In Search of the Nomenklatura: Yesterday’s USSR, Today’s Russia

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**Books Mentioned:**
*Inside Gorbachev’s Kremlin* Yegor Ligachev (Pantheon, 1993)
*The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* John B. Dunlop (Princeton University Press, 1993)
*The Struggle for Russia* Boris Yeltsin (Belka, 1994)
*Animal Farm: A Fairy Tale* George Orwell (Secker and Warburg, 1995 [1945])
*Comrade Criminal: Russia’s New Mafiya* Stephen Handelman (Yale University Press, 1995)
*KGB: State Within a State* Yevgenia Albats (FSG, 1994)
*Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* David Remnick (Random House, 1997)

Of the twenty million members of the former USSR Communist Party, perhaps two to three million made up the higher nomenklatura—a formidable elite that encompassed the party apparat, state bureaucracy, military, and KGB. Even if suspicions abounded that many of these officials had become cynical about the official ideology, analysts remained convinced that collectively they would never permit the overthrow of the system. Thus, notwithstanding the profusion of autopsies, a significant puzzle persists: why did the enormous Soviet nomenklatura, armed to the teeth with loyal internal forces, fail to defend either socialism or the Union with all its might?

The riddle becomes even more challenging when we note that it was the Soviet elite who launched, and willy-nilly presided over, the dissolution of socialism and the USSR. Moreover, once the danger became manifest, elements of the most privileged groups deliberately gave the shaken edifice a final shove over the edge. Could the elite of a great power really have permitted or facilitated its country’s dissolution without having suffered foreign occupation, any hints of insubordination among its massive military and secret police, or even prolonged civil disobedience? Either we experienced a phenomenal phantasmagoria or something needs to be explained.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s prolix memoirs, read in conjunction with other works, provide an occasion to confront the central conundrum of the Soviet collapse: the role
of the elite. What did the Soviet leader think he was doing? What did the rest of the Politburo and Central Committee think Gorbachev was up to? Was he a heretic in the Kremlin? Did the conservatives sabotage his reforms? What about the vaunted KGB? How could the massive Soviet Union vanish so suddenly and meekly? Does the “credit” go to Gorbachev’s nemesis, Boris Yeltsin? What happened to Yeltsin’s postcommunist revolution? Where is Russia headed? Answers to these questions can be found by examining the old Soviet nomenklatura. Our search begins with the last general secretary, traces how his efforts to renew socialism resulted in resigned auto-liquidation rather than brutal convulsions, unwraps the seeming enigma of Yeltsin’s Russia, and concludes with observations on Washington’s paroxysm of award ceremonies for the other super-power’s dissolution.

The drama of reform

A formidable operator and the one relative youth (fifty-four) in the Politburo when the inevitable generational change at the top could no longer be avoided, Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the post of general secretary in March 1985. Far from an aberration, his memoirs reveal the former country bumpkin from Stavropol to have been a quintessential product of the Soviet system and a faithful representative of the system’s trajectory as it entered the second half of the 1980s. With an inner circle inherited from his patron Yuri Andropov, Gorbachev set out to bridge the gap between socialist ideals and the institutions of a revolution approaching old age, in the context of competition with the West. Much of his cohort hailed him as the long-awaited “reformer,” a second Khrushchev. In fact, true belief in a humane socialism had reemerged from within the system, and this time, in even more politically skillful hands, it would prove fatal.

In the USSR only the general secretary had the authority, if he desired to use it, to chart a new course; but he could not do so alone. To run the all-important party Secretariat (charged with implementing policy), Gorbachev chose Yegor Ligachev, an old acquaintance brought to Moscow on Andropov’s watch and a man who had been indispensable in the maneuvering leading to Gorbachev’s elevation. Alexander Yakovlev, former ambassador to Canada and before that director of the Central Committee department for agitation and propaganda, was named Central Committee secretary in charge of ideology (formally under Ligachev). At the same time, many officials were removed. Yet there were even more holdovers. Gorbachev sought to outflank Brezhnev-era recalcitrants by appealing directly to the mass of party members, intelligentsia, and working people. After a party congress, several trips around the country and abroad that were televised, an anti-alcohol campaign, a call for openness (glasnost), the release of Andrei Sakharov from exile, increased Jewish emigration, Chernobyl, the shuffling of editors at key periodicals, the appearance of a few banned films and novels, and various Andropov-style administrative measures that failed to raise output or quality, Gorbachev placed economic reform on the agenda of successive Politburo sessions. It was 1987.

