



1991

## The Empire Strikes Out? A Look at the Nationalities Crisis in the Soviet Union

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**A LOOK AT THE NATIONALITIES CRISIS IN THE SOVIET UNION**

**CATHERINE E. BREEN**

**GOVERNMENT HONORS THESIS**

**ADVISED BY PROFESSORS CHIP HAUSS AND GUILAIN DENOEU**

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## **NOTE TO THE READER**

The immediacy of the events in the Soviet Union necessitated the use of many current sources, particularly periodical and newspaper articles. The volatile nature of the current political, economic, and social situations demanded that I use these recent references over more authoritative sources.

*Great Russia has forged an indestructible union of free republics.....*

First line of the Soviet national anthem

### Prologue

These first few words of the national anthem of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics are very telling. That the Soviet state was indeed *forged* together, at first by an overbearing empire and later by an greedy totalitarian government, has become increasingly evident in recent years as the shroud of secrecy covering the Soviet Union's enigmatic past has been lifted under a program of democratization and other reforms. It is also has become apparent that the union is not as *indestructible* as initially believed. As we can see by merely glancing at today's headlines, the Soviet Union is experiencing grave internal disorder. The union's fifteen republics, which are not really *free* after all, are tearing themselves away from each other and from the central Soviet government, taking with them resources, land, and power, which many nationalists feel was wrongly taken from them by the Russians. Some of the republics were annexed under the tsarist regime, while others were incorporated after the communists seized power in 1917. All, however, share a common bond - they were forced into the union.

Because of this forcible annexation of lands, a powerful animosity towards the central leadership developed within most of the annexed republics. A bitter resentment, coupled with strong nationalist sentiment, existed in some form in every non-Russian republic. However, the autocracy and authoritarianism that existed up until the arrival of Gorbachev stifled

and repressed nationalism. When Gorbachev entered office and introduced his new reform program, these ethnic problems surfaced, creating a more problematic situation than either the economic or political crises, both of which have received far more attention from the American media.

My thesis rests on the notion that, because of the increase of freedoms in the Soviet Union today, many republics are demanding that their autonomy be restored and that this nationality crisis, an unforeseen and unwanted byproduct of recent reforms, has grown into such a disaster that it is now actually impairing the whole reform movement in the Soviet Union as civil unrest and strife are beginning to threaten the stability of this huge empire. Ethnic identity is not something that can be hidden, changed, forced, or converted, nor will national and cultural roots simply disappear over time. Thus, the coercive incorporation of different nationalities will result in resistance and ultimately in revolt, but only if enough freedom and power can be garnered and then organized by the oppressed peoples.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms uncovered a lot more than just economic and political structure problems. Unfortunately for him, he realized this a little too late. Once out of the closet, nationality tensions erupted all over the country. Originally, analysts asserted that the ethnicity crisis evolved out of the rapid changes and implementation of semi-democratic reforms, but upon a more careful examination of the situation, it is evident that the nationality problem has existed since the revolution but was merely well-hidden. The closed nature of Soviet society before Gorbachev allowed for these kinds of "secrets."

As the crisis unfolded in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, it became apparent that the hostility that existed between some republics and the central Soviet government was precipitated by both a growing dissatisfaction with the Soviet system and a new-found freedom to express this vexation.

The question of how to handle this domestic dilemma in the USSR, the largest multiethnic nation in the world, has been the source of much controversy since the introduction of Gorbachev's reform program. Interethnic hostilities and discord have resulted in widespread disorder and antagonism in Russia and the other fourteen Soviet republics. Thus, while the USSR faces the monumental task of implementing *perestroika* - a virtual economic and political facelift - it is being challenged by this other overwhelming dilemma, popularly referred to as "the nationality question," which is gradually forcing the other reforms into the background. This recent heightened awareness of nationalism has given rise to many pro-independence, nationality movements, which in gaining a voice through *glasnost*, perhaps the most important element of *perestroika*, are today crying out almost in unison for independence. The question now is whether the Soviet Union will be able to hold itself together. Can a leadership that is steadily losing its grip on society hold together a crumbling union?

One can easily see that these ethnic crises unleashed by Gorbachev's reforms have revealed a fundamental flaw within the Soviet system. The central Russian power, in trying to forge many different nations into one great society, but ignoring the ethnic and cultural diversity, has gotten itself tangled up in a terrible dilemma. The leaders in the Kremlin must face up to the facts that successful democratic reforms cannot coexist with oppression and coercion of minority nationalities or any other group. Moreover, the

Soviet leadership cannot hope to solve one problem without having to also resolve the other. In other words, economic reform cannot be successfully implemented without offering a solution to the problem of nationalism. The political, economic, and social crises within the USSR are distinctly different problems, but they are all interconnected. The Soviet Union cannot hope to democratize their system while simultaneously denying the republics a right that is granted to them under the Constitution. Thus, what lies ahead for the Soviet Union must be calculated by looking into the development of this national crisis and putting it into perspective in the framework of how it is interwoven with other domestic problems in the USSR.



## INTRODUCTION

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was formed in 1922 when the Russian republic "merged" with the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and parts of the Transcaucasus region. In later years, the Union continued to amass even more territory by annexing several more states. In the late 1920s, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, and Tadzhikistan, all southern republics bordering Iran and Afghanistan were added. Soviet Central Asia expanded its territory in the middle of the 1930s, when the Kirghiz SSR and Kazakh were annexed. A few years later, in 1940, Moldavia and the three Baltic republics (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) were forced into the union, bringing the number of soviet socialist republics to a total of fifteen.<sup>1</sup> Today the USSR spans over eight million square miles and consists of these same fifteen different republics plus five autonomous regions, ten autonomous areas, and over one hundred distinct nationality groups speaking in two hundred dialects and languages.

Although hardly a united nation, Soviet leaders since the time of its conception have striven to establish a common identity within the union. "Nationalist in form, socialist in content" was the image the Soviet leadership sought to portray. However, in trying to create a single Soviet identity by forging all of these different regions, religions, races, and ethnic groups together into one, the leadership succeeded only in promoting hostilities among these peoples and towards the central powers themselves.

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<sup>1</sup>Vadim Medish, The Soviet Union (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991) pp. 33-34.

But only over the past six years were these angry republics able to voice their animosity, after decades upon decades of repressed bitterness and dissatisfaction. This project will examine why the USSR, after seventy years of preservation, today faces possible disintegration. More specifically, the case studies of the three Baltic republics and the Ukrainian republic, all of which have strong, organized separatist movements, will be used to show how the cohesion of the union is in jeopardy. Differences in the struggle for independence between the Ukraine, which was initially annexed into the Union during imperial times, and the Baltic region, which was annexed much more recently, during World War II, will also be highlighted. The history of both regions will be examined in search of why the former is more likely to stay in the union while the latter are more apt to secede. The Ukraine and the Baltics have actively pursued independence over the past year and a half and are both relatively successful and powerful regions. Yet both may end up with distinctly different destinies. Why the Soviet Union has failed to create a unified national identification throughout all of the republics can be answered by looking into their recently uncovered past, which, in turn, aids in the speculation of what the future may hold for this precarious alliance.

### **Historical Perspective**

Assessing the historical development of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the name by which it officially became known in 1922, is essential to our overall understanding of the nature of the present national crisis. Russia's political roots date back about eight hundred years. In its first

hundred years, many battles were fought and lives were lost, but the Russians managed to hold onto their territory. In the Middle Ages, Russians had gained enough manpower and strength to successfully fight off any invading army and even succeed in spreading westward into new territories that were conquered with relative ease. Indicative of their westward expansion, Russians moved their capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg, present-day Leningrad, in the sixteenth century. Out of new acquisitions, old territory, and a tsarist form of government evolved the Great Russian Empire.

By the 1700s, Russia had annexed parts of Poland and today's Baltic region and had begun moving into Transcaucasia and the Crimean Peninsula. A century later, territorial acquisitions included all of the above regions, Finland, parts of Central Asia, Armenia, and Georgia.<sup>2</sup> This drive for territorial expansion was motivated by a combination of reasons. Surely the euphoria of victorious conquests drove the Russians to continue in their succession of foreign invasions, but an even stronger driving force was the Russians' fear of being invaded themselves. Because of their own lack of natural borders around their original territory, they had been repeatedly invaded and feared that their empire might once again be snatched away from them. Thus, Russia began invading neighboring regions to build a buffer zone and satisfy its perceived need for security. In short, territorial expansion was justified as defending national interests. Under the tsarist regime, based on an imperial legacy, sovereignty of a non-Russian territory was disregarded, at best, and repressed, at worst.

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<sup>2</sup>Medish, p. 11.

After the Revolution of 1917 brought tsarist rule to an end, Lenin came to power and sought to redefine the map of the former empire. Along with reforms of things such as the alphabet and the calendar, Lenin promised to change the very nature of the union, granting freedom to all the republic territories. However, almost as soon as it was granted, their freedom was taken away again. Some of the stronger areas on the fringes of the union were able to break away, other smaller, more dependent republics were not so lucky. Areas dominated by the Finns, Poles, and Balts were successful in their drives to restore independence, many of the other republics were simply "recaptured."

The need to create a unified Soviet state was used as justification for this forced annexation of lands. The nationalism that existed in the non-Russian regions after the Revolution was viewed as incompatible with the goals of the new communist government and thus was quelled. Lenin decried the struggle for self-determination by many ethnic groups, calling it "unacceptable" and urged they all the annexed territories join their efforts to create a unified state.<sup>3</sup> In actuality, Lenin was endorsing the subordination of these new regions to a centralized government which was completely Russian.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic identity were not only discounted, but was also repressed. Thus, in forming the Soviet state, Lenin and the new Soviet constitution ignored the continued cries for independence and insisted on forcing harmony in the new union.

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<sup>3</sup>Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, Soviet Disunion - A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR (New York: The Free Press, 1990) pp. 23-24.

<sup>4</sup>Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 26.

Moreover, according to Marxist-Leninist theory, the development of an international consciousness would eventually result in the disappearance of nationalism. Socialism, it was thought, would create a single, unified state in which all peoples would live harmoniously and cooperatively. In addition, the incorporation of non-Russian territories was seen as necessary for the socialist cause. Marx, on the formation of the new Soviet state, said that it was necessary to "impel the republics towards amalgamation" in order to create "a reliable bulwark against international capitalism."<sup>5</sup> This also served as justification for holding onto the republics which would ensure the safety of the Soviet Union, as well as guarantee a wide scope of influence for both Russia and socialism. The post-revolutionary leadership, first under the direction of Lenin and later under Stalin, strictly enforced Soviet hegemony, ignoring the distinct ethnic and cultural differences among different regions that had been incorporated into the new Soviet state.

### Today's Perspective

Independence movements and interethnic hostilities which, over the past couple of years, have threatened to overshadow Soviet domestic reforms, today seem to all but ensure their demise. In trying to concentrate on economic reforms and implement democratization, Gorbachev and his colleagues have been distracted by commotion in the outlying republics, commotion which now demands immediate attention before any of the other problems. By the end of 1990, all of the union's fifteen republics had declared

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph Stalin, Marxism and the National Question (New York: International Publishers, 1942) pp. 123-125.

some sort of sovereignty from the union, and seven others, the Baltics states, Armenia, Moldavia, Georgia and the Ukraine, have declared independence altogether.

