

THE EFFECT OF *GLASNOST*  
ON THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SOVIET UNION

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The Soviet Union in 1985 was a shadow of its former self. To be sure, it still appeared to be the massive, multinational, totalitarian empire that it had been for nearly 70 years. But times had changed. The national economy was crumbling; oil, which had been one of the state's few profitable exports for the previous decade and a half, was declining in both demand and value, and consequently Soviet coffers were being depleted of a critical source of revenue.<sup>1</sup> Agriculture and industry were stagnating, too, and it was clear that if Communist-era collectivization was to continue unabated, major shortages and possibly even famine would follow.<sup>2</sup> The botched war in Afghanistan, where the Soviets lost thousands of troops and ultimately a crucial ideological battle, was another major drain on both the national budget and Party legitimacy. If the system could not handle a relatively minor conflict in a comparatively unimportant country, how could that system be expected to overcome the difficulties of handling a vast empire with myriad problems and myriad peoples?

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## The Arrival of Gorbachev

It was in this climate that Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed head of the Soviet Communist Party. Recognizing the economic crisis that was taking place, he implemented a plan to put the Soviet Union back on solid ground. *Perestroika*, as the program was called, was meant to be an economic restructuring that would right the wrongs of the previous generations. The term, first coined during the reign of Peter the Great, was familiar to the people and semantically indicative of progress and advancement. Gorbachev's implementation of *perestroika* would privatize farms, make industries more efficient, and trim down imports, which at the time vastly outweighed exports.

However, a grand plan must always start somewhere, and *perestroika* was no exception. Gorbachev's first act was to increase the scrutiny that quality control committees put towards their evaluation of factory products.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, workers were not happy. They were forced to make products of higher quality—thus investing greater effort—for a negligible increase in wages. There was no motivation for them to do so, and Gorbachev understood that to achieve popular support for his reforms, he would have to compromise on long-held Soviet policy and attach some sort of personal incentive to *perestroika*. But the people were skeptical, and many believed that the plan would simply not have enough of a backing to be successful.<sup>4</sup>

Gorbachev's confidant and Secretariat of the Soviet Communist Party, Aleksander Yakovlev, was certain it would. In order to gain popular support for *perestroika*, he maintained that it was necessary to concede some individual rights and freedoms, which in turn would inject Gorbachev's administration with much-needed political legitimacy. Indeed, it was hoped that through these concessions the idealized goals of *perestroika* could come to fruition.<sup>5</sup>

Yakovlev first turned to mass media, where he effected the passage of laws allowing for greater transparency and acknowledgment of the missteps and wrongdoings of the Stalinist

era. Yakovlev also worked to restore other creative works that had been suppressed, such as movies and books, whose creators went on to publish material that previously would have landed them in jail. He returned more than 400,000 religious buildings and places of worship to the people.<sup>6</sup> Schools also began teaching students about the earlier Communist era of Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev, and atrocities such as the Ukrainian forced-famine of the 1930s. The name for this initiative was *glasnost*—literally, “voice-ness”—and came to signify openness in public affairs, press, politics, education, and even free speech. Newspapers began to publish reports on the Stalinist era, and for the first time people were able to witness, if by second-hand accounts, what acts had been committed. Through *glasnost*, Gorbachev hoped to attain a certain degree of credibility through which he would be able to implement the economic restructuring of *perestroika*.<sup>7</sup>

Like *perestroika*, the term *glasnost* had long been a part of Russian vernacular, though its rise to popular acceptance and recognition came later with the first wave of liberalization during the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>8</sup> It was molded to become the choice word for the humanists and Slavophiles of the era, who used it to further their ambitions for openness in the political and public sphere.<sup>9</sup> It was meant to allow for greater political transparency while also retaining the absolutism of the monarch, a striking parallel to the aspirations of Gorbachev a century later. So ingrained was it in the Soviet cultural identity that both Lenin and Stalin used *glasnost* to their own benefit, though each interpreted it uniquely. Lenin linked the term to the earlier Slavophiles, deeming self-criticism and introspection necessary for the healthy functioning of a Communist society. Stalin, on the other hand, co-opted the spirit of *glasnost* by allowing public display and “press coverage” of his show trials. Khrushchev and Brezhnev followed in Stalin’s footsteps by trying to integrate the principal into both the Soviet Constitution and general political ideology, with mixed results.