Against objections by the planning bureaucracy, Gorbachev rammed through a series of sweeping extensions of formerly restricted experiments, which included enterprise autonomy, some direct “market-like” relations among factories, and small-scale private enterprises under the guise of “cooperatives.” Leading Soviet social scientists brought in as advisors singled out “social activism” as the sine qua non of successful economic reform, and Gorbachev permitted the formation of “unofficial” (neformaly) associations as well as the workplace election of managers. Undergirding these moves was his putative ace in the hole. A good third of his memoir is taken up
with his goading of Ronald Reagan (and then George Bush) into accepting steep mutual reductions in nuclear arsenals to “free up” vast resources for peaceful economic reconstruction and attract Western investment. Though the USSR began a phased withdrawal from Afghanistan, arms negotiations dragged on. But international public opinion and the desire for a place in history led to a number of agreements as well as promises of aid and “partnership.” That, in a nutshell, was it—perestroika. Gorbachev revolutionized the USSR’s relationship with the West and secured the Politburo’s approval to open up the system to the scrutiny of the domestic and foreign media. He also began a serious if difficult attempt to unblock the Soviet economy, inviting citizen activism and associations outside the party. Thus did the occupant of Brezhnev’s old office captivate the world and confound the experts. What went wrong? It started with the economy. Following the misexecution of the anti-alcohol campaign, much care and expertise went into the laws on economic reform in 1987-88. The press, too, was an ally, exposing the worst absurdities of planning. Nonetheless, Gorbachev had no choice but to leave the ministerial bureaucracy to implement a decentralization that involved a far-reaching transfer of its authority. The slow progress, he concluded, did not derive from an incompatibility between the market (real prices) as well as limited private property, on the one hand, and planning, on the other, but from bureaucratic resistance. Yet he was groping, just as Stalin had. Stalin’s improvisation involved the suppression of the market, private property, and wage labor as the path to socialism. Gorbachev was discovering that his “reform” of the socialist economy required the reintroduction of the very capitalistic mechanisms whose suppression constituted the essence of socialism. As economic “reform” moved very haltingly toward the market, the planned economy became unhinged and output plummeted. Behind planning lay far deeper problems. By the 1980s the USSR economy consisted, incredibly, of around 70 percent heavy industry, mostly of the early twentieth-century fossil-fuel variety. Efforts in the 1960s and 70s to correct the imbalance by expanding light industry had little effect. Moreover, by that time, much of the country’s heavy industry had become hopelessly antiquated, as yet untouched by the rust-belt shock that had wrenched the postwar capitalist world (where heavy industry had never been nearly as dominant as in the USSR). In Gorbachev’s reforms, however, no new investment was forthcoming to revamp the country’s gigantic assemblage of obsolete manufacturing (or to clean up the nearly unfathomable environmental catastrophe). In fact, the most advanced sectors (defense), which might have provided investment capital, were targeted for drastic downsizing. Military retrenchment abroad, meanwhile, cost money, to pay for decommissioning Soviet troops and arming former clients to defend themselves. These economic quandaries were compounded by the unforeseen consequences of glasnost. Complaints and jokes about the system were a time-honored tradition, and little love was lost on most apparatchiks, but the Soviet system was founded in part on belief, at least the willingness to suspend disbelief, particularly against the background of interwar fascism and the Great Depression. Postwar capitalism had become peaceful and prosperous, and though the superiority of capitalist living standards was suspected long before glasnost supplied startling (indeed exaggerated) information, many Soviets, Gorbachev included, believed that the absence of unemployment and the provision of social welfare made socialism superior. Glasnost induced profound shock and anger at the apparent proof that socialism was in no way more just than capitalism. Peoples’ identities, all the sacrifices, were betrayed—right when expectations had been raised. The flood of new details about Communist repressions, less surprisingly, further undermined the