President Mikhail Gorbachev, realizing the gravity of this unanticipated crisis, has vowed to resolve it. Initially attempting to use forceful measures to maintain unity, as was the case when interethnic violence first surfaced in Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1985, Gorbachev seemed to have been moving away from this tactic in the late 1980s. Then in early 1990, he ordered Red Army tanks into Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, when the republic declared its independence from Moscow. Unlike his other uses of force, as in Kazakhstan and Georgia in the late 1980s, when Gorbachev claimed to have been trying to restore order, this display of Communist might in Vilnius was an unambiguous message to nationalists to end their attempts to break away.

Ironically, however, Gorbachev has recently been alternating between use of force and power of negotiation. Since the middle of last year, he has been entertaining the idea of a new treaty that would guarantee the republics their sovereignty in exchange for a degree of submission to the central authorities in Moscow. But instead of treaties and contracts, threats and ultimatums have been made. No promises have been made on paper, however, and spoken promises have only included compromises deemed mediocre and flawed by pro-independence republican leaders.

Today the leaders of the world's third most populous nation are teetering on the edge of a gradually eroding cliff. The question, then, that lingers on everyone's lips is: Will the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

remained united, or will this seventy-year-old confederation come crumbling down? The answer probably lies somewhere at the midpoint between these two recourses. That Mr. Gorbachev and his colleagues must soon provide the anxious republics with more finite, unambiguous guidelines is evident. What the specifics of these provisions, as well as their short- and long-term effects, may prove to be is much less clear. As then Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzkhov so aptly stated in September, 1990: "To be or not to be a united government, that is the question."

### International Significance

So what exactly does all the turmoil mean and what kind of significance does it have on a world-wide level? The domestic crisis of the Soviet Union is not only an international problem, but it is also a lasting problem. Trying to straighten out the crises within the Soviet Union could potentially take more than a generation's worth of time, if reforms are indeed to be carried out at all. If conservative forces succeed in hindering reform, then it could take even longer. The Soviets' internal problems will have world-wide reverberations, especially if civil war breaks out. Western Europe, Great Britain, and the United States have already stated their displeasure with the invasion of the Baltic republics, warnings could easily grow into action taken by foreign countries if prompted. At the beginning of 1991, the European Community threatened to revoke a promise made earlier to the Soviet Union for "\$1 billion in food and economic aid and \$500 million

in technical assistance."<sup>6</sup> The United States acted similarly in May of 1991 when they threatened to revoke a \$1.5 billion aid package. In an interview with a Warsaw newspaper, former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze warned that if the (Soviet Union's) situation could not be stabilized then "it will pose a threat to.....the whole of Europe and the world. And unstable Soviet union poses the highest danger. It is in the world's interest that the situation in the Soviet Union should stabilize."<sup>7</sup>

Under Gorbachev and "new thinking," there has been a renewed interest in increasing multilateral ties. Under his economic and foreign policy reforms, Gorbachev expressed a renewed interest in foreign investment, a move which could ultimately strengthen the global economy. Moreover, concrete steps toward disarmament, in the form of troop cutbacks, base closings, and arms reduction have been taken by this former superpower over the past few years. Reform in the Soviet Union, if successful, could mean the beginning of a new global relationships that could potentially benefit the Soviet Union itself as well as other countries and the world balance of power. Consequently, what happens inside Soviet borders is not just their own business, but rather its problems carry grave implications for the rest of the world. Thus, in addition to dominating domestic affairs, the nationality question in the Soviet Union spans across international boundaries.

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<sup>6</sup>Bruce Nelan (a), "The Bad Old Days Again," Time, 28 January 1991: p. 83.

<sup>7</sup>Daily Report Soviet Union, 20 March 1991 "Shevardnadze: Dictatorship Warning 'Well Founded' " (Washington, D.C.: FBIS-SOV-91-054) p. 31.



The manner in which the Soviet leadership deals with each republic cannot be emphasized enough. For roughly four decades following World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union dominated global politics in their battle for dominance as the "more important" superpower. This relationship has changed significantly as a bi-polar world has gradually given way to a multi-polar world and the rivalry has softened with the increased cooperation between leaders. With the recent thawing of Cold War attitudes, there has been a shift in the relationships among world powers, many of which are still in the making. A cooperative, bilateral relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union would mark a new era in international politics.

Although renewed relations between the two former superpowers have been somewhat cautious and reserved, their continued cooperation in the Middle East crisis at the end of 1990 and beginning of 1991 clearly indicates a willingness to enter into a new type of alliance. However, if the American administration is to look to the Soviets as a genuine ally, Soviet domestic actions are of the utmost significance. If the leadership chooses a path of forceful coercion toward the republics, this conduct would undoubtedly call for a hold on warming relations, if not some sort of retaliation, depending on the severity of the action. On the other hand, if the Soviet Union becomes so entrenched in these interethnic crises, Gorbachev's domestic reform program will be delayed, thereby hindering the Soviets' progress in rebuilding their nation, after seventy-plus years of communist stagnation.

In addition, the outside world has already witnessed how many of the republics, frustrated at the sluggish rate of reform, have formed restructuring plans of their own, distinctly separate from those outlined by Gorbachev over

the last six years. It is precisely this type of mood which has precipitated anti-communist and anti-soviet movements in most of the republics. The same democratic forces which helped to bring down the Iron Curtain in 1989 could feasibly surface in the Soviet Union in 1990s and they, like those in Eastern Europe, could look towards Western democracies for help and support.

## CHAPTER I: Background

Before Gorbachev, when the Soviet Union was still the "evil empire" to most outsiders and the gold sickle and hammer against a red background was a symbol of communist expansionism, the words "Russia" and "Soviet Union" were used interchangeably. Still today, many people, mainly of an older generation, do not realize that there is a difference - much to the chagrin of politically-aware people *outside* of the Soviet Union, and undoubtedly to half of the 290 million *inside* it. However, as the nationality question has come to demand international attention, the obvious differences between the two words is becoming better understood, and the old misconception is being put to rest.

The fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) vary greatly in size, structure, and ethnic composition. They range from the largest and most centrally located, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, with a total population of 148 million, 83% of which is Russian, to the small, northern republic of Lithuania which is home to 3.7 million people, only 9% of whom are of Russian origin.<sup>8</sup> The Soviet Union's population is 290 million people, of which 52% are Russian. The other 48% is a mixed bag of twenty one major ethnic groups and numerous other smaller ones. Linguistic differences have in the past also caused many problems and controversies in

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<sup>8</sup>Paul Quinn-Judge, "The Soviet Union: Empire in Turmoil," The Boston Globe, 22 April 1990, Sec. A, p. 22.

a country where Slavic languages, spoken in Russia, the Ukraine, and Byelorussia, differs as much from the Turkic tongues of the southern republics as they do from English. However, in addition to historical and linguistic differences among the fifteen republics, there also exist over one hundred other ethnic groups within the Soviet Union with distinctly different backgrounds and cultural roots. These differences make it difficult to force one uniform identity onto the people.

### **Ethnic Identity**

Soviet national identity began to form in 1917 in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Lenin and the Bolsheviks sought to create a unified, harmonious nation incorporating many different regions which now constitute the fifteen republics. The national structure was defined in January of 1918 at the Third All-Russia Congress of Soviets in a declaration which proclaimed formerly non-Russian lands as a part of the "federation of Soviet national republics."<sup>9</sup> The Union continued to expand and build in size up until World War II, when the last four republics were annexed.

Since the Russian Revolution, Soviet leaders have struggled to build a unified national identity, or at least maintain the myth that there was one. However, they simultaneously denied the existence of a major interethnic problem, claiming that by simply adhering to Marxist-Leninist policies and theories, which served as the basis of the Soviet regime, they were ensuring harmony and justice. The fact is, however, that Lenin suffered a stroke, and

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<sup>9</sup>Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 21.

later died, before he was able to outline a clearly defined plan on how to handle inter-republic relations in this enormous multinational state. Despite this hole in the political structure, the Soviet leadership continued for decades to assert that relations were indeed harmonious. But it was not until the recent freedoms afforded to the republics through Gorbachev's reform program that the true nature of relations became apparent. Horror stories of forced Russification, ethnic discrimination, and oppression surfaced when Gorbachev opened Pandora's box - a box to which the lid has now been lost.

Regional differences, socio-political cleavages, and inter-ethnic tensions can no longer be ignored. Violent conflict erupted in 1988 between Armenians and Azeris over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and has been continually reignited on numerous occasions since. Georgia remains strife-torn as different ethnic groups within the republic, particularly the Abkhazians and Ossetians, are hostile towards each other and towards the Georgians themselves.<sup>10</sup> In the southern republics of the Soviet Union, Muslims and Christians have long been embroiled in violent skirmishes. At the beginning of 1990, hostile fighting resulted in over one hundred deaths in Azerbaijan. Red Army tanks rolled into the southern republic to quell the fighting. Troops temporarily put an end to the violence, but their presence only exacerbated tension; hostility towards the central government loomed large over the actual predicament at hand. In the early spring of 1990, ethnic unrest sparked by a growing nationalist sentiment broke loose in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. On March 11, Lithuania made history by proclaiming itself independent of the USSR.

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<sup>10</sup>John Parker, "Massed Against the Past," The Economist, 20 October 1990: Survey Section, p. 5.

## CHAPTER II: Building an Empire

The roots of today's nationality crisis in the Soviet Union can be traced back to the early days of the Roman empire, when the Transcaucasus region was conquered by the Roman Army. The different cultural identities within present Soviet boundaries have been evolving for centuries. Some, like the Arab and Persian cultures, intermingled early on, creating hybrids which, over the years, formed distinct identities of their own. Others, like the Tatars, stayed more or less homogeneous for decades upon decades.

The numerous ethnic groups within each republic and around the Soviet Union can be broken down into five major ethnic groups. The largest of all is the Eastern Slavic group, although they are gradually losing their position to Asians, Moslems, and other ethnic groups whose populations have been steadily increasing over the past few years. Eastern Slavs include Russians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians, all of whom share a common border, as well as similar languages, cultures, and religions.<sup>11</sup> Historically, the Slavic culture dates back to the tenth century when a clan of people, probably descended from the Scandinavians, settled around present-day Kiev. This area, known as "Rus," adopted Christianity from the nearby Byzantine empire, as well as some of their other customs, and soon developed into a well-known cultural center which was to flourish for centuries to come.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Zev Katz, ed., Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities (New York: The Free Press, 1975) pp. 9-11.

<sup>12</sup>Medish, p. 47.

However, Moscow soon established itself as an organized principality and supplanted Kiev as the center of Russian society around the 1300s. Gaining enough power and might over the next few centuries, Russia began to enlarge its boundaries, using forceful measure to overtake surrounding areas in Scandinavia and northern Asia. Moscow's population, along with its ever-expanding boundaries, grew rapidly. What eventually turned into the Great Russian Empire developed politically and socially, and flourished up until some time around the 1800s. Military defeats during this century, coupled with crumbling central control and social ills, such as the continuation of serfdom, brought this empire to its knees. By the turn of the century, Russia was ready for a change. A revolution occurred in 1905 in an attempt to change Russia, but it failed. Twelve years later, under the direction of V.I. Lenin, the Bolsheviks assisted in toppling the tsarist regime and the provisional government that succeeded it and established a communist form of government. At this point in time, under the leadership of a new government, the formation of a new country began.

### **The Ukraine**

The Kievan region, having been surpassed in size and significance by Moscow by the fourteenth century, took second place behind the new capital at this time. The ethnic clan which inhabited the region, the Ukrainians, as they had come to be known, had established their territory as an independent state. In the mid-fourteenth century, portions of Ukrainian territory were

annexed by Poland and by Lithuania.<sup>13</sup> Three centuries later, the Ukrainians rebelled against Poland, pulling away from their control. Caught in a rather vulnerable position, they were coerced into signing an agreement with Russia as an autonomous territory. Again in the eighteenth century, the Ukrainians once again tried to restore their former independence, but failed. At the end of the 1800s, Russia abolished their autonomous status, and the Ukraine came under total Russian rule.

