the erroneous Soviet experiment with it.

d) Position of the Post-Soviet States on the Democracy Index:

The Soviet Union adopted the Marxist-Leninist model of economy, through the medium of communism. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many believed and hoped that the resurgent Russian Federation will thrive on an open market system and will don democratic norms and rules of engagement. However, not so surprisingly, the Russian Federation had a tense romance with capitalism and democracy and to be more precise treaded a narrow line of difference between capitalism (and democracy) and authoritarianism. As a result, a kind of “hybrid” system of democracy flourished in the country.

Here in this debate, I will be measuring the relative strength of the Central and East European countries that were under the spell of Soviet communism but that later on in 1989 abolished it and embraced the Western capitalist and democratic system vis-à-vis the Soviet Constituent republics that made disproportionate romance with capitalism and democracy. If the latter camp is overwhelmingly lagging on the “democracy index” vis-à-vis the former camp, it will be the proof

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that the Russian imperialism has collapsed only on paper and that the empire stands right there, high and tall. (Kekic, 2006).

So, the difference is very clear, as is evident from the Democracy Index of 2006. The Central and East European states that were formerly under the influence of Soviet Communism were free enough to embrace capital market system and democratic values and thus showed outstanding results on the index of democracy. These countries include but not restricted to Germany, Czech Republic, Greece (formerly under communist influences), and Slovenia. All these countries have outperformed many former Soviet republics and are thus branded as “full democracies.”

On the other hand, the main successor of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, including few others such as Georgia, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan are branded under “hybrid democracies.” The former Soviet Union republics and satellites that include; Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Moldova, are all tagged under the banner of “flawed democracies.” Yet others, Belarus and Azerbaijan, including the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are branded as “authoritarian regimes.”

Thus, it is quite unambiguous now that since the former Soviet republics including the Satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe continues their abysmal downward spiral on the democracy index despite the fact they also claim being independent and sovereign states baffles the conventional wisdom which says “the Soviet Union or to be more precise the Russian empire has disintegrated.” If the Russian Federation (hybrid democracy) had no influence over a majority of these states then they should have been welcoming to the Western capitalist and democratic ideologies and be flourishing like Germany, Czech Republic and Slovenia etc. However, that is not the case at hand and these states continue to be influenced by the anti-democratic Russians in the cultural, economic, political and military realms.

The situation in the Central Asian Republics is nonetheless a telling story of its own kind. Most of these republics were left relatively unscathed (lacked nationalist mobilization) and that they were also impervious to the so called “disintegration of the Soviet empire” and thus inherited the authoritative bureaucracies and autocratic leaders who were obviously Pro-Kremlin. Therefore, these states continue to be authoritarian on the democracy index. Understandably, the situation of human rights is next to bad in these states.

Section C

Mikhail S. Gorbachev: Traitor or a Bloody Genius?

Mikhail S. Gorbachev was the last General Secretary of the CPSU (communist party of the Soviet Union) (Weiss & Faul, 2009). He came to power in 1985. It is interesting to note that the General Secretary of the CPSU was actually reckoned as the leader of the Soviet Union. Whether Gorbachev was the greatest reformer and a political genius or was he simply a traitor, as viewed by many of the conservative or rightist elements of CPSU, who nudged the Soviet Union toward its final demise is subject to serious discourse and to the declassification of materials on the part of the contemporary Russia (as Russia continues to keep most of such records classified).

Let us first begin with Gorbachev's legacy of reformation. He was not actually the first to kick started the barrage of reforms and restructuring but leaders before him did undertake such efforts. After Joseph Stalin, his immediate successor Nikita Khrushchev was the pioneer among the Soviet reformers. He bifurcated the Communist Party and went for limited political and cultural openness. However, all this was effaced by his successor Leonid Brezhnev after assuming power in 1960s (Weiss & McFaul, 2009). The Soviet Union skyrocketed in terms of military, economic, cultural, educational and technological sectors during the nearly two-decade long rule of Leonid Brezhnev. The Soviet Union under Brezhnev started challenging the US hegemony not just on land and seas but also in space (Weiss & McFaul, 2009). However, things started moving in the retrograde once Brezhnev fell ill and ultimately died in 1982. His immediate successors were aging and ruled the giant of the Soviet Union with dragging feet and who died in quick succession one after the other. The Soviet Union once again immersed in darkness and awaited a new leader for more radical reforms in order to reverse the unwavering tide of unemployment, public discontent and to deal with rapidly developing international actors accordingly.

It was then that Mikhail S. Gorbachev came to the scene as General Secretary of CPSU in March 1985. He was from a generation of a new group of Soviet leaders who favored radical reforms in order to save the sinking ship, which was the Soviet Union. In the 27th Party Congress in 1986, Gorbachev openly denounced "stagnation" and "negative tendencies" of the Brezhnev period; although it was precisely toward the end of his tenure in office when he fell incapacitated and his aging fellows took on the reins of power and who then died in quick succession (Kalashnikov, (n.d).