allegiance to socialism. Having introduced openness and social activism to elicit support and achieved the opposite result, Gorbachev also saw various groups take advantage of the freedoms to advocate radicalization of the “reforms.” Open calls began to be heard for the overthrow of the Communist Party, mostly among the tiny handful of former “dissidents,” but such challenges took on a national complexion with the 1988 formation of “national fronts”—with party and KGB involvement. The fact that nationalist political movements kept threatening to go beyond “acceptable” bounds was perhaps overshadowed in the leadership’s perception by the outbreaks of mass inter-ethnic violence in the Caucasus. Yet the manifest liquidational logic of economic reform was paralleled in the political realm. Eastern Europe’s experience had shown that the efforts to fuse elements of the market with planning or with socialism’s claim to have overcome exploitation (as embodied by wage labor and private property) were highly problematic. This was even more true of the efforts to combine wider latitude for the press and political associations with the Communist Party’s monopoly. What, after all, had brought the tanks to Budapest and Prague? One would think that the more recent lessons of Poland’s Solidarity would have raised profound questions. But to Gorbachev and indeed to most analysts, the main drama of reforming socialism involved not squaring the circle, but a fierce struggle between reformers and hard-liners. Gorbachev recounts how much effort he expended urging all levels of the apparat that not to take the risks of political reform would be more dangerous. In 1987, he managed to coax the Politburo into agreeing to “democratize” the party with competitive elections. Accustomed to lifetime appointments and perquisites in exchange for following orders, most party officials, even those who had reformist inclinations, did not know how to address a public reconfigured as voters. Nor did functionaries appreciate being held personally accountable for Stalin’s past crimes. The courageous types who heeded the call for the vanguard to lead “perestroika” discovered that, in the absence of economic improvements, they were “leading” little more than angry public ventilations over the existence of deepening problems for which the party was blamed. It was not long before an apparat revanche, which Gorbachev had been expecting, emerged into the open. At the February 1988 party plenum, higher party officials let loose a plaintive wail, replete with dire warnings of catastrophe. The next month a storm erupted over a Leningrad schoolteacher’s letter to the editor of a rearguard newspaper. The general secretary moved to have the “Nina Andreeva” text branded an “anti-perestroika manifesto” at a special Politburo session. Aspersions were cast on Ligachev and the Secretariat for masterminding the letter’s contents and publication. Gorbachev writes obliquely that the letter “contained information known only to a relatively narrow circle.” Ligachev writes that Gorbachev had the circumstances of publication investigated and privately exonerated him of responsibility. Gorbachev never made a public disavowal of the suspicions. On the contrary, with the avid assistance of the Soviet and foreign media, Ligachev was made into an unwitting instrument in the general secretary’s efforts to cultivate society’s sympathies and to pressure the apparat to demonstrate publicly that it was not anti-perestroika. Gorbachev also fashioned himself a scapegoat for economic failures: the Ligachev-led conservatives were strangling the reforms. To top it all off, he continued to enjoy Ligachev’s loyalty, owing to party discipline and to the insincere private exculpation. “Without knowing it,” Gorbachev writes innocently, “Nina Andreeva actually helped us.” But his brilliant stroke stirred up even greater fury at (and within) the party, without magically transforming the behavior of apparatchiks, let alone the economy. Gorbachev seemed to recognize as much, for not long after he had
launched the effort to “democratize” the party and begun the exploitation of Ligachev, he unveiled a plan to revive the soviets. Power had been seized in their name in October 1917, yet these Jacobin clubs embodying a vision of direct democracy had long since atrophied. Now, local soviets were to be reinvigorated by means of contested elections. These were to be accompanied by elections to a new all-Union body, a Congress of People’s Deputies, which in turn would choose representatives to a thoroughly revamped USSR Supreme Soviet or parliament. Nominally only a refurbishment, this plan meant moving beyond the party’s hereditary power and acquiring a popular mandate—a test that the vast majority of sitting party officials who stood for election to the soviets failed miserably. (Gorbachev exempted himself and the rest of the Politburo from the competitive elections.) As always, Gorbachev’s larger strategy was dictated by tactical considerations. Khrushchev’s efforts at reform, first strongly supported by the party, had come to an abrupt end when the nomenklatura balked at plans for terms limits and, in a conspiracy, used its formal powers to accept his “request to retire.” While aiming to invigorate the soviets, Gorbachev also sought to protect himself against a repetition of October 1964. Not content with the Nina Andreeva stratagem, he went after Ligachev’s power base. In late September 1988, just prior to the upcoming 1989 election campaign for the Congress of People’s Deputies, Gorbachev engineered a “reorganization” of the party Secretariat, abolishing its Union-wide supervisory functions so that it could not serve as a behind-the-scenes coordinator of either the elections (and the