During this same century, not surprisingly, Ukrainian nationalism surged. Partly stemming from the desire to establish independence and partly influenced by European romanticism, a national consciousness formed, never to be fully extinguished by the process of Russification. Immediately following the October Revolution in 1917, the Kiev *soviet* (council) in the Ukraine decided to pull away from the central government, then located in Petrograd (modern-day Leningrad). In December of that same year, Lenin, the leader of the Revolution, declared that he would permit the republics to secede or form a confederation with the Russian Republic. Contradicting itself shortly thereafter, his government expressed strong displeasure with their failure to bond with Russia. But, having received the go-ahead on secession, Ukrainians began to dismantle the Russian military apparatus within their borders. The Bolsheviks, sensing danger and fearing a loss of power, quickly intervened and established their own government there.

By 1918, Russian troops had occupied most of the Ukraine and succeeded in establishing a Bolshevik regime.<sup>14</sup> At first a violent protest

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<sup>13</sup>Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup>Katz, p. 24.



broke out and former Ukrainian leaders fought to keep their own form of government in power. The Civil War raged through Ukrainian territory, embroiling its inhabitants in a merciless struggle. Ukrainians were fighting for their independence, former "owners" were fighting to reclaim lost land, and the Bolsheviks were fighting for control of this strategically located territory rich in natural resources. In the end the Bolsheviks were able to defeat the tired, oppressed Ukrainians. The crackdown followed quickly thereafter as the Bolsheviks tightened control and centralized their power. They even began placing limits on the use of the Ukrainian language. Soon enough Russification was fully under way. In 1922, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was formed.

Under Stalinist rule in the late twenties and thirties, the Ukraine, like almost all of the Soviet Union's other republics, was subjected to massive purges and collectivization of agriculture. The effects of collectivization combined with a massive famine in 1933, caused by "the imposition of excessive delivery quotas" on Ukrainians, resulted in at least a million deaths by starvation.<sup>15</sup> Purges also increased and became more brutal in the mid-1930s when a Ukrainian movement for autonomy emerged.

World War II had an equally devastating effect on the Ukraine. An estimated 5.3 million Ukrainians lost their lives in the war and roughly 700 towns and 28,000 villages were either completely destroyed or damaged.<sup>16</sup> In addition to major losses to its population, the Ukrainian economy also

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<sup>15</sup>Katz, pp. 24-25.

<sup>16</sup>Orest Subtelny, Ukraine - A History (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988) p. 479.

suffered immensely, first under Stalin and then during World War II. Farms, industries, and whole communities were ravaged, leaving a large portion of the society to be rebuilt from scratch.

Unification of all Ukrainian territory took place after the war, however, and the Ukraine saw its borders expanded. Taking land away from both Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania in the western part of the region, the Russians established a newer and bigger Ukrainian SSR. Because its borders had changed, the populace of the Ukraine also underwent a transformation. The Soviet government sought to help the Ukraine resettle and help the new Ukrainian population adjust to its new territory. Expanding still more in the 1950s, when Crimea (formerly a party of the RSFSR) became a part of the Ukraine, the Ukraine almost doubled its size.

After Stalin's death, life in the Ukraine became slightly more tolerable as rigid laws and disciplinary measures were relaxed a little. Gradually, the standard of living began to improve for the Ukrainians under the rule of Khrushchev in the late fifties and early sixties. Ukrainians, who had formed almost an entirely new culture because of the massive losses suffered under the Civil War, the Stalinist reign of terror, and the Second World War, had hope in rebuilding their culture although they remained dependent on the central government. The Ukraine had suffered a major setback and was unable to lift itself back up and thus "improvements in Ukraine's relative importance....or political successes of individual Ukrainians did not alter the fact that Ukrainian interests were completely subordinated to those of the Soviet empire as a whole."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Subtelny, p. 509.

During the sixties and seventies, Ukrainian society was, as was much of the Soviet Union, stagnant. Although reforms were badly needed in all sectors, political, economic, and cultural, no solutions were offered. As Ukrainians struggled to reconstruct their economy, the Ukraine became less agricultural and more industrialized. Farming, of course, remained important for all Ukrainians, but new industry and technology was added to facilitate their agricultural production. However, the Russians were quick to take advantage of the Ukrainians' steps towards modernization and exploited the Ukraine's economic advancement.

In addition to economic suppression at this time, the Russians were also heavily engaged in stifling cultural development in the Ukraine which they deemed "dangerous." Another widespread purge in the Ukraine, aimed at eliminating political enemies, took place in the 1970s when the KGB cracked down on dissenters by searching suspects, interrogating them, and throwing them into jail.<sup>18</sup> Politically, the Ukrainians followed the footsteps of their mentors in Moscow. Although there were slight deviations, the Ukraine Communist Party, for the most part corresponded to its counterpart in Moscow. There were dissenters, of course, but the Communist Party's offer of stability and organization to the Ukrainians superseded these sentiments. Compliance, after all, was easier than dissent. Skepticism and dissatisfaction with society grew however, and by the mid-1980s, the need for reform was evident. It was at this point, that nationalism began to surge once again.

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<sup>18</sup>Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 177.

## The Baltic States

While the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, differ from each other in culture and ethnic composition, they all share a similar historical background. Each of these three areas experienced their own hardships and struggle for autonomy for centuries before finally gaining independent status in the early 1920s. However, in World War II, they had their independence taken away again by Stalin. Now each nation is undergoing another struggle - a struggle to reclaim their lost independence. Below, the Baltic states have been grouped together in attempt to show how the republics strove to develop their own distinct national identity, but now are unified in their fight to win it back.

All three Baltic territories have long been used by other powers who wanted to take advantage of, and in some cases steal, their valuable ports on the Baltic Sea. Throughout the Middle Ages, Estonia and Latvia were dominated by other ethnic groups, the Estonians by the Germans and Swedes and the Latvians by the Germans and Poles. Lithuania, however, stood as an independent state from the early thirteenth century to the late sixteenth century. Known as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it was a relatively small territory until it merged with Poland in 1569.<sup>19</sup>

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, Imperial Russia had set its sights firmly on the Baltic region. In the early eighteenth century, Estonia was ceded to Russia. At this same time, Peter the Great and his army invaded Swedish-controlled Latvia, gaining access over the port of Riga and

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<sup>19</sup>Medish, p. 50.

the territory surrounding it.<sup>20</sup> By the end of this century, the rest of present-day Latvia (which was then a Polish domain) was incorporated into Russia. Later, in 1814, Russians finally won control over Lithuania, annexing almost all of this territory into its ever-expanding empire.

Throughout the period of the nineteenth century, the process of Russification was thoroughly enforced, although this process was widely resented by the Balts. Russification included the forceful assimilation of non-Russians into Russian culture by stifling a specific ethnic group's own national identity and customs and imposing Russian traditions, language, and religion. The national character of each state, however, which was promoted primarily by the use of indigenous languages in each of the republics, was only enhanced by the forced Russification. Despite the repression of Baltic national consciousness, strong cultural identities had evolved and strengthened over time. However, after Lenin's Revolution in 1917, the Baltic states were set free, for the time being, and autonomy was established. By 1921, each state was recognized *de jure* by the international community as independent states.

During their twenty years of independence, the Baltic states thrived. After the war, like everyone else, they had to rebuild what had been lost. Post-war Russia was chaotic and disorganized. The Baltic states were left to fend for themselves while Russia struggled to get back up on its feet. Thus, the Baltic states, temporarily freed of Russian suppression, were able to recreate strong, independent states. Although the war had left them lacking

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred Bilmanis, *A History of Latvia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970) p. 15.

most of what was needed to rebuild - i.e., capital, raw material, and means of production - the Baltic states, eager to prove themselves, brushed themselves off and began to institute major reforms.<sup>21</sup> Land was divided and redistributed among the peasants and new farms were created, generating new work for the unemployed. Thanks to their strategic location, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were able to renew trade on an international level. Soon enough, both productivity and efficiency soared to new heights. Living conditions improved and educational and medical facilities were opened up. Overall, the period between World Wars I and II proved to be prosperous for the Balts, who were striving, and succeeding, in proving themselves as legitimate new states.

World War II changed everything for the Baltics. The Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler which divided up Poland and the Baltic states was signed in 1939.<sup>22</sup> In 1940, Soviet troops were occupying the Baltic states. In the early summer, after Germany's offensive on the West, Stalin decided to annex the three Baltic nations. German troops occupied the region until 1944, when Soviet troops returned. In each territory, Russian communist leaders replaced the former governments. The declaration officially declaring these regions as soviet socialist republics stated that it was a necessary action to spare each state from exploitation. The Soviet government stressed that it was "liberating" Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia,

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<sup>21</sup>John A. Swettenham, Tragedy of the Baltic States (Westport: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1981; rpt. 1952) p. 52

<sup>22</sup>Robert G. Kaiser, Why Gorbachev Happened (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) p. 285.

both economically and politically.<sup>23</sup> Industry, land, and banking were all nationalized by the Soviet state, and centralized planning replaced all private enterprise in the Baltic states. They were no longer free, but were now subjugated to the government in Moscow, a government of which they wanted no part.

Post-war plans of the Soviet government aimed at rebuilding their country. In addition to increasing industrial output and mobilizing all natural resources, the Soviet leadership also instituted rigid disciplinary measures once again. As the Cold War commenced in the mid-1940s, Western thought was not allowed to penetrate the Iron Curtain that had fallen around Soviet society. Critics of this society were either exiled or eliminated. The goal of building socialism and rebuilding society was not to be interfered with. Nationalism was severely suppressed at this time as it was seen as incompatible with the objective of creating a unified, socialist society.

Much like the Ukraine, the Baltic region experienced a dead period of economic and political stagnation in the fifties and sixties. Arrests for political dissent continued, although not on the massive scale of Stalinist years. But the spirit of nationalism had been resuscitated due to a combination of dissatisfaction with society under Soviet rule and an easing of strict disciplinary measures. By the mid-1970s, independence activists in all the Baltic republics had begun to organize their efforts collectively and their spirits could not be dampened by arrests and bans on publications. Leaders in Moscow kept a tight leash on the ports in the Baltic region and their economic activity was controlled from the center. Although relative to the

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<sup>23</sup>Swettenham, pp. 73-77.

rest of the union the Baltic region flourished economically, they were hindered from realizing their full potential by the overbearing Soviet state.

Culturally, the region was stagnant. All types of nationalist activity, including following national customs, were eliminated. Religious activity was curtailed and even banned in some places, as with the Catholic church in Lithuania. In 1976, for instance, seven Lithuanian high schoolers were expelled from school for attending church services.<sup>24</sup> Local police and KGB officials worked in conjunction to seek out nonconformists and put an end to their activities. Restrictions were placed on the use of the native language in each republic and the use of Russian at official levels was obligatory. The teaching of Russian language was instituted at pre-school and elementary levels to promote the "unity of statehood, economy, ideology, and culture."<sup>25</sup> However, when the gravity of the nationality issue was addressed, as it was by well-known dissidents Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov in the mid-1970s, Soviet leadership dismissed both the problem and the problematic people, kicking outspoken dissenters out of their homeland. But public acknowledgement of the crisis merely strengthened the nationalist bond among the Baltic republics. And as nationalism became more prominent and reforms within the republics became necessary to appease the Balts, the tiny region forced itself into the eyes of the central government. By the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev came into office, a powerful animosity between the Baltic states and the central government was beginning to develop.