It is no surprise, then, that *perestroika* and *glasnost* became the preferred terms in the era of reform and collaboration under Gorbachev. Not only did the terms have a history that allowed

Gorbachev to use them to his advantage, but they had also been a mainstay of Soviet political culture for more than a century. This latter point especially proved invaluable in gaining popular support, as the citizenry saw both as familiar concepts, rather than as abstruse, foreign institutions.<sup>10</sup>

There are several conflicting arguments as to why Gorbachev implemented *glasnost* at all. One can credit the influence of Yakovlev, but his altruism should not be overstated. Like Gorbachev, he was simply a pragmatist who knew that if the Soviet crisis was to be averted, a significant liberalizing process would have to be undertaken to rectify the country's economic woes. It is important to understand that both men were still Communists, and conservative ones at that. They were hardly pushing for an overthrow of socialism; in fact, by instituting *perestroika* through *glasnost*, they were hoping to strengthen the system.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately for them, and for the rest of party leadership, these events had unintended consequences. *Glasnost* quickly became nearly impossible to contain. Suddenly liberated minority groups, under-represented and mistreated for ages, began demanding self-determination. Gorbachev and his allies had miscalculated the forces that such a liberal policy might unleash and underestimated the nationalistic bent of these groups and the extent to which they were still culturally distinct. This myopia proved calamitous.<sup>12</sup> Gorbachev could indeed have taken a "send in the tanks" attitude, but quelling insurrection through force would have undermined *perestroika* entirely.

*Glasnost* did not immediately produce much in the way of mass protest or demonstration. What it did produce was a change in overall mentality. If Communism needed drastic restructuring to continue functioning even at the most basic level, how could that ideology be trusted?<sup>13</sup> Moreover, how could Moscow be trusted to implement that restructuring? This was precisely why Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and the other post-Stalin politicians had always dealt with reform as a taboo subject. For Communism to be strengthened, doctrines would have to be relaxed. But if doctrines were relaxed, support for an already extremely unpopular government

would be shaken. It was a delicate balancing act, but one that Gorbachev was willing to attempt. Previous governments had put off this pressing issue for quite long enough, but the situation in 1985 was dire and nearly beyond repair.<sup>14</sup>

Change was imperative, but Gorbachev was averse to distancing himself entirely from those who had come before him. Unlike Nikita Khrushchev a generation earlier, Gorbachev made no speech denouncing his predecessors and initiated no public break with the past. Instead, he quietly waited for *glasnost* to take effect, which only served to increase the skepticism directed at him. It was understandable that for the populace itself, the wrongs of the past governments and the failures of the previous leaders became the wrongs and the failures of the present.<sup>15</sup>

The first signs that change was afoot came during a protest on Manezhkaya Square in Moscow in 1987. While not specifically a nationalistic revolt, it did take advantage of key liberties granted by Gorbachev. Its leaders were invited into the home of Moscow's mayor Boris Yeltsin, who calmly discussed with the protesters their aims, their goals, and their desires. They left having been given a number of allowances and concessions,<sup>16</sup> and while their movement was not in the end revolutionary, it did set a politically dangerous precedent. The number of groups requesting meetings with high-ranking officials grew rapidly. The end result in these situations was not as important as the idea—now, people could simply request to talk with the mayor and that request might actually be accepted. For many people, and their respective parties, *glasnost* meant freedom to ask for favors and demand rights.<sup>17</sup>

### Downfall of an Empire: Three Case Studies

An empire is defined by Ronald Suny as “a composite state structure in which the metropole is distinct in some way from the periphery and the relationship between the two is conceived or perceived by the metropolitan or peripheral actors as one of justifiable or unjustifiable inequity, subordination, and/or exploi-

tation.”<sup>18</sup> In the Soviet context, Moscow acted as the metropole and the 15 republics and countless ethnic groups made up the periphery.

In analyzing the downfall of the USSR, three factors must be considered: the vitality of the center, the behavior of the peripheries, and the connections between the center and the peripheries. If these relationships all are in good stead, then that empire can be considered healthy.<sup>19</sup> In the Soviet Union, however, all three were rapidly deteriorating. The central government in Moscow was becoming increasingly weak and powerless; the peripheries were struggling for autonomy from Moscow; and the ties between the two were straining. The Communist system was on the verge of collapse.<sup>20</sup>

It was the unforeseen effects of *glasnost* that weakened the bonds holding together the core and the periphery. As we shall see in the following case studies, the deterioration that precipitated the fall of the Soviet Union was not confined to a single region—it affected the entire periphery—and the effects of *glasnost* were not the same everywhere.