Gorbachev first went for radical structural reforms at the level of the CPSU and the state in 1985 which came to be known as Perestroika. They were not, however, the determinative causes of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (Weiss & McFaul, 2009). Although, this along with some of his other reforms, particularly that of openness or Glasnost of 1986, unearthed the

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horrendous stories of the Stalinist era which nonetheless unleashed a colossal tide of nationalist movements (particularly including Russian nationalism) that swept across the Soviet Union. It is pertinent to mention that Gorbachev did not do it deliberately or perhaps intended to rid of the cumbersome Soviet Union when he was taking these radical steps. However, these might have accurately been the unintended consequences of Gorbachev's radical decisions (and or even indecisions). Many conservatives doubted Gorbachev's loyalty to the Soviet Union as he continued to slowly march toward democratization and liberalization of the Soviet Union. However, Gorbachev rebuffs all this when he says in 1989 "I am a Communist, a convinced Communist! For some, that may be a fantasy, but for me, this is my main goal." These short phrases of Gorbachev clearly hints he was not a traitor to the Soviet Union but was having apparently something else in his mind vis-à-vis a rapidly changing world order in the favor of the West. So, if Gorbachev was not traitor, then is it right to call him genius and why, especially when the Soviet Union collapsed in his era?

Fact of the matter is that, the agency of Gorbachev was pro-democratic. He reluctantly though avoided using force against anti-communist rebellions in Eastern Europe in 1989. He let the Berlin Wall torn down peacefully that united both the German blocks in 1989. He ceded independence to the Baltic States beginning in 1990. There was however, only one instance, in which Gorbachev reluctantly oversaw the use of military force on unarmed protestors at a television centre in Vilnius, Lithuania. Nearly 14 people died and another 500 were wounded. He largely did so when severely pressed by his conservative Communist party members in the top echelons of the CPSU (Weiss & McFaul, 2009).

Boris Yeltsin, the newly elected member of the Russian Politburo, was a fierce opponent of Gorbachev's slow and faulty reformation. However even then, for the sake of democracy, the two would communicate for larger national interests.

Gorbachev was aware of the fact that the Soviet Union's collapse was inevitable and that something must be done to make it less violent and different. Different in the sense that Gorbachev wanted to transition the structure of the Soviet Union into a different one, a loose ethno-federalism or perhaps a confederation of independent states following the ultimate collapse. Through the spring and summer of 1991, Gorbachev grew increasingly isolated from the conservative Politburo members when he was set to negotiate the "Union Treaty" with the constituent 15 republics of the Soviet Union. It was then that an unexpected move changed everything.

On Saturday, Aug. 1991, the head of K.G.B., Vladimir Kryuchkov, summoned a meeting of the top Soviet leaders (including the prime minister, defense minister and others) and expressed deepest concerns over Gorbachev's democratic moves especially his signing of the Union Treaty. They all wanted to rid of a weak and spineless Gorbachev in order to protect the fate of Communism and the Soviet

Union. Thus, on Aug. 18th 1991, Gorbachev who was holidaying in his villa in Crimea was house-arrested and forced either to annul the Union Treaty or resign. Gorbachev refused to do either. Within hours, military was mobilized as an effort to launch a military coup d'état especially around the White House in Moscow where the Russian Politburo was housed (Sebestyen, 2011). The coup plotters failed to have the pro-democratic (and anti Gorbachev political giant) arrested. Boris Yeltsin took to Moscow along with his numerous supporters to denounce the coup and demand for the immediate release of Gorbachev. The military refused to open fire on Yeltsin and his Soviet (largely Russian) supporters in a flamboyant show of the spirit of citizenship and nationalism. Boris Yeltsin mounted on top of a military tank and denounced both the Communist coup plotters and the erroneous policies of Gorbachev while remaining well within the realm of democracy. The coup ultimately fell after three days on 21st Aug. 1991. Gorbachev returned to Moscow and resigned on 25th Dec 1991.

It is thus argued in light of the extensive debate above that it was actually the military coup that accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union. Otherwise, Gorbachev was well aware of the inevitability of its demise which was the reason he was going for the Unity Treaty. The wish of Gorbachev, although not materialized the way he wanted, can be seen in a slightly weak structuration in the form of CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) which was especially espoused by Boris Yeltsin, who nonetheless remained in consultation with Gorbachev about the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union.(Timeline, 2016)

Also, most importantly, the world around the Soviet Union especially the Western Europe and U.S. in particular, were living a relatively prosperous life and at the same time with military and technological upper-handedness. If Gorbachev had not taken a pro-democratic and flexible line of action that he took while dealing with Eastern and Central Europe (Communist regimes), with the unification of Germany and with the massive tide of nationalism within the Soviet Union, there may have been a strong likelihood that the Western powers led by the mighty U.S. would have taken opportunity of the exceedingly weakening Soviet political turmoil and would have intervened to disintegrate it, thus risking the horrible escalation of a nuclear confrontation. In light of all this discourse, and in addressing the counter-factual of my research paper, I have reached the conclusion that Gorbachev was a bloody genius, not traitor. It was rightly in honor of his services for democracy, avoiding a Third World War, and (later on rallying the Soviet Union toward a peaceful demise) that he was conferred the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990 (Prize, 1990)

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