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<sup>24</sup>Joshua Rubenstein, Soviet Dissidents (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 223.

<sup>25</sup>Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 187.



Understanding the roots of nationalism in both the Ukraine and in the Baltic states is crucial to understanding the roots of ethnic conflict as a whole. As is evident, the seeds of nationalism were being sewn throughout the history of the development of these regions, yet overt conflict and dissent had not yet surfaced by the end of the 1970s. However, the spirit of nationalism, being several decades in the making, was hardly in its early stages when it was uncovered in the 1980s. When Gorbachev entered office and unleashed all of the nationalist problems, it was like the top coming off of a pressure cooker. Although the strife amongst nationalities was bound to surface at some point, Gorbachev hastened this process by allowing it to happen officially.

## CHAPTER III: Shaping the System

### Soviet Leadership: From Lenin to Gorbachev

When nationalism began to reappear in the mid-eighties, many outsiders assumed that Gorbachev's reforms, coupled with a pulling away from socialist ideology, were responsible for its emergence. Taking a closer look, however, it was soon realized that nationalist tension had always existed and had merely been covered up for several decades. Moreover, under the tighter reins of former Soviet leaders, everyone was under close surveillance, at home, at the workplace, and in school. Tactics of intimidation were utilized successfully in order to take care of citizens who had been "lead astray." Lengthy prison terms and labor camps served as a remedy for the courageous few who dared to defy the system.

The severe repression under the Stalinist regime had not even been realized, let alone documented, until three years after his death, when Nikita S. Khrushchev delivered his "secret speech" to the Twentieth Soviet Party Congress in 1956. Khrushchev, a former Ukrainian party boss, emerged as the only viable leader after Stalin's death. The only other potential successors, Malenkov and Beria, were both thought by other Party leaders to have designs on creating a dictatorship and thus were rejected.<sup>26</sup> In Khrushchev's

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<sup>26</sup>Joan Frances Crowley and Dan Vaillancourt, Lenin to Gorbachev: Three Generations of Soviet Communists (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1989), pp. 133-134.

speech, he denounced the crimes under Stalin and cited him as solely responsible for the deaths of millions of Soviets. Not long after the speech, it was leaked to the public, some say intentionally, and a program of de-Stalinization began. Many scholars have marked this particular point in time as a watershed in Soviet politics. For the first time in Soviet history, the outside world was aware of events, and follies, inside the borders of the USSR. It was seemingly inevitable that political reforms would have to be implemented.

In addition to the de-Stalinization program, Khrushchev's leadership is also known for his attempts at decentralization of the economy and elimination of Stalinist terror tactics, such as the widespread use of secret police. Although Khrushchev has never been hailed as the most intellectual of Soviet leaders, his decision to break away from "Stalinist lies" and the two-camp doctrine was indeed a strategic one. Recognizing the reality of the nuclear threat, as well as the increasing presence of other major world powers, Khrushchev aimed at increasing the Soviet Union's viability on the international scene.

However, in revealing the horrors of Stalinism, Khrushchev also considerably weakened his own legitimacy as a leader because of the blow that he dealt to the Communist world as a whole. Although he offered many promising prospects for reform, including revision of Marxist-Leninist theory, his empty words held little meaning and structural changes never materialized. His intentions to modify society, including his plan to relax the tight grip on non-Russian republics, had potential but did not get very far. Tired of too many empty promises and unfinished programs, his own party colleagues unseated him.

In 1964, Leonid Brezhnev took over as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Brezhnev, like Khrushchev was a native Ukrainian and had joined the Communist Party at an early age, which thus earmarked him later as a Khrushchev protege. However, his style and tactics differed much from his predecessor. Brezhnev was a very cunning man and his personal and professional manner suggested a sense of order and pragmatism; this was a sharp contrast to Khrushchev's careless and often unpredictable behavior. Brezhnev, however, was not as efficient as he initially appeared. He focused on concentrating power in the center, although, unlike Stalin and Khrushchev, the power was never intended fully for himself. He amassed influence and prestige for both himself and his colleagues throughout his eighteen year's in office.

The period of Brezhnev's leadership, is commonly known as the era of "stagnation," although marked by increased industrial and agricultural production. Both corruption and inactivity pervaded the government during the late 1960s and 1970s. Part of the Brezhnev Doctrine stated that "the entire [socialist] system was responsible for the maintenance of socialism in particular countries."<sup>27</sup> This dogma merely served as justification for Soviet intervention and expansionism.

Brezhnev also attempted to rehabilitate Joseph Stalin's image, until angry public protests forced him to brake these activities. He experienced mixed reaction from Soviets, but began, about the same time as his health began to fail, to garner more enemies than friends. Thus, during his

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<sup>27</sup>Allen Lynch, Gorbachev's International Outlook: Intellectual Origins and Political Consequences (New York: Institute for East-West Security Studies, 1989) p. 49.

leadership, Soviet society and policy regressed and few promising prospects were seen for the future. Dissatisfaction among Russians and non-Russians alike with the inactivity and inefficiency in the government was beginning to grow.

In 1976, Brezhnev suffered a massive stroke. From this point on in his political career, a parade of ambulances and doctors followed him wherever he went. The stroke greatly impaired his speaking ability and his concentration level was shortened. As his health continued to deteriorate, so did his political authority. Progress in the Soviet Union had come to a standstill. In 1982, Leonid Brezhnev died.

Yuri Andropov, previously a KGB chairman, was named as the next General Secretary of the CPSU. Just one year later, at the ripe old age of 69, he was elected President of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. This same year, Andropov's health which was already poor to begin with, deteriorated further and he was no longer able to make public appearances. While he had been in better health, Andropov had vowed to make some small, but promising nevertheless, changes in Soviet life. He had attempted to increase the productivity of Soviet workers, by cutting down on alcoholism and absenteeism, a reform that was picked up by Gorbachev where Andropov had left off. However, it seemed that he had arrived at the top just a little too late. In February of 1984, Andropov died.<sup>28</sup> Reforms in the Soviet system, it appeared, would have to be put on hold until political stability was re-established.

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<sup>28</sup>Crowley and Vaillancourt, p. 182.

Konstantin Chernenko, another Politburo member who was even older than Andropov at the time of taking office, emerged as Andropov's successor. Although Andropov apparently would liked to have seen a much younger Gorbachev fill his spot, Chernenko's seniority won out. He had worked under Brezhnev for over three decades and was a generally experienced party bureaucrat. Like Andropov, he had good intentions, such as educational reform and land improvements, which were cut short by failing health. Assuming the post of Secretary at age 72, Chernenko was already old and feeble and suffered from a history of lung disease. He died a year after taking office.<sup>29</sup>

Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, then the youngest member of the Politburo at age 54, took over as General Secretary the very next day in what was a remarkably quick transition of power for the Soviets. His haste in assuming the position led many observers to note that Chernenko was merely warming up the seat for Gorbachev while he prepared to make his debut.

By the mid-eighties, it was apparent that social change was imperative to ensure the durability of the Union. Gorbachev quickly stepped into office immediately after Chernenko's death, and into a position envied by few. The Soviet Union in the eighties, stifled by decades of inertia, was not a promising place. The Soviet people, having witnessed years of inefficiency within the Party, were ready for a change. Gorbachev's promises of perestroika and glasnost were welcomed by frustrated Soviets who were tired of being held back by a closed, repressive society. By opening up Soviet

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<sup>29</sup>Crowley and Vaillancourt, p. 184.

society in affording the people a new voice through glasnost, however, Gorby got more than he had bargained for. Gorbachev was the first leader since the Revolution to implement actual social changes for the better. In doing so, he awakened a "sleeping giant" who, upon opening his eyes, was furious at what he saw around him.

### **The Gorbachev Factor**

When Gorbachev first outlined his program for reform in front of the Twenty Sixth Party Congress of the CPSU in 1985, changes in the economic and political arenas were cited as top priority. From Gorbachev's perspective, social change, in the form of glasnost, or openness of society, was a necessary vehicle by which to implement the other reforms, but perestroika and *demokratizatsia* were the main concerns. The crumbling economy and ineffective political structure served as proof to the need for fundamental changes within the Soviet system. Initially well-received by most of the Soviet public and those within the government, the extensive reform program and Gorbachev's "new thinking" were viewed as a potential lifesaver for the USSR.

Gorbachev's glasnost at first came as a shock to the outside world which received the real figures of alcoholism, work absenteeism, and political and social corruption with astonishment. Socialism, after all, was to have remedied all these social ills. The Soviet Union, however, had hardly attained Marxist ideals. The rehabilitation of Soviet dissident writers, a process begun by Khrushchev, continued with Gorbachev as he allowed works by Boris Pasternak and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to be published at

home. Glasnost also unveiled the fundamental flaws within the Soviet economic system, which gave rise to the need for perestroika. After public recognition of the economic failure, the party's tight grip on the Soviet economy began to loosen. State regulation became somewhat less constrained, allowing smaller economic ministries to revive their own local power. Factory workers and managers, for example, were given more control over their individual workplaces and controls on wages were relaxed.<sup>30</sup> Gorbachev also set up long-range plans that would accomplish further decentralization and signed agreements for military disarmament which, he realized would also help to rejuvenate the economy. The idea of private enterprise was explored for a short while by Gorbachev and his colleagues and then put into action when laws on cooperatives were established.

Unlike glasnost and perestroika, *demokratizatsia*, or democratization, has experienced only limited success in the Soviet Union. While much of the public welcomed plans for democratizing Soviet society, the Central Committee did not take well to these plans, even at the start when everyone was enthusiastic about Gorbachev's reforms. A firmly-entrenched aversion to the capitalist's way of doing things, especially running a country, resurfaced when Gorbachev introduced plans for implementing democratization into the highly-centralized elite of Soviet politics. Undoubtedly concerned for their political careers and wary of radical change, some members of the Politburo and the Central Committee rejected Gorbachev's appeals for democratization. After seventy years of single-party rule and relative political stability, the Soviets saw no need to replace the Communist way.

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<sup>30</sup>Parker, p. 12.



### **An Underlying Problem**

Gorbachev's policies of democratization and openness have been relatively successful. The ironclad grip on Eastern Europe was eased in the fall of 1989, when Communist governments were toppled only to be replaced by democratic leaders. No longer does the Communist Party of the Soviet Union maintain a monopoly on all political power. President Gorbachev had that article deleted from the Constitution in March of 1990. No longer does censorship prevent the West from seeing and reading about daily events in the USSR. If it were not for glasnost, there surely would have been significantly more deaths in both the Chernobyl accident and the Armenian earthquake. Almost immediately after the reports came out about both disasters, Westerners rushed to the aid of the unfortunate victims. Without the openness, although it was somewhat delayed, on the part of the Soviet press, hundreds of lives would not have been saved. Furthermore, Gorbachev was instrumental, if not solely responsible on the Soviet end, in helping to thaw the Cold War. The Gorbachev-Reagan relationship in the 1980s grew into a friendly alliance at times. Arms deals were cut and agreements were set. US-Soviet relations thrived because of Gorbachev's efforts to establish renewed bilateral partnership. He even earned himself the prominent title of Time's 'Man of the Year' in 1989.