### The Crimean Tatars

The first effect that *glasnost* had on dissident cultural groups was greater access to historical information. As one of the central tenets of *glasnost* was openness in regards to the past, historical records and documents became more publicly available.<sup>21</sup> Those whose families had been victimized in earlier years finally had the opportunity to learn what their people had gone through. The new generation experienced an upsurge in national self-awareness and as *glasnost* was implemented, offshoot dissident organizations began to strengthen. *Glasnost* brought a new wave of people into separatist movements, which gained in influence accordingly. One such group that experienced an awakening through *glasnost* was the Crimean Tatars.

The Tatars are an ethnic group that had inhabited the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine since the Middle Ages. Like many of the minority groups in the Soviet Union, they are of a mixed Turkic and Mongol ancestry and have an appearance quite different from their Slavic counterparts. Famine, pogroms, and war had already decimated much of their population,<sup>22</sup> when, in 1944, Stalin issued a decree that all Tatars remaining in Crimea were to be deported far back out to the Uzbek SSR.<sup>23</sup>

Furious over the forced relocation, they fought back over the next quarter-century, becoming one of the Soviet Union's most universally disdained peoples. When Nikita Khrushchev promised freedom to all exiled nationalities in 1956, he consciously omitted the Tatars, who managed only to receive the paltry concession of not having to reside in rehabilitation camps.<sup>24</sup> They were still excluded from public office, unable to return to the Crimea, not allowed to speak their language, and barred from practicing Islam. It simply had not been possible under the conditions set down by the regime of the time for the Tatars to successfully resist the authoritarian Communist rule.<sup>25</sup>

This changed with *glasnost*. Unfettered access to historical information meant that Tatars who knew about the forced relocation of the 1940s only through oral history could now read about it. They could learn about their own people's history in school, and through newspapers, books, and television. Membership swelled in the unofficial independence movement—the Crimean Tatar National Movement—as new recruits eagerly participated in cultural renewal and rejuvenation.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it was precisely the awareness bred by *glasnost* that paved the way for organized protest.

In March of 1987, 3,000 displaced Crimean Tatars mostly from the Kazakh and Uzbek republics signed a petition directed at Gorbachev, demanding that he resolve the nationality dispute and the question of Crimean Tatar exile.<sup>27</sup> When the petition was delivered to Gorbachev, he did not entertain it. As a result of what they considered a slight, 2,000 Crimean Tatars traveled all the way to Moscow and gathered in front of the Kremlin. Headed

by Mustafa Jemiloglu,<sup>28</sup> a Tatar nationalist recently released from jail, the group staged the first *en masse* protests of the *glasnost* era. They demanded an audience with Gorbachev to discuss the issue of reinstatement into Crimea, and when that was denied, they chanted his name and threatened to storm in. Gorbachev finally acquiesced and allowed talks to be held, though only through a proxy, and only behind closed doors.

This was a significant historical milestone for the Soviet Union. Had the same group marched on Moscow just 10 years earlier—much less during Stalin’s regime—it is likely that the participants would have been either thrown into jail or killed.<sup>29</sup> But Gorbachev had tied his own hands. Using force to suppress protest would undermine *glasnost* and endanger the economic restructuring of *perestroika*. On the other hand, allowing protests to take place without fear of governmental reprisal would foster a growing revolutionary spirit that could have equally damaging effects.

Over the next year, Andrei Gromyko, Gorbachev’s proxy and the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, set up a commission that sponsored investigations, held talks, and studied exhaustively the question of Tatar reinstatement. By this time *glasnost* had already taken root in Soviet society and most people were expecting the issue to be resolved in favor of the Tatars, the equality and modernization brought forth by *glasnost* having made talk of repression along ethnic lines politically unacceptable. Surprisingly however, the Tatars lost the cause. The commission decided that the more homogeneous ethnic composition in Ukraine that had developed since the 1940s, in tandem with the prevailing racist undercurrent would prevent the Tatars from making a safe return to their homeland. Thus their demand for repatriation was declined.<sup>30</sup>

For Moscow, this was problematic. As with the march on the Kremlin, Gorbachev was in a position with no favorable outcome. He could reject the committee’s findings, though it was obvious to him that the Tatars would not be warmly received in Ukraine. Alternatively, he could accept the committee’s decision and hope that the Tatar situation would be mediated in some other fashion,



an option that would not sit well with those whose political allegiance rested on the promise of freedom and democracy.<sup>31</sup> The constraints of *glasnost* meant a hard line approach in the Crimean Tatar situation was impossible.