economy) or a conspiracy against the general secretary. Thus he deliberately broke the apparatus might well before he relented on the demands to abolish the constitutional clause on the party’s monopoly. But he failed to grasp that, by undermining the party and enhancing the state (Union and republic Supreme Soviets), he was exchanging a unitary structure for a federalized one. The most poignant moment of his memoir comes when he writes of the 1988-89 political reforms, that he failed at that time to put forward a program to transform “the unitary state into a federal state.” This is exactly what he did do—unawares. Few people, Gorbachev included, understood the party as an institution. The party had been formed as an underground conspiracy to seize power, but once power had been seized in 1917 and a revolutionary government formed, what was to be the party’s role? Instead of being abolished as redundant, the party came to serve as a political watchdog in the government and indeed in all institutions during the civil war (1918-1921), when members of the tsarist officer corps were enlisted in the Red Army and political commissars were introduced alongside the officers to guarantee political loyalty. Such, haphazardly, became the model for the whole country: in every institution party “cells” acted as guarantors of experts’ political loyalty. But after army officers, bureaucrats, and engineers ceased to be holdovers from the tsarist period, the separate party-member meetings within every state institution could seem superfluous. More than that, the party had a full set of administrative bodies completely parallel to those of the state that were performing the same function: management of society and the economy.

This redundancy might have been just a smothering inefficiency had it not also been central to the multinational aspect of the revolutionary state. During the turmoil of 1917-18 a number of borderland areas in the empire had declared themselves independent. Although in the civil war the Red Army forced them to reestablish their association with Russia, the political situation in the republics, especially Ukraine, helped prevent their absorption into Soviet Russia. An innovative compromise—the USSR—was proclaimed in January 1924. Whereas the Russian empire, aside from the Duchy of Finland and the Central Asian “protectorates” of Bukhara and Khiva, had
recognized only non-ethnic administrative units, the Soviet state became federal, comprising fifteen ethnic republics (many created after 1924). For each republic, Moscow introduced constitutions, parliaments, and academies of science and oversaw the expansion of native literacy and native elites (albeit unevenly). This nationality-based institution-building and consciousness endured the purges, mass deportations, and xenophobia and was reinvigorated with de-Stalinization. Of course, alongside the federal (nationality-based) structure of the state, Soviet leaders counted on the unitary structure of the party (the embodiment of working class or universal interests). A 1919 resolution had declared that the Ukrainian and other republic-level Communist parties retained the status of regional committees “wholly subordinated” to the Russian party. As one Bolshevik leader explained, “a single centralized party beside a federation of states.” So remove the party, and you would be left with a federal association of republics each of which could chose to withdraw from the Union, as was permitted by the USSR Constitution. The Communist Party, administratively redundant and yet critical to the integrity of the country, was like a bomb planted inside the core of the USSR.

In this light, Beria’s proposals immediately after Stalin’s death stand out as fateful. Beginning with the industrialization of the 1930s and continuing through WWII and the onset of the Cold War, the state side of the dual political structure became more dominant yet the bifurcation persisted. Beria, a highly skilled if ruthless organizer and the top boss of the state’s military-industrial complex, proposed virtually eliminating the administrative role of the party and restructuring the multinational institutions. The rest of the leadership pounced on him before he pounced on them. Khrushchev, with the backing of the party officials whom the technocratic Beria disdained, won the ensuing power struggle and renewed the commitment to Communist ideals as well as the role of the party vis-à-vis the state, thereby reconsolidating the system’s perilous dualism. The reinvigorated apparat then turned against Khrushchev. The party-state seemed both to call forth efforts at socialist renewal and to block those efforts. That was the contradictory political dynamic that had produced Gorbachev and that he had set out to master, first with the Nina Andreeva manipulation and then with a momentous maneuver that undermined all his clever tactics. Even had he not waylaid the party Secretariat in September 1988, Gorbachev would have had his hands full bringing separatist aspirations to heel. With the party’s central structure broken, he discovered that the Supreme Soviets of the federal republics began to act as what he had made them: parliaments of de facto independent states.