However, despite Gorbachev's success on the international scene, a consistent and effective nationalities policy has yet to be formed. His inability to act on the problem is hardly due to lack of awareness. His own native

region, the Stavropol' region in the southern portion of Russia, serves as home to several different ethnic groups, including Moslems.<sup>31</sup> In fact, when Gorbachev came into office, he seemed to not want to have to deal with the issue directly and passed it off Yegor Ligachev, probably the most conservative member of the Politburo. Ligachev, Gorbachev's ideology chief and apparent second-in-command, merely responded by reasserting the predominance of Soviet central leadership and emphasizing the necessity of maintaining unity to promote national interests. Thus, his policy on the republics seems largely incompatible with glasnost and Gorbachev's other reforms.

Early in Gorbachev's administration, it became evident that the Soviet Union was beleaguered by far more social ills than originally imagined. The world's largest multi-ethnic state was finally having to own up to the fact that it had been unable to transform a nation of some 290 million people into a harmonious "melting pot." And while Gorbachev scrambled to maintain unity among his republics, they utilized their newly-found liberties to extend the in. Lenin's dream of the formation of the 'new Soviet man' had never materialized and non-Russians, and even some Russians themselves, began to reassess their cultural identities out loud. This nationality problem now stands at the forefront of Mikhail's agenda.

Major ethnic hostility first confronted Gorbachev in 1986 when he appointed a Russian to head the Kazakh Communist Party replacing a native Kazakh leader, sparking a violent national protest. Outbursts and riots continued as fighting between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh grew increasingly violent. Enhanced cultural

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<sup>31</sup>Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 231.

autonomy, granted through glasnost, had reignited some old hostilities, such as the ones in the Georgian republic, and some new ones, as in Uzbekistan. The conflict between Meskhetian Turks and native Uzbeks in that republic, which erupted suddenly out of a simple misunderstanding in the market, reached crisis proportions in 1989. Similarly, a long-brewing conflict in Georgia between the native majority and the small ethnic minority, the Abkhazians, caused a bloody battle which was precipitated by Georgians taking full advantage of their new-found autonomy.

These hostilities have erupted as a result of a combination of factors. Firstly, the nationality problem has been suppressed for decades and ethnic identity, stifled under Russification and repression of nationalism, has not been allowed to be freely expressed. Since new liberties were granted to the republics under the reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s, seventy years worth of discontent and animosity has come pouring forth out into the open. Thus, conflicts have broken out revealing the true nature of the problem, the forced fusion and subjugation of many different cultures and ethnicities.

## **CHAPTER IV: Ethnicity and the Broader Crisis**

Singling out the ethnicity crisis as separate, unrelated problem in the Soviet Union is a miscalculation that many observers, especially critics of the Soviet system, have made. While the question of how, or even if, the Soviet leadership can keep the country from falling apart centers around the question of nationality, which is a social dilemma, political and economic concerns are closely related. Thus, in order to fully understand how the Soviet Union has come to face the situation that it does today, it is also necessary to put the question of ethnic relations into a broader perspective.

The triad of social, political, and economic ills that plague the Soviet system could potentially lead to the demise of the USSR unless rectified. The more the nationalists are dissatisfied with the political or economic situations in their own countries, the more they will push for independence. On the same level, the worse the economy gets, the more people will look towards the individual republics to come up with better solutions, a move which would necessitate increased economic freedoms. Because of their inextricable connections with one another, no one problem can be solved independently of the other.

### **Economic Troubles**

Economically, the Soviet Union is in shambles. Over the past few years, there has been a steady deterioration of the economy and decline of

growth rates, due, in large part, to the failure of the socialist system. By the time Gorbachev came into office in the mid-1980s, economic growth was at a virtual standstill and the Soviet gross national product per capita was the equivalent of a country like Jordan or Mauritius.<sup>32</sup> Not only was the economy of the Soviet Union thus unstable, it seemed to actually be shrinking.

The Soviet Union has had a state-owned economy since the introduction of communism during the revolutionary era in the early 1920s. This means that all economic activity is centrally controlled and directed. The state owns virtually everything from land and natural resources to buildings and industries to transportation and health facilities. In this type of system all of these properties of the state are run by state committees, all of which are subordinate to the primary organ, GOSPLAN.<sup>33</sup> Most of these committees break down further into smaller, more localized associations and enterprises. However, despite the presence of separate, local ministries, the reins on the economy are directly controlled by the central government in Moscow.

Even today, with partial economic reforms in place as Gorbachev has attempted to move towards a more Western type of economy, much of this state control has remained intact. The state still serves as the boss of a large majority of the industrial sector. Banking, transportation, trade, and communication are among the many sectors of the economy still controlled

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<sup>32</sup>Parker, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup>Donald Barry and Carol Barner-Barry, Contemporary Soviet Politics (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991) pp. 174-178.

by the state.<sup>34</sup> Gorbachev has, however, made enormous strides towards changing the stale socialist system. Since he came into office he has allowed cooperatives to flourish, relaxed laws on private ownership, and has legalized private entrepreneurial activities. However, because the state still does control much of the means of productions, adventurous entrepreneurs have had a tough time of getting the raw materials they need to get their businesses off the ground. In addition, because of the relaxation of laws and loosened grip of the KGB and other state mechanisms formerly used to impose order, the black market has also been able to flourish. The predominance of black marketeers, who deal in everything from basic commodities such as toiletries to luxury items like Western clothing, has caused the value of the Soviet ruble to plummet on the official market. At one point in the late 1980s, there was almost a \$1.50 (US) difference in the official and the black market values of the ruble.

The Russian currency, the ruble, has also posed a major problem for the Soviets economically. Because the ruble is still non-convertible, the Soviets have yet to make an entrance into the world market, a shortcoming which has greatly hindered their trade and growth of capital. Furthermore, inflation and unemployment are at their highest rates ever, and attempts at implementing some elements of a free-market system while still maintaining control over both prices and wages have sent prices on consumer goods soaring. Price hikes in April of 1991, intended to bring the prices of consumer goods up to reflect their real costs, are expected to have a devastating effect on the family budget and to spark nation-wide strikes.

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<sup>34</sup>Medish, p. 159.

Plans for a rapid transition to a more Westernized economy have been reneged due to opposition from the right. Hence, the radical economist Shatalin, who introduced the "Five Hundred Days" program to transform the stagnant Soviet economy into a free-market system via privatization, has fallen into a mysterious black hole in the USSR, along with several other former builders of perestroika. This plan was originally approved by Gorbachev back in September of 1990, but later abandoned when opponents of the liberal plan pressured him into holding off on the transition. The all-too-common "too much too fast" rationalization of the hard-liners, who advocate a slow, gradual reform process, has once again forced Gorbachev back into the conservative corner.

Furthermore, if economic reform continues at the rate it is currently going, the next couple of years hold few promising prospects. In the first few months of 1991, both the gross national product and the rate of productivity have fallen significantly. Moreover, international trade has fallen due to poor economic conditions in other countries and because of sanctions induced during the army invasion of the Baltics in January. Productivity will continue to fall off sharply as industries are cut out, unemployment will continue to rise, and riots and strikes are likely to become more frequent, forcing more closings and temporary shortages.

Currently, shortages of food and other consumer goods are forcing more and more people into the black market and out into the streets in protest. With the easing of restrictions on the Soviet consumer since the advent of perestroika, it has become clear that the Soviet Union is in dire need of basic commodities. At the end of 1988, for instance, *Pravda* reported that "meat was being rationed in twenty-six of the Russian Republic's fifty-

five regions, and sugar in all but two of them."<sup>35</sup> In the summer of 1989, Soviet citizens went without essentials such as soap, detergent, and aspirin because of workers' strikes and inefficient distribution in industry. Even in Moscow the simplest household items, such as matches, were not available on store shelves. But even more importantly, basic goods could not be obtained by the average Soviet consumer and serious food shortages resulted. In the fall of 1990, the streets of Leningrad were filled with demonstrators protesting the lack of cigarettes, causing a major, day-long traffic jam and forcing the city administration to crack down on the instigators of the protest, as well as redefine city laws. Shortages of bread, which is one of the staple foods of the Soviet diet, were reported all over the country as recently as April of this year. Anxiously waiting in queues for common, everyday items and products only to find them unavailable, has created widespread dissatisfaction.

Through price reforms, increased industrial efficiency, and other measures the government hopes to revitalize the economy, but thus far the reforms that initially promised by Gorbachev to get the country back on its feet to recovery certainly have been greatly disappointing. Revamping the Soviet system is a monumental task and Gorbachev has made several significant steps in the right direction. But unless he stands behind his reforms, economic or otherwise, the public is sure to lose faith. If he and his colleagues in the Kremlin turn their backs on reform now, the Soviet Union may never extricate itself from this mess.

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<sup>35</sup>Stephen White, Gorbachev in Power (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 108.



Since the announcement of Gorbachev's restructuring plan in April, 1985, economic conditions have worsened, riots and strikes have become more frequent, and this former communist monolith is threatening to come crumbling down. Thus, the Soviet leadership is slowly being forced to come to a decision concerning the future of the rebellious republics - from the northern Baltics down to the southwestern republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

### **Political Flaws**

Also on the minds of many careful observers and undoubtedly of millions of anxious Soviets, in addition to the economic woes, is the dilemma of trying to govern the peoples of the USSR. From a political standpoint, Gorbachev is quickly losing ground, as well as supporters. Caught between the conservative hard-liners who are trying to slow the pace of reforms and democratic reformers who are trying to accelerate it, Gorbachev is more and more frequently finding himself unable to mollify either side. His popularity has been on a steady decline over the last couple of years, so much so that many people within his own country militantly demanded this year that he relinquish his Nobel Peace Prize. As recently as 1989, Gorbachev's popularity rate was at an impressive 43%. However, during a session of the Congress of People's Deputies in December, demands were made for his resignation from office and a vote of "no confidence" was attempted by some of his colleagues. Last fall, studies showed that "less than

2% of the people have any confidence in the future."<sup>36</sup> Gorbachev's overall approval rating had dropped by over 25% by the end of 1990.

Although Gorbachev tried to purge the government of the more conservative forces in the late eighties, many members of the old guard have remained in power. Gorbachev recently named Valentin Pavlov, widely known in political circles as an advocate of central control and a die-hard bureaucrat, as the new prime minister. Another conservative figure, Boris Pugo, a former KGB boss in Latvia, replaced a moderate minister of internal affairs. These and other recent conservative appointments by Gorbachev represent a step backward in the democratization process. Furthermore, Gorbachev seems to be either unable or unwilling to diminish the hold on power that conservative forces like the KGB, the military, and Communist party leaders maintain. Moreover, conservative groups, such as the political movement *Soyuz* ("union") which opposes autonomy for the republics and demands an increased role of the military, have gained nationwide support in recent months. Unified groups of conservatives pose a real threat to the Gorbachev government and are gaining significant strength, especially among industrialists, military officers, and Communist party officials. These conservatives support the original promise of Gorbachev when he first came to office that reforms are necessary, but must take place within the framework of the communist system.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Jeff Trimble and Douglas Stanglin, "The Last Hurrah," U.S. News & World Report 19 November 1990: p. 34-35.

<sup>37</sup>Jeff Trimble, "Can Gorbachev Last?" U.S. News & World Report 22 April 1991: pp. 31-32.