Gorbachev ultimately overturned the Gromyko ruling and set up a new committee to analyze the state of affairs. Its sole purpose was to negotiate a safe passage back into Ukraine, and once that was accomplished, the Crimean Tatars would be left to their own. For some, a return to their homeland actually created worse living conditions and greater poverty than before. But they *were* given the option, and in a country so buoyed by social liberalization, that was what mattered. At the very least, the Crimean Tatars were allowed to practice their free will.

*Glasnost* played a major role in Gorbachev's political restraint. The climate in which *glasnost* was enacted, in the midst of economic turmoil, and with the promise of social freedom a key goal, necessitated strict constraints on policy decisions. This is precisely why Gorbachev's tactics had to be different from those used by past Soviet leaders. Gorbachev could not afford bad press.

The Crimean Tatar situation also exacerbated the already strained ties between Moscow and its peripheries. As the Crimean Tatars gained a degree of self-determination, many other similarly repressed ethnic groups—Chechnyans or the Polish Sorbians, for example—would follow their lead.<sup>32</sup> The Soviet government could not afford to have a multitude of these ethnic groups splintering off from the core, nor did they want to see national groups like those in the Caucasus and the Baltic states break off. If that were to happen, the survival of the Soviet Union would be at risk.

## The Caucasus

Another outcome of liberalization through *glasnost* was that suppressed ethnic tensions were allowed to resurface. Under Communism, official propaganda had forced acculturation under the Soviet flag; citizens were made to see themselves as Soviets

rather than as members of their regional cultural denomination.<sup>33</sup> Gorbachevian reforms, however, turned this on its head—people were no longer simply Soviet, but rather Georgian, Kazakh, Ukrainian, and so on. *Glasnost* halted cultural assimilation, and people were free to express their own, often national, identities.

This was particularly evident in the Caucasus region—which, located at the convergence of three continents, multiple religions, and dozens of languages and cultures, had a long history of disputes and confrontations. The genocide of the Armenians in 1915 is perhaps the best-known of these, but ethnic warfare had been present for far longer.

The nationalist policy pursued by Soviet Communist leaders, however, required assimilation into both Soviet culture and state, thus uniting the peoples of the Transcaucasus (a political term for the nations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). Outward displays of nationalism or nationalistic conflict were all but absent, and the three nations each functioned simply as separate regions within the Empire. Ironically, it was under authoritarian Soviet rule that the Transcaucasus experienced its first era of prolonged peace.<sup>34</sup> Yet malice among the three nations was never entirely gone, and the belief was that with the greater freedom of expression resulting from *glasnost*, these dormant conflicts would return to the fore.<sup>35</sup>

And so they did. Coinciding with the Crimean Tatar repatriation, the governmental stranglehold in the Caucasus broke and tension spilled forth. Gunfights, bombings, and lynching started to occur throughout the region, despite strong local efforts to stop them.<sup>36</sup> The focal point of this clash was the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which had been under Azeri jurisdiction since the Soviet takeover in the early 1920s. However, the region was still populated almost wholly by ethnic Armenians, who spoke Armenian and practiced Armenian orthodoxy. Azerbaijan, with its Muslim-Turkic makeup, presented a cultural threat to the Armenians.

What triggered the conflict was a 1988 referendum enacted by representatives of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and

overseen by a delegate from Moscow. The voters were to decide the region's political fate. Here too the consequences of *glasnost* are clear—for the first time in 60 years, the people of the Transcaucasus found themselves enfranchised. The expected (and realized) outcome was an overwhelming majority for assimilation into Armenia, but the referendum would make it official.<sup>37</sup> This is generally the accepted starting point of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Armenia declared the region its own, and the Azeris started fighting. Gorbachev's response was to send troops into the area, as the immediate priority then was cessation of violence. This hard line approach worked, for a while, until the inhabitants realized that the troops were under strict orders not to interfere with any affray directly, much less shoot at those involved.