To be sure, Gorbachev retained control over the executive pillars of the Soviet state: the KGB, interior ministry (MVD), and the army, each of which was centralized (republic KGBs and MVDs were completely subordinated to Moscow; there was a single Soviet Army). Had the MVD’s several hundred thousand highly trained troops and the KGB’s even greater number of operatives been ordered into swift and massive action to enforce the priority of USSR laws in 1989 or even 1990, they could have set back independence and anti-Communist movements in any of the republics and bought precious time. Well aware of this threat, the republics endeavored to split off MVD, KGB, and army officers stationed in their territories, achieving nominal success. But their greater ally was Gorbachev: the same dynamic that had produced him and perestroika rendered him reluctant to resort to methods that smacked of Stalin. Few people credit the Soviet president’s insistence that he had nothing to do with the bloody dispersal of street demonstrators in Georgia in April 1989 or the violence in Lithuania in January 1991. Whether we accept the implausible denials, we must admit that he came to see that the irresolute spilling of blood served as a formidable weapon in the hands of separatists, recruiting “nationalists” among
those who had been undecided and placing Moscow on the defensive. As political instruments, the KGB, MVD, and army were no substitute for the party’s Secretariat—
or for the USSR Supreme Soviet, undergoing a major renovation and competing with republic Supreme Soviets. In March 1990, Gorbachev persuaded the alarmed Politburo to authorize, and the USSR Supreme Soviet to create, an executive presidency for him. But central power had been dispersed, and the survival of the Union was in doubt. The assault on the conservative’s potential power base, meanwhile, succeeded spectacularly. Ligachev moans that for a long time he missed the significance of the Secretariat’s September 1988 “reorganization.” But even after seeing through Gorbachev’s camouflage, Ligachev shrank from raising the matter at subsequent Politburo meetings. When someone else brought it up, Gorbachev pointedly asked Ligachev if he (personally) needed a Secretariat. The party’s number two man confesses he remained silent for fear of showing ambition, shuffled back to his office and began writing alarmist letters to his boss. “The bitter truth,” Ligachev concludes, is that “I turned out to be right.” But if Ligachev knew back then that socialism and the motherland were in danger, as excerpts he claims to be citing from his written protests indicate, the bitter truth is that the person best positioned to do whatever was necessary to stop the general secretary lacked the wits and the stomach to do so. He was, in short, no Suslov. Passing Ligachev’s letters to the archives, Gorbachev continued on his haphazard quest for reformed socialism. Only it wasn’t reform. It was dissolution. Because Ligachev shared Gorbachev’s belief in the necessity and possibility of energizing the system, he refuses to concede that it was precisely perestroika that precipitated the system’s demise or even that the blame lay with the man he helped put in power. Instead, Ligachev rails against the hijacking of the original “socialist” perestroika by Yakovlev and other “radical conspirators” intent on destroying socialism. Here is the inept counterpart to Gorbachev’s scapegoating of the conservatives. For American readers, Ligachev’s exposure of Yakovlev’s neo-Bolshevik manipulations may be eye-opening, but the flattering endorsement of Yakovlev’s self-promotion does not do the general secretary justice. Gorbachev sidesteps clarifying the role of Yakovlev, yet the latter served at his behest; the decisive “conspirator” was the general secretary himself. But as the souvenir Matroshka dolls demonstrate, inside Gorbachev there was Khrushchev; inside Khrushchev was Stalin, and inside him, Lenin. The founders of the Soviet system had inadvertently booby-trapped it with a dangerously redundant administrative structure, an explosive mix to which Gorbachev added incomparable political skills. The play within the play, obscured by the fixations on his personality and pas de deux with Ligachev or the banal preservationism of millions of functionaries, featured the virtuoso tactician’s unwitting, yet extraordinarily deft, dismantling of the system. Into 1990, with the planned economy stumbling, organized political movements calling for an overthrow of the regime, and various republics passing laws superseding those of the USSR, Gorbachev continued to state publicly that the principal obstacle to “reform” was conservative opposition. This was after Eastern Europe had imploded. Then in June 1990, the Russian Republic declared its “sovereignty,” a move incited and imitated by the Baltic republics. Ukraine and Belorussia followed suit. With some republics raising doubts about future contributions to the Union budget, Gorbachev belatedly announced preparations for a new “union treaty.” During the summer and fall, he also joined forces with the “left” to prepare a 500-day program for a transition to the market. The program recognized reality: both the socialist economy and the unitary state were absent. Confronted by what he had wrought, Gorbachev renounced the 500-Day Program and appointed