Although the nation is unlikely to revert to Stalinist repression of a previous era and can no longer hide under their former shroud of secrecy, the conservative forces could potentially bring democratization, decentralization, and privatization to a halt if allowed to consolidate their power. Gorbachev, unfortunately, is still at the mercy of these people. In November of 1990, for instance, President Gorbachev met with one thousand military officers who demanded that he abandon a proposal for a new union treaty in favor of a plan that would centralized power in the Kremlin.<sup>38</sup> In March of this year, Gorbachev, facing pressure from conservative colleagues and resistance from the public, announced a ban on all protests in Moscow. Attempting to curb pro-Yeltsin rallies in the city's squares and streets, Gorbachev handed police power over to the national Interior Ministry, taking this power away from the city's democratically elected government. It is now feared that "Gorbachev may be abandoning perestroika for *poryadok* (order) and turning to the old implements of powers and to the old coalition of the military, the KGB, and the party to enforce it."<sup>39</sup>

From a different angle, Gorbachev is being pushed in the opposite direction by maverick leaders like the Russian Republic's President, Boris Yeltsin, Moscow's radical mayor, Gavril Popov, and his Leningrad counterpart, Anatoly Sobchak. These liberal leaders within the RSFSR, and numerous others within the rest of the republics, have been successful in rallying public support and underlining the importance of establishing democratic principles at local and national levels of government. Stressing

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<sup>38</sup>Douglas Stanglin (a), "A Warning to Caesar," U.S. News & World Report 7 January 1991: p. 33.

<sup>39</sup>Stanglin (a), p. 36.

that reforms must be implemented across the board, these leaders and their reformist colleagues are prompting Gorbachev for faster and more pervasive reforms. Yeltsin, who was once removed from his position at the Politburo by Gorbachev only to bounce back as the leading Populist politician in Russia, is reportedly backed by an impressive 40% of the Russian people, a stark contrast to Gorbachev's 17% public support rating.<sup>40</sup> Most of the democratic leaders in government positions have fared the same among the public, but are endangered by a clampdown enforced by the Kremlin.

Democrats have allied themselves with even the most radical groups in an attempt to avoid anything related to conservatism and the communist leadership. Even the striking coal miners, of which there were an estimated 300,000 at the beginning of April of this year, have found friends in democratic reformers.<sup>41</sup> Reformers and nationalists have sought to form an alliance, as did Yeltsin in the summer of 1990 when he announced the independence of the Russian Republic from the Soviet Union, following the lead of secessionist republics like the Baltics. The democratic platform of social-democrats in the Soviet Union, which reformers avow to support, calls for more autonomy in the outlying republics.

A recent sharp drop in the number of pro-democracy demonstrations and a decline in democratic publications, however, reflects fear of a backlash like the one that throttled democratic protesters in the tragic Tiananmen Square incident in June of 1989. An anticommunist demonstration in the

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<sup>40</sup>Robin Knight, "Dismantling Lenin's Legacy," U.S. News & World Report 9 July 1990: p. 27.

<sup>41</sup>Brian Friedman "The Kremlin Yields," The Boston Globe 4 April 1991: p. 2.

center of Moscow in December of 1990 only rallied about 1,000 supporters and many of Moscow's leading supporters of the democratic movement did not show up. One democratic deputy mayor, justifying his decision to stay at home, said, "This is a very serious winter, [and] any demonstration can bring on the unpredictable, even violence."<sup>42</sup>

As the liberal force, which once merely stood up for reform, is turning more and more radical and the government is facing increasing pressure from the right, the public, fearing for their well-being, are shying away altogether. Because both groups have failed to compromise with each other, in congress and out on the streets, they have resorted to extreme positions. The widening gap between the conservatives and liberals is undoubtedly also a product of continued dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and failure to see results with the reform program.

There are thus two opposing views taken by the informed public concerning the status of reforms. Some citizens, mainly younger and more liberal, say that the reform movement has moved too slow and its pace must be quickened to ensure viable end results. They want to see democratization implemented as it has been throughout Eastern Europe, across the board, not sluggishly and incrementally. Yet another sector of the public, clinging to the stability of the past and fearful of what change may bring to their country, claims that the reform process is going too fast and trying to accomplish too much. Strangely enough, both views are partially valid. The liberals are right in thinking that reforms must be "all or nothing," lest the government end

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<sup>42</sup>Carroll Bogert, "Where Have all the Democrats Gone?" Newsweek 7 January 1991: p. 38.

up accomplishing nothing, but conservatives have correctly observed that chaos has been the primary result of trying to make so many changes in such a vast system all at once. Hence, the Soviet people are becoming increasingly polarized and seemingly confident with their respective decisions, but the country's future is only becoming more nebulous.

Disillusionment with the central government and its ability to solve the crisis has led to many nationalists taking matters into their own hands. Hence, democrats in the Russian Republic are moving out - out to the republics, allying themselves with nationalist groups fighting for independence from Moscow. Conservatives, on the other hand, are moving inward to centralize their power, in their attempt to preserve unity. The old notion of the inability of socialism and nationalism to coexist is still alive and well among conservatives.

Thus, while the gap between conservative Communists and reform-minded democrats continues to widen, Gorbachev, once straddling the middle, is steadily losing his balance. He has been verbally attacked during sessions of congress from members of both sides and been publicly criticized on television and in the press. Former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, once Gorbachev's closest ally and probable choice for the newly-created post of vice-president, shocked Gorbachev and the Congress in December of 1990 by announcing his resignation. Citing dismay over the reform process and a deep-seated fear that the country was "unambiguously moving towards authoritarianism," Shevardnadze stepped down from his position leaving Gorbachev with two empty spots to fill (text of speech, 12/90). Other supporters, such as former Politburo colleague, Yegor Yakovlev, once called a "cornerstone" of perestroika, have resigned for

similar reasons. In many cases, Communist party apparatchiks have been chosen to fill these positions abandoned by disillusioned supporters of perestroika.

### **The Nationalities Issue: A Social Crisis**

Gorbachev's economic and political troubles are only exacerbated by nationalist tensions within his crumbling empire. A multiple crisis has attacked the Soviet system and each problem seemingly feeds on the other. Political and economic troubles have led to unrest in the republics, while simultaneously nationalist tension within the republics has caused strikes, demonstrations, and other protests which have negatively affected the political and economic atmosphere.

All fifteen soviet socialist republics have declared some sort of sovereignty and many of the smaller autonomous regions and oblasts are following in the same footsteps. Pro-independence groups within the three Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia, Moldavia and the Ukraine have worked out plans for establishing independence from the central government. Even the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) threatened to secede from the Soviet Union last June under a plan drawn up by Yeltsin. Mikhail Gorbachev has desperately tried to convince the republics to stay together and work out differences and problems with each other, not individually. In a speech to Parliament last November, Gorbachev declared his opposition to the "fragmentation of territory" and urged his peoples to maintain unity (Televised address to Parliament, 11/14/90).

The question Gorbachev would probably most like to have answered is why, after so many decades of relative stillness, nationalistic aspirations are so noisily resurfacing. Certainly by now he has made the connection between the easing of social rigidity under his reforms and the resurgence of nationalism, but the underlying reason might be a little more ambiguous. After all, the Soviet Union is not the only multi-ethnic state in the world. Yet ethnic hostility is not seemingly threatening the very existence of each of these other heterogeneous nations.

It seems as though the concept of ethnicity in the Soviet Union has been both misunderstood and neglected by past and present leaders. To assume that the assimilation of so many different cultures into one unified identity using coercive and even hostile measures is a feasible concept is naive at best. Webster's dictionary defines *ethos* as "the characteristic attitudes, habits...of an individual or group." Mankind is best divided up by these features, namely different customs, languages, religious beliefs, and other such attributes. Identity of an ethnic group is determined by social, political and economic interests and is controlled by its cultural and historical roots. Although people have the right to choose their own social environment, ethnic identity is primordial and cultural roots can not be exchanged. Man is an inherently sovereign being, the desire for individual freedom is inbred. Thus, "at the margin of choice, today most people would rather be governed poorly by their own brethren than well by aliens, occupiers, and colonizers."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) p. 14.



Self-determination, then, is a powerful, instinctive attribute of different nations and ethnic groups. If national impulses are denied or suppressed by an oppressor, that specific exploited group will reject the domination. The rejection may be tacit at first, but will undoubtedly surface over time. The longer the suppression, the more violent the reprisal. The suffocation of national and cultural identity of the annexed republics is what has led to the angry vindictiveness against Russian oppressors. Animosity over this oppression was bottled up for decades, stifled by harsh autocratic regimes. Once the republics were allowed to vent their anger and frustrations, their vengeance came out in full force.

## **CHAPTER V: Heat of the Moment**

### **Gorbachev and Today's Crises: Crackdown from the Center**

Ethnic unrest had begun to pose such a problem to the central leadership in Moscow that the Kremlin began to issue threats to rebellious republics by the end of 1990. In November of 1990, then Soviet Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov threatened the Baltic states with economic repression if they did not cooperate with Moscow. He demanded that they abide only by Soviet laws, such as tax regulations. Furthermore, he warned the three republics that hard currency funding from the central government would be cut off if the Baltics went ahead as planned and did not participate in scheduled talks on the ruble. Moldavia was threatened in a like manner when Gorbachev demanded in December that they nullify a law that made a Romanian dialect the state language.

At the beginning of January, 1991, the Soviet Defense Ministry announced that units of paratroopers were begin sent out to rebellious republics such as the Baltics, Georgia, and Moldavia. Their mission, ordered by the Kremlin, was to enforce the military draft and hunt down deserters. One week later, on January 13, the Red Army launched an assault on Lithuania's capital city in an attempt to ensure the transfer of power from the democratically elected parliament to a new conservative government under Central Committee control. This new government, who called themselves

the National Salvation Committee, had mysteriously appeared out of nowhere and been immediately aided by military forces. Tanks entered the city at dawn, running down unarmed civilians who stood in the way. Press facilities were taken over by the army and media buildings were closed down. Three days later, Gorbachev said he had no prior knowledge of events before the attack.<sup>44</sup> Although Western officials remained skeptical, Gorbachev denied repeatedly that he had ordered the attack. Gorbachev later defended the army's crackdown, calling the attack necessary.

By the middle of January, troops had stationed themselves in Estonia and Latvia, as well. Paratroopers and shock troops stand "ready to move into the secessionist strongholds of Georgia and the western Ukraine."<sup>45</sup> The presence of the army has had a direct correlation with the increase of active nationalism in these and other republics. The random and sometimes unprecipitated violence seems not to deter their drive for independence. Today troops still occupy these areas and have made no plans on moving until the nationality issue has been settled, preferably Gorbachev's way.

### **The Baltics and the Ukraine Today**

The drive for independence has differed in each republic. In some it has been quite comprehensive and successful, while in others it never gained much steam. In Soviet Central Asia, nationalists are part of an almost

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<sup>44</sup>Kaiser, p. 395.

<sup>45</sup>Rose Brady and Rosemarie Boyle, "Back to Iron Fists and Brazen Lies," Businessweek 28 January 1991: p. 41.

insignificant minority and there are no demands to separate from the Soviet Union, on which it has become so dependent. The Transcaucasian republics seem to want increased autonomy, but are too caught up with their own internal ethnic strife, that they have not been able to mobilize an organized front. Interethnic hostility throughout the Soviet Union, thus, is not uniform or consistent. Anti-Russian sentiment differs from place to place, but is strongest among non-Russian nationals. This, however, only intensifies Russian resentment towards non-Russians. Thus, the nature of the relationship between Russians and non-Russian nationals is cyclical. The Russians, or the Russian leadership anyway, strive to eliminate the animosity connected to nationalism, but in doing so, assert their own predominance and stifle the breeding of any other ethnic consciousness. Their actions, in turn, reinforce nationalist resentment.<sup>46</sup> Since overt separatism began brewing at the beginning of the end of the 1980s, nationalist efforts have varied in intensity and scope, yet all the defiant republics have essentially the same gripe with the central government. Each rebellious republic is demanding more political and economic autonomy although the efforts to attain this goal have varied.