What followed was six years of warfare between the two sides, during which thousands died and millions were displaced. A truce was declared on May 16, 1994, at which point a clear Armenian victory had been achieved. The terms of the ceasefire, however, made the status of Nagorno-Karabakh unclear, and the political situation reverted to its pre-war state. In the end, nothing had been achieved.<sup>38</sup>

One might have expected that the Soviet regime would simply assert its dominance after the vote and physically separate the two nations. The war might well have ended then and there. However, as was the case throughout the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was not keen on interfering with the peripheral states. At the outset, Gorbachev himself sided with the Azeris, so it is clear that he had an opinion to voice.<sup>39</sup> But that was all it was—an opinion. Unlike the historically interventionist Soviet regimes before him, Gorbachev was unwilling to arrest the progression of the conflict. The rapid political liberalization that accompanied *glasnost* had made the concept of orderly reform improbable from the very beginning. As the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze, said in response to hardline colleagues pushing for military intervention: "it is time to realize that neither socialism, nor friendship, nor good-neighborliness, nor respect can be produced by bayonets, tanks or blood."<sup>40</sup> Gorbachev could not afford

to lose the support of his political constituents who were aspiring for democracy and freedom. On the other hand, if he let the situations progress unchecked, the Union itself might crumble.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, in the case of the Caucasus, increased freedoms and a more open and inclusive political system precipitated the warfare that followed. Gorbachev must have considered Armenia and Azerbaijan insignificant—or unsalvageable—for him to have let them go as he did. In either case, this attitude reveals a startling lack of connection between his government and the governments of the peripheral republics. As such, the conflict can be understood as another step towards a Soviet downfall.

### The Baltics

Perhaps the most critical piece of the dissolution puzzle happened in the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—a region that bore little resemblance to the violent, impoverished, and racially diverse Caucasus and Central Asia. They had come under Soviet rule in 1940, far more recently than any other Soviet republic. Moreover, the circumstances of their integration—the treachery of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, wherein Baltic lands were illegally ceded to the Soviets—only served to further engender hatred and acrimony.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, it was easily the most affluent region in the Soviet Union, and the Baltic countries had had access to Western television and radio stations for quite some time.<sup>43</sup>

Such were the political conditions when Gorbachev implemented *glasnost*. Conflict in the Caucasus and the successful revolt in central Asia had already eaten at the threads holding the country together. Then the Balts, already the least legitimate of Empire's holdings, were now being given a chance to voice their opinions.<sup>44</sup> A relatively rich, forward-looking cluster of semi-autonomous states breaking from the Union was the worst-case scenario for Moscow—were they to secede, the pretense of Soviet omnipotence would be exposed. Other republics would then

open themselves to secession, as the fears of the Soviet backlash diminished. Therefore, it was necessary—above all else in the Baltic—to prevent independence from becoming a possibility. At the same time, though, the Baltic was the last place where Gorbachev wanted to bring police violence, as it *was* the region most likely to succeed. Yet he could not allow protests to go unchecked, for they would certainly grow in intensity until the people's demands were met. The constraints of *glasnost*, then, forced him to attempt to eliminate the spirit of independence by persuasion instead of coercion, a difficult task.

The Baltic peoples were not completely preoccupied with the issue of independence, however.<sup>45</sup> Early on in the campaign for cultural autonomy, in 1984, only one in eight native Estonians believed that it was the nation's most pressing issue. Of the population of ethnic Russians (around one third of Estonia's total population), a mere 1 percent were in that camp.<sup>46</sup> There *was* a notable group of Restorationists whose political agenda revolved *solely* around the issue of independence; however, for the average person, this was not altogether pressing. Indeed, the themes that most dominated discussions were those of the environment and economy. One of the first retaliatory measures taken by the Balts on Soviet power in the era of *glasnost* happened in Latvia, where plans to build a new nuclear power plant on the Daugava River were halted and later scrapped after mass demonstrations forced Soviet construction workers into withdrawal. The environment was something real and important; independence was a distant hope.<sup>47</sup>