several proponents of “order” to a new Soviet government. These were the men who would attempt to impose martial law. The final act Accompanying Gorbachev’s November 1990 rightward lurch, which his memoirs cover up, a draft union treaty was published. It accorded republics only limited control over enterprises and resources on their territories, maintained the primacy of Union laws, specified Russian as the state language, and failed to mention the USSR Constitution’s guarantee of secession. The draft had no prayer of winning republic approval. Even before its appearance, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had refused to take part in any discussions about a union. (In January 1991, riot troops and “national salvation” committees were let loose in the Baltics—mysterious episodes that lasted just a few days and were denounced by Gorbachev.) Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova announced that they also wanted nothing to do with the Union. A new draft union treaty was unveiled promising a much looser federation and restoring the right to secession (piled with restrictions). The leaders of the nine republics still willing to recognize “the center” continued to demand that Gorbachev stop dictating futilely and enter into direct negotiations. In late April 1991 he agreed, tacking back to the “left,” though he kept his hardline government in place. While depicting himself as the initiator of the confidential talks, Gorbachev pointedly notes that the fate of the Union lay in the hands of the republics, above all Russia—meaning Boris Yeltsin. Party boss in provincial Sverdlovsk during the Brezhnev era, Yeltsin had been transferred to Moscow by Ligachev in 1985. By 1987, he clashed with Ligachev over apparatchik perquisites and then, with Gorbachev, impulsively accusing the general secretary of fostering sycophantism and being indecisive. Yeltsin was bounced from the Politburo. Gorbachev threw him a line, the post of deputy head of the construction industry, which Yeltsin took. But he provoked further attacks and party officials obtusely obliged, facilitating Yeltsin’s 1989 landslide election to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. The next year he was elected to the copycat Russian Federation Congress, becoming its chairman and pronouncing Russia “sovereign.” One of Yeltsin’s foreign supporters (and Gorbachev’s denigrators), John Dunlop of the Hoover Institution, acknowledges that his man, too, was a product of the Soviet system. But whereas Gorbachev was guided by his belief in the reformability of socialism as a system, Yeltsin’s commitment to socialism was more an emotional identification with the “little man.” Wielding the common touch Gorbachev lacked, Yeltsin capitalized on Gorbachev’s most vulnerable point: disillusionment with socialism. Foreigners erred in thinking that the Soviet population had become pro-market overnight. Much of the faith placed in the market in the early 1990s betrayed the same desire for social justice that had been the promise of socialism. Unwilling to grant Soviet socialism the possibility of any popular support, Dunlop argues mistakenly that Yeltsin’s popularity had nothing to do with the system. Nonetheless, he gets the main point: Yeltsin’s electoral victories were founded on social-justice populism. Yeltsin had the people and he had the Russian Republic. Not one to give up, Gorbachev reached into his bag of tactics and pulled out a referendum, to be held in March 1991, on the preservation of the Union. Unable to block the vote, Yeltsin did better: he managed to attach a second question on the desirability of creating a presidency for the Russian Republic. With an 80-percent turnout, three-quarters of the electorate (slightly less in Russia) supported a “renewed union.” True, six republics disallowed the ballot on their territories—a fact Gorbachev omits—but the Soviet president had his “mandate.” At the same time, Yeltsin began his Union-challenging presidential election campaign, which he won resoundingly in June. Such was the background to the Union Treaty negotiations between nine republics and Gorbachev,
which opened in late April. In late July, an agreement was reached in principle. It dropped the word “socialist,” devolved most ministerial functions to the republics, upheld the supremacy of republic laws, called for the dissolution of the USSR Supreme Soviet, and made clear that Union membership was voluntary. For the radically diminished “center,” this was a worse deal than the one Gorbachev had rejected nine months earlier in the 500-Day Program. The Soviet leader went on television to praise the accord—without divulging its contents—and then left for vacation in the Crimea. The Union Treaty was set to be signed in Moscow on August 20. Gorbachev admits that he remained concerned about Yeltsin’s possible abandonment of the settlement, but neglects to add that Ukraine, too, seemed unsure whether it would sign. He also does not explain that the treaty was only a general framework that appeared