Overall, the Ukraine and the Baltic republics have the most organized and extensive programs for trying to re-establish lost freedoms. In the late 1980s, as ethnic unrest came to the fore in the Baltic region, "popular fronts" were organized in each republic. Latvians took the lead, forming a popular front in 1987, and Estonia and Lithuania soon followed.<sup>47</sup> In Lithuania,

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<sup>46</sup>Katz, pp. 18-19.

<sup>47</sup>Walter C. Clemens, Jr., "The Baltic Way, " World Monitor May 1990: p. 60.

activists in Sajudis, the pro-independence group, took dramatic steps towards restoring independence. In Estonia and Latvia, actions taken by pro-independence groups were intended to be more gradual, but equally intense. *Rukh*, the Ukrainian independence movement, has gained popularity and influence over the past year and was mainly responsible for their declaration of sovereignty.

Many of the Soviet republics, including all the Baltics and the Ukraine, wish to utilize their new freedoms to enact their constitutional right to secede from the union into which they were forcibly incorporated. Under Chapter 8, Article 72 of the Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, "Each Union Republic shall retain the right freely to secede from the USSR."<sup>48</sup> Lithuania was the first of the republics to take the law into their own hands in March of 1990 when they declared independence.

A newly-elected parliament in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, announced on March 11 that it had voted to secede from the USSR and restore its pre-World War II independence. The Kremlin, ignoring the fundamental rights granted to the republic under the Constitution, responded by cutting off all oil and shutting off 80% of the natural gas supply to Lithuania, which is almost entirely dependent on Moscow for both resources.<sup>49</sup> The economic embargo placed on the maverick republic was supposed to serve as a lesson for all, said officials in the Kremlin. Leaders in Moscow also set a deadline by which the Lithuanians were supposed to have revoked this declaration, only eight days

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<sup>48</sup>Barry and Barner-Barry, p. 346.

<sup>49</sup>Mark Porubcansky (a), "Soviets Tighten Lithuanian Blockade," The Boston Globe 20 April 1990: p. 10.

after the republic had announced secession. Gorbachev sent in military aircraft to fly over the Baltic territory as the deadline neared, claiming that the Lithuanian proposal was illegal. Promising conservatives that the declaration would lead nowhere, Gorbachev made both threats and demands on the small Baltic nation.

A short while after the passage of the independence legislation, Gorbachev announced that if Lithuania did not annul its declaration, it would have to pay Moscow back in retribution for having invested in the republic. He demanded that Lithuanians repay 21 billion rubles (or about US\$34 billion) for "Soviet investment." Sajudis, Lithuania's proindependence group, retorted that the Soviet central government owed Lithuania an estimated 300 billion rubles in compensation for the "300,000 people who were killed, imprisoned, or exiled....by Stalin."<sup>50</sup> New Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis rejected Gorbachev's demands that he annul the legislation, but was finally forced into a compromise position one month after the declaration when armored vehicles rode into Vilnius, threatening to take over.

Lithuania's Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Estonia, announced plans for similar declarations in the spring of 1990, although both said that they would opt for a more gradual, less dramatic transition to sovereignty. By May of 1990, however, the Baltic crisis had reached a dangerous level. Sanctions in all three republics had begun to affect everyday life as shortages of gasoline and natural gas forced closings and shutdowns of plants, offices, and other

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<sup>50</sup>Mark Porubcansky (b), "Ligachev Bars Use of Force," The Boston Globe 13 March 1990: p. 2.

businesses. Yet as time wore on, Gorbachev seemed further and further away from offering any viable solutions and the secessionist republics seemed less willing to compromise. Lithuania and Estonia had already begun by the middle of last year to establish multi-party systems, moving away from the single-party, socialist system.

Following the Baltic lead, the Ukrainian Republican Party and Rukh joined together in a unified demand for economic and political independence last year. By the beginning of June of 1990 the Ukraine was pushing towards changes in the constitution which would allow for increased autonomy and complete control over their own natural resources. The Ukraine, often called "the bread basket of the Soviet Union", is responsible for almost one quarter of the country's total food production.

By the end of June, Vladimir Ivashko, a Ukrainian Supreme Soviet Member and former Gorbachev ally, submitted a draft of legislation calling for autonomy. Ukrainian independence leaders began pressing for each secessionist republics to demand independence and seek out "lateral cooperation."<sup>51</sup> In October, after having suffered through several weeks of strikes and demonstrations in the Ukraine, Rukh decided to seek full independence. The Ukrainian Congress which passed the legislation "committed itself to a nonviolent transformation" into an independent republic.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Douglas Stanglin (b), "Reaping the Whirlwind," U.S. News & World Report 28 January 1991: p. 55.

<sup>52</sup>Carey Goldberg, "Ukrainian Movement Resolves to Seek Independence," The Boston Globe 29 October 1990: p. 4.

The reaction of the central government to the Ukrainian independence movement differed greatly from their harsh, militaristic reaction to the Balts' steps towards secession. Proindependence leaders' decision to opt for a gradual transition to a freer republic probably stood as much less of a threat to Moscow than did the Lithuanians' drastic and sudden decision to break away from the union. Moreover, the history of nationalism in the Baltic region has been much more troublesome for the government in Moscow than it has been in the Ukraine, a region which has its roots in the Slavic tradition. Many Russians maintain close relationships with the neighboring Ukrainians, mainly due to linguistic and religious similarities, coupled with a similar historical tradition. There has also been a rise in the Ukraine recently in in-migration by Russians, particularly in the industrial areas, such as the Donbas region.<sup>53</sup> Russification in the Ukraine has thus been more pervasive, partially because of its proximity to the RSFSR and its large Russian population and partially because of its vulnerability over the past few decades. Studies have proven that "attitudes toward the ideal government and social and economic organization of society are a general cultural trait shared by both Russians and Ukrainians."<sup>54</sup>

The Russians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians are all Slavs and therefore share cultural similarities which have created a sort of bond among them. To kill or harm a fellow Slav would be seemingly self-destructive. Even the Soviet military realizes this cultural connection and admit that "shooting Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and other Slavs is quite

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<sup>53</sup>Subtelny, p. 525.

<sup>54</sup>Seweryn Bialer (a), Inside Gorbachev's Russia (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1989) p. 18.



different from shooting Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians."<sup>55</sup> The Balts are not of Slavic origin, but in fact all have European roots. Customs, traditions, and cultural behavior of the Balts are far removed from those of the Slavs. Thus, there is a much weaker inclination to treat the Balts as brothers, or even as true allies for that matter.

From an economic perspective, the Balts have demonstrated the ability to survive on their own, as they did for two decades between the two world wars. Their "self-financing" reforms, begun in the late 1980s, have proven to be successful thus far. Financially, they are the most successful of all the republics, including the Russian Republic. They have shown they are both willing and able to establish their own, independent forms of government that have little or no connection to the socialist system. Because they have been dependent on the Soviet system for so long, however, they probably could not make it as a unified, independent territory or as separate states just yet. Being part of the union requires that you contribute equally to the Soviet state as a whole and because of this, they have lost out. Republics rely heavily on one another for trade and have come to depend on this reliance. If trade were cut off to any region, the affected republic would surely suffer, at least in the short-run. Supplies would be in greater demand and industries could very well shut down all together. This dependence on imports renders the republics all but chained to the Soviet economy.

Transforming the Baltic region into separate independent states would require changing the whole system into a newer, more Western version,

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<sup>55</sup>Seweryn Bialer (b), "The Kremlin Crossroads," U.S. News & World Report 22 January 1991: p. 33.

something that might not be so easy to convince farmers and factory workers of right away. A new form of currency would have to be created and Soviet troops withdrawn, meaning that many Estonians would have to find other employment or work towards creating a whole new military complex. These changes, and undoubtedly countless other necessary transformations, would take time, but will probably be successful in the long run. The task would be neither easy nor speedy. From a more optimistic point of view, for the Balts at least, their strategic location on the Baltic Sea makes them an easy target for Western aid if they are able to establish complete independence. Furthermore, the neighboring Scandinavian countries will be able to provide a little boost to their economy if a good balance of trade is established.

The Ukraine, on the other hand, is more financially dependent on Moscow. Despite an abundance of agricultural produce, particularly wheat and grain, Ukrainians are largely dependent on Moscow to provide them with machinery, transport, and other essentials that can make their valuable raw materials into finished products. Their dependence stems largely from debts incurred in borrowing from Russia after having suffered devastating losses during tragic periods such as the famine in the 1930s and the occupation of their territory in World War II. Despite the fact that Russia itself inflicted much of the pain and catastrophe upon the Ukraine, they still are indebted to Moscow for helping pull them out of agricultural backwardness and helping them rebuild their territory. Moscow is primarily responsible for the building of large industries and factories that have made the Ukraine a modernized industrial center.

The nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in the Ukrainian SSR in 1986 made the Ukraine even more reliant on the central government for aid. Over

100,000 Ukrainians were forced out of their homes after the huge nuclear reactor caught fire. Radiation emitted from the plant has caused extensive ecological damage across the Soviet Union, damaging valuable crops and arable land. The causes of the explosion at Chernobyl, a Soviet-built nuclear energy plant, were later cited as operators' errors, inefficient equipment, and regulation violations, all of which were essentially the responsibility of the central government.<sup>56</sup> The "breadbasket" republic was forced to abandon much of its produce out of danger of contamination. In addition, thousands of people and animals have been exposed to high levels of radiation in and around Chernobyl. The incidence of cancer in this region has risen drastically since the disaster and genetic disease stemming from the accident will undoubtedly plague the region for generations to come. Thus, the Ukraine has found itself the victim of another unfortunate circumstance caused by Soviet dominance. The Ukrainians are caught in a cycle, perpetuated by the Russians, from which it has become increasingly difficult to escape.

Politically, the Balts have also made significant strides in trying to prove their legitimacy. Democratic elections have taken place in all three republics forming the basis for their congresses and parliaments. With their newly created parliaments they have overridden Soviet laws and passed many of their own. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians all joined together in protest in August of 1989 on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In this non-violent demonstration both the pact and the annexation were declared illegal and void. The Balts are unified in

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<sup>56</sup>Nigel Hawkes, Chernobyl: The End of the Nuclear Dream (New York: Vintage Books, 1986) p. 100.

their struggle for independence, demonstrating this "oneness" of mind in a human chain that stretched across all three of the republics during the August demonstration.

In the Ukraine, however, the organization of political forces pushing for autonomy is relatively new. Rukh was only formed in 1989 and began its struggle for independence by demanding freer use of the Ukrainian language.<sup>57</sup> Henceforth now, in 1991, their political battle has just begun and is still in its developmental stages. The ousting of Communists was called for as early as the beginning of 1990, but Moscow is too nearby to let the Ukraine stray far from communism. Conservative Communist party members still dominate the Ukrainian government today. Demonstrations and protests have been the prominent feature of the Ukrainian thus far as no solid steps have been taken to create a new political system. Thus, not only is the Ukraine divided between reformers and conservatives, but it is also split between Western Ukrainians and other Ukrainians. The Westerners want to create a whole new territory unto to themselves with full independence from the Ukrainian SSR, as well as from the Soviet Union itself. These divisions make it more difficult for Ukrainians to form a unified decision on the issue of freedom, and easier for Moscow to justify enforcing unity.