The push for independence was especially strengthened by publications in various magazines and newspapers. *Looming* and *Vikerkaar* were two of the major literary journals in *glasnost*-era Estonia, and their influence was vast.<sup>48</sup> Before the reforms, *Looming* was, with 13 percent of the public reading it, one of the biggest weekly publications in the country. By 1989, 75 percent were reading it. Other written works, like *Vikerkaar*, produced similar figures. Unsurprisingly, such journals were the frontrunners in the nations' fight for autonomy and the first to break the

independence “taboo” that had existed for much of the Russian occupation. In Latvia, *Atmoda* and *Diena* played a similar role, with subscriptions increasing at a comparable rate.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to remember that under *glasnost*, these were hardly subversive publications. They were mainstream, and wrote of nothing illegal—they did not organize protests or severely criticize the regime. They simply took advantage of the freedom of the press in the era of *glasnost* to promote local movements and unite their readership. Thanks to the rapid progression of *glasnost*, these periodicals were transformed from underground publications to very familiar actors on the dissident scene, becoming all the more outspoken in their support of the various independence movements that had sprung up around the region since 1985.<sup>50</sup> *Atmoda*, for instance, was a staunch supporter of the Latvian National Movement. At the same time, radio and television provided much-needed vocal and visual support. The press managed to avoid Soviet censorship, though, as it did not technically espouse national sovereignty—simply the organizations that pursued it. In the Baltic region, the media was not a catalyst for independence as such, but it did enhance popular perceptions and the cross-cultural influence of the idea of independence, which was just as important.<sup>51</sup> The spokespeople for Gorbachev’s administration called mass media “the most representative and massive rostrum of *glasnost* [in the Baltic].”

It was through these channels that the concept of sovereignty was transformed from the distant hope mentioned previously to something real and plausible. As Gilbert Parker writes, “the spirit of independence was alive in all three Baltic states, including Estonia and Latvia. They had developed bi-lateral relations in agriculture, ignoring the authority of the Soviet central government, and were reviving the Council of Baltic States, first created in 1934.”<sup>52</sup>

In Estonia, much of the early resistance took place in the form of rock festivals. Thousands flocked to these; many more listened to them on the radio. The bands would often play nationalistic hymns and songs, and sometimes political leaders would attend

and give speeches. In Latvia, the Helsinki-86, an independence group modeled after the Czechoslovak Charter-77, laid roses at the Latvian Freedom Monument, symbolizing the health and wealth of the Latvian state. This was a bold act; a stern defiance of Soviet power. *Sajudis*, the Lithuanian nationalist organization, was perhaps the most radical—regularly staging massive protests and publishing very harsh criticism of the regime. But what really brought the Baltic movement together as one was a demonstration known as the Baltic Way.<sup>53</sup>

What effectively started out as a publicity stunt ended up as one of the most memorable symbols of Baltic independence efforts. On the morning of August 23, 1989, more than 2.3 million people—across all three republics—created a human chain and formed a symbolic “wall” against Soviet oppression. Response in Moscow was scathing, with some calling for a forceful breakup of the protests that had started in the aftermath. Yet Gorbachev hesitated. Yakovlev, the founding father of *glasnost*, is reported to have stated that “if a single Soviet soldier fired a single bullet on the unarmed crowds, Soviet power would be over.”

Despite his warnings, troops were eventually sent out. The situation had been coming to a head, especially in the southern states of Latvia and Lithuania, and all three states had, by 1991, declared independence. While they were not yet recognized by any member of the international community, it was becoming obvious that Moscow could not maintain power for much longer. In Lithuania, the police could not manage to stop the riots and responded by shooting on the protesters.<sup>54</sup> Fourteen died and hundreds more were injured trying to defend the Vilnius radio and television towers and the broadcasts that they were transmitting. Embarrassed and by this time consigned to defeat, the army pulled out. Just five months later, in August of 1991, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became officially independent states.<sup>55</sup>

Crucially, the Baltic protests were of a different nature than those in Caucasus or Uzbekistan. They were nonviolent for the most part, little blood was shed, and few lives were lost. Moreover, they were *legal*. What happened between Armenia and Azerbaijan

was not legal—the authorities simply failed to act accordingly. The insurrection in the Baltic was within the law, though, and that is part of the reason for its success. The media reached out to so many of the region's people and transmitted perfectly allowable messages—revolutionary in character, sure, but lawful. Understandably, a fully-transparent, legitimate media should garner more support than one controlled by the government. And so it did.