Baltic territory is also a relatively new acquisition for the USSR, which makes them much less "Soviet" than Ukrainians. In fact, the Balts are much more European than they are Russian. Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine today, was actually Russia's first capital. In fact, today's Russia really evolved out of

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<sup>57</sup>Bruce Nelan (b), "Lashed by the Flags of Freedom," Time 12 March 1990: p. 29.

Kievan Rus. The history of Kiev and the origin of the Russian state dates back to the ninth century. Baltic-Russian relations, however, only go back to about the eighteenth century, when the Russians were anxious to establish new ports. And even after the Russians did move into Baltic territory, they never fully infiltrated the land, but merely used the region for access to the Baltic Sea.

Today, both the Ukrainian republic and the Baltic states are continuing in their fight for independence from the USSR, who seems not yet ready to relinquish these territories. The Soviets, refusing to recognize anyone's independence, have retained control over these areas, however, and continue to use threats of force if the republics take any drastic measures. Balts have argued that they are not doing anything wrong in repossessing their statehood, but rather that the Soviet leadership is violating international law by forcing them to stay in the union. Citing their constitutional rights as proof of the validity of their actions, they are demanding freedom. Gorbachev has never really denied that the rights to secession and freedom exist, but he has stated "that the Baltics and others should not try to exercise it (the right to secession) until new laws are passed that spell out the procedure for seceding."<sup>58</sup> Yet Gorbachev has not offered any kind of legislation for such a procedure, except for the new union treaty, which is not seen as a compromise by the secessionist republics.

### Attempts to Maintain Unity

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<sup>58</sup>Clemens, p. 60.

Other legislation has been devised by leaders in Moscow in an attempt to try to keep the union together. At the beginning of March of 1991, Gorbachev announced the plan for a referendum voting to take place on March 17 in which citizens of the Soviet Union would be able to choose whether or not to maintain unity amongst the republics. The referendum ballot, which included other issues such as the implementation of an executive presidency, was worded differently in a few republics due to linguistic differences. The original question, however, concerning the issue of unity was: "Do you consider it necessary to preserve the USSR as an alliance of equal sovereign states?" The referendum was a first in the Soviet Union and in a televised speech Gorbachev called the referendum an "issue affecting the present and future of our multinational state....the country's destiny."<sup>59</sup> The leadership and officials within the government repeatedly stressed the significance of the ballot, but six republics (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, Moldavia, and Armenia), seeing the referendum as a token gesture and an uncompromising alternative, refused to take part in the voting. Gorbachev, in answering questions from Soviet and foreign news correspondents, commented after the voting day had drawn to a close that he was confident that this vote would mean that the country was moving towards a "renewed Union," yet he did not comment on the republics which did not participate in voting on the unity question.

Citing reasons for choosing not to participate in the polling, Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis called the referendum "a deception" and said

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<sup>59</sup>Daily Report Soviet Union, 18 March 1991 "Gorbachev Televised Address Supports Union" (Washington, D.C.: FBIS-SOV-91-059) p. 25.

that the results had already been "calculated in advance."<sup>60</sup> Yet an estimated 500,000 voters (almost all Russian) turned out to participate despite the fact that there was an official ban, the same was reported in the other two Baltic republics and Moldavia. Apparently, the protest was not a unanimous decision, everywhere, and it can be assumed from population figures that the voters who did show up at the polls were not all Russian. Some Balts claimed that they merely wanted to have a stake in their future rather than simply protesting it. Not wishing to be hypocritical in their quest for a more democratic society, protesters afforded those who did wish to vote the opportunity, and public organizations and some work collectives set up polling stations. Official results of the referendum in these areas have not yet been made public by the official Soviet news agency, TASS. TASS reported extremely high voter turnout rates in many places, particularly the Central Asian republics and publicized preliminary results that showed upwards of 90% of the population voting "yes" in Turkmenia, Tadzhikistan, Kazakhstan, and other republics.<sup>61</sup> Widespread fraud and voting violations were reported, however, despite the monitoring of polls by Soviet people's deputies (of the Congress of People's Deputies). In one town soviet, called Tolyatti, the number of ballots counted turned out to be greater than the number of ballots that had been originally given out. These incidents, mainly reported in the Baltic region, were reported to Soviet law enforcement agencies and the referendum commission. Citing improper methods and observation, many have discredited the referendum.

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<sup>60</sup>Daily Report Soviet Union, 20 March 1991 " ' Hundreds of Thousands' Vote in Referendum" (Washington, D.C.: FBIS-SOV-91-054-S) p. 33.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid*, p. 30.





## CONCLUSION

Despite Gorbachev's adamant opposition to the break-up of the Soviet Union, secessionist republics seem not to be heeding his words. His pleas seem to have come too late and with too few concessions. Once again, Gorbachev has found himself tangled up within his own web. Flames of democratization, sparked by his own perestroika program, have begun raging through his country and Gorbachev is having difficulty trying to extinguish the fire. He has been caught up in a series of contradictions which threaten his hold on power. Claiming, at least at one time, to endorse a free-market system, he has yet to provide a concrete plan for transition and remains unwilling to open up his country to private enterprise. He has also vowed to give the Soviet people freedom of expression, yet has shut down publishing buildings in the Baltic republics and elsewhere and appears to moving back towards a policy of censorship. Moreover, while touting political reform to world leaders, Gorbachev is denying the republics their rightful sovereignty on the homefront. The Red Army has used force to quell tension in the rebellious republics, killing hundreds of demonstrators since they began to utilize these tactics in 1986. From Kazakhstan east to Armenia and all the way north to Lithuania, Soviet troops have assaulted unarmed civilians and peaceful protesters whose only end has been to restore what had been kidnapped by the Great Russian Empire - land, freedom, and cultural identity.

The Baltic states, well on their way to independence, are not showing any interest in compromise with the Kremlin. They are unlikely to move anywhere but forward in their struggle to regain their former statehood

despite how long this struggle may take. Their ethnic and cultural roots are far removed from the Russian tradition. Peaceful, successful assimilation could probably not occur even if Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were to consent to it. Moreover, freedom and autonomy are recent memories for the Balts. The repressive annexation which abruptly cut off their successful drive towards establishing themselves as legitimate states is still a fresh wound. Neither tradition nor history binds the Baltic republics to the Russian motherland. The fate of the Baltic republics was decided by the Russians in accordance with their desires and needs. There existed neither legal foundation nor moral justification for the forcible annexation of the Baltic states.<sup>62</sup>

Even the threat of force does not seem to discourage their plans for renewed independence. Every step that Gorbachev takes towards authoritarianism, the Balts take a counter-step towards independence. In trying to preserve a centralized structure, he is pushing the independence-minded republics further away from the center. The Baltics, who have a good deal of support in the West, are likely to break away from the union altogether before the beginning of the next century unless a violent crackdown occurs first.

The Ukraine, however, is less likely to pull away from the union, at least in the near future. Economic dependency on other republics, especially the Russian Republic renders them too vulnerable to pull away completely. Despite the Ukraine's growth and development over the past few decades into a major industrial power in the Soviet Union, it is still unable to survive

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<sup>62</sup>Swettenham, p. 50.

without outside assistance. Although Russia itself is to blame for poor socioeconomic conditions in the Ukraine today, it would not have been able to rebuild what it had lost without the aid of Russians.

Ukrainians probably do not, for the most part, want to sever their close cultural ties with the other Slavic republics, Russia and Byelorussia. Although a distinct form of nationalism has evolved over time within Ukrainian territory, it is still too young to separate itself from Russia. Gradually, as cultural revitalization is allowed to flourish, if it is indeed allowed to grow at all, the Ukrainian nationalist independence movement will find its place and possibly be able to establish itself as a free nation.

## Epilogue

Seventy years of rule by a highly centralized, oppressive state which emphasized the predominance of the state over the individual have resulted in widespread dissatisfaction and resentment towards the government. Although Gorbachev's reforms initially offered a hope for the future, his inconsistency with policy and failure to follow through on reform programs have resulted in disillusionment. Today, the people in the Soviet Union do not like what they see. Uncertainty and a lack of faith in the Soviet system has led to alienation from the union itself and an increase in ethnic nationalism. By trying to force several different cultures and ethnicities into a legitimate state, without accounting for the differences and not allowing cultural growth within each separate territory, the Soviet Union decided its own fate. The forging of nations into one larger body under the rules and laws of a single, centralized body and subsequent repression of development goes against all the natural laws of personal freedoms. And when an individual's liberties or rights have been infringed upon, the result is resistance towards that body. Today, the Soviet Union is witnessing collective resistance towards the oppressive body - the central Soviet government.

Thus, Gorbachev's problems are mounting. Politically and economically, the country is breaking down and ethnic and nationalist tensions, wrapped up in the political and economic crises, may soon cause a breaking up. The forces unleashed six years ago by "new thinking" and an

ambitious reform program unveiled by Gorbachev are now threatening to sweep him away. And with increased domestic confusion and chaos, Soviets are beginning to look into the future with heightened apprehension and skepticism. But the threat of a return to former days of repression and authoritarianism are directly challenged by forces of democracy uncovered by glasnost. Leaders and citizens of the Soviet Union alike fear, justifiably, that civil war could be lurking around the next corner.

Taking into account the historical background of nationalist tensions and other domestic dilemmas, the recent past, and the present social situation in the Soviet Union, we are thus left with only a few possible scenarios for the future: The first and perhaps the most optimistic scenario is that democratic reforms will win out. If the reformers take power, the hard-liners are ousted, and democratization is fully implemented, the Soviet Union could be looking at a freer, looser confederation of states. Harmony among the different nationalities could generate support for the political and economic reforms that are so desperately needed today.

A second, far more dangerous scenario entails civil war. If the economic, political, and ethnic situations are allowed to deteriorate until an all-out revolution is the only answer for the Soviet people, then the revamping of the Soviet system will take perhaps another whole generation to accomplish. Or, on the other hand, if the use of force to prevent ethnic unrest or economic protest escalates, and nationalists or workers group together to topple the government or fight the military, massive violence and bloodshed would surely result. In any event, if civil war were to occur, the USSR would be left in pieces and fragments, rather than as a united nation.

The last plausible scenario for the future is the consolidation of power by the right. If Gorbachev or any other successor creates a coalition with the military, the KGB, and other conservatives in an effort to prevent destabilization and deunification, the Soviet Union might revert to an authoritarian regime. The presence of a solid conservative faction presents a real threat to the Soviet Union today. If hard-liners are able to accumulate enough strength and defeat the reformers, a return to the oppressive, centralized regimes of the past is likely.

Whatever the future may bring to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, they will have a long road to reform. Whatever course is chosen, the political and economic situations are likely to worsen. Furthermore, the nationality issue will not be resolved if democratic reforms are not fully implemented. Gorbachev cannot hope to solve the problems in the USSR by straddling socialism and democracy. Likewise, he cannot sit on the fence with the nationalities issue. If he stays in power, he should either grant secessionist republics their independence or work out some feasible arrangement that will allow them more autonomy with an interdependent relationship with the Soviet Union. If a cooperative arrangement could be worked out among leaders from each republic, a solution to the crisis might be found. But given the animosity and hostility among republics and between republics and the central government, this is a dim hope. If Gorbachev or a future leader totally sacrifices commitment to reform to restore order and discipline in Soviet society, a bitter internal and external dispute will surely follow. Thus, as Gorbachev struggles to reform the economy, maintain political stability, and ensure unity in his country, the Soviet people are watching this huge former empire crumble around them.

While some want to hasten its disintegration and others are striving to keep it together, only one thing seems certain: the end result, whatever it may be, will be tragic.



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Nahaylo and Swoboda, p. 365

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