Here, too, it becomes clear that *glasnost* made it nearly impossible for strong ties to be sustained between member states and Soviet government. The political restraint that *glasnost* demanded meant that Gorbachev could not put an end to the Baltic protests by force. And if not by force, then how else? Minor confrontation was the most that he could plausibly afford. At the same time, though, if the protests were not put down, they would morph into something altogether more dangerous for the Soviet state, as we saw with the Baltic Way.<sup>56</sup> It was a catch-22; if Gorbachev could not control the Baltic states, the Communist regime was bound to fall. As Ronald Suny noted earlier, an Empire without its peripheries ceases to be an empire. Such was the case within the Soviet Union by 1991.

## Conclusion

The deterioration of stable bonds between the center and the periphery was one of the most notable effects of *glasnost*. It happened in all of the case studies presented—with the Tatars, the Armenians, the Azeris, and the Balts. It was also the key factor in determining the very demise of the Soviet Union. Had the connections been strong, the breakaway provinces and nations would have had no incentive to disconnect from the regime. Had the power in the center been solid and established, any attempted secession would have been put down.

Indeed, it was the collateral outcome of *perestroika* through *glasnost* that brought about the end of Soviet Communism. The



system did not collapse, as is sometimes understood. A collapse would indicate a sudden and complete fall from grace. Instead it crumbled gradually, and certainly not from a high position. It really is one of history's great paradoxes: to survive, Soviet Communism had to compromise, but if it compromised, it could not survive.

One can criticize Yakovlev, who is generally viewed in retrospect as anti-Soviet, anti-Communist, and more than a little bit naïve, for the misguidance that resulted in the Soviet breakup.<sup>57</sup> The era of stagnation, coinciding with the military failure in Afghanistan, provided Gorbachev with a less than ideal set of circumstances to work with. In addition, maintaining the welfare of the more than 127 separate ethnic groups<sup>58</sup>—few of which had been of any importance to Gorbachev's predecessors—made peaceful compromise almost impossible. In the end, Gorbachev could do no more than delay the seemingly inevitable. He is praised by many, especially in the West, for his approach in handling the Cold War,<sup>59</sup> but in reality, it was more a matter of circumstances than personality that resulted in Gorbachev acting as he did.

Ironically, Gorbachev himself was unseated by the very people who benefited from his reforms. Boris Yeltsin, who replaced him as president of the Russian Federation, would not have been able to oversee the Soviet Union's transition to democracy without Gorbachev's reforms having paved the way. Not only did *glasnost* cause the Union to break up, but it also curtailed the political career of its creator.

One can wonder how the crisis could have been averted before it got out of hand. Perhaps it would have been prudent for the regime not to institute *glasnost* at all. Doing so would have forestalled dissent and disintegration, but it is also likely that the Union would have collapsed economically. Looking back, it is surprising that few contemporary thinkers had sufficient knowledge of the gravity of the Soviet situation and the repercussions that *glasnost* would have on the peripheral states. For better or worse, they simply did not see it coming.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Beissinger, National Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 57

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kenez, A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 249

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249

<sup>5</sup> Martin McCauley, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2008) p. 407

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408

<sup>7</sup> Kristian Petrov, "Construction, Reconstruction, Deconstruction: The Fall of the Soviet Union from the Point of View of Conceptual History," Studies in East European Thought 60, no. 3 (September 2008) pp. 179-205

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192

<sup>9</sup> Kenez, p. 253

<sup>10</sup> Ilona Travencova, "*Gorba ovovy reformy a rozpad Sov tského svazu*," Politologie/Politologie a evropská studia (Praha, 2008)

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## Notes on Contributors

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K'ung-fu-tzu (551-479 BC) The Analects

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Richard Montgomery High School, Rockville, Maryland	
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*A Quarterly Review of Essays by Students of History*

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# THE CONCORD REVIEW

Volume Twenty-Two, Number Three

Spring 2012

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- 1 Anushua Bhattacharya  
Refugees During World War II
- 37 Jonathan Frankle  
Invasion of New Mexico
- 53 Eliza Fawcett  
Great Leap Famine in China
- 77 Tiancheng Zhang  
Rise of India
- 107 Nicolas Powell  
Effects of Glasnost
- 129 Preston Metz  
Nat Turner's Rebellion
- 145 Collin Henson  
Scottish Immigration Before 1800
- 171 Luke R. Salazar  
Second Punic War
- 195 Kathleen Rao  
The Six Companies
- 211 Jae Hyun Lee  
The British in the Sudan
- 241 Sarah A. Sadlier  
War of Regulation 1766-1771
- 348 Notes on Contributors

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