unworkable to many. Two days before the signing ceremony, on August 18, in the early evening, a group of Soviet officials arrived unsummoned at Gorbachev’s Crimean dacha with a decree for him to sign declaring a state of emergency. He appears to have refused that as well as their alternative—to claim illness, temporarily appoint Vice President Yanayev in his place, and return “healthy” when the dust settled. The heads of the KGB, army, military-industrial complex, and civilian Soviet government went forward tipsily with the second scenario. In personal terms, their demise had been made plain by the text of the Union Treaty, leaked to the press on August 15, and by Yeltsin’s imperious decrees asserting the Russian Republic takeover of the valuable USSR oil and natural gas industries and the formation of a Russian Republic KGB and army general staff. In case they still did not get it, Union KGB chief Kruchkov exhibited the transcript of an eavesdropped conversation among Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and the president of the Kazakh republic, Nursultan Nazarbaev, that named every top USSR official for removal. On 19 August, tanks rolled into Moscow. Serious though they were, the plotters failed, as Dunlop effectively explains, because of blunders, rainy weather, the “fog of war,” the absence of a single charismatic leader, and the hesitancy of commanders unsure what country and which president they served. Yeltsin’s defiance, symbolized by his fearless climb onto the tank and supported by a coterie of courageous people, was critical to shattering the coup quickly, rather than having it come apart over time or explode into a shortlived yet violent “Romanian scenario.” His stand gave rise to the comforting myth of the triumph of “democrats” over Communists, a view also propagated by Dunlop. This is a partial truth concealing a much larger one. Well before August 1991, press freedom and competitive elections had become regular features of the political system. De facto and then de jure, the party’s monopoly had ended. Party “cells” in factories and other institutions were being dissolved spontaneously and party facilities given over to other organizations. The move to the market had become inescapable and was willy-nilly underway. Of course, Gorbachev resisted a full embrace of the market, and he stubbornly clung to the Communist Party (even after the coup). Yet those who condemn him for his belief in reformed socialism forget that this was the very reason that the transformation got started and reached the point at which it became irreversible. In a book that sparkles with insider information from former KGB officials and classified documents, the Russian journalist Yevgenia Albats shows that the KGB was deeply involved in launching and trying to direct perestroika. The secretive arm of the Soviet state sponsored informal political associations and individual politicians, watched and infiltrated, and collected voluminous information; but to what effect? Glasnost removed people’s fears, while Gorbachev’s hectoring about a law-based state neutralized the KGB’s intimidation potential. True, the KGB conducted an
international smear campaign against Yeltsin, tapping his and other “democrats’” telephones (materials that were later discovered in a safe with annotations in Gorbachev’s hand). But deprived of the option of inducing disappearance, the KGB proved to be of limited use. Evincing a dissident’s mentality about the KGB’s omnipotence, Albats fails to pose the obvious question: why did the all-knowing KGB not lead a crackdown earlier than August 1991? Since only the KGB had the political and technical means, while the internal troops and special army units were subordinated to the interior and defense ministers, any action required the coordination of three separate men, each of whom answered to the general secretary (later, the Soviet president). In 1988, around the time Gorbachev disarmed Ligachev and the Central Committee Secretariat, he transferred KGB chief Chebrikov there. He was pensioned off the next year. Writing that Chebrikov had begun to express alarm over the new press freedoms, Gorbachev notes that he chose as a replacement Vladimir Kriuchkov, a longtime deputy of Andropov (since Hungary 1956). Was Gorbachev less afraid of Kriuchkov acting independently than Chebrikov? Or was he trying to improve the KGB leadership? Or both? Gorbachev does not say. All we know is that, under Kriuchkov, the KGB bombarded Gorbachev with disquieting (and accurate) analyses of the political situation, followed his orders to prepare contingency plans for martial law, and waited as he temporized. Gorbachev’s move to the right in November 1990 resulted from his own disorientation, but also from KGB and military pressures (following the army’s doleful recognition that retrenchment in Europe had turned out to be one-sided). Yet the move appears to have stalled the KGB until the summer of 1991, by which time the Russian Republic had become an authoritative source of allegiance. Gorbachev’s reluctance to employ the full force of the USSR’s repressive-military machine was the flip side of his hesitation to embrace the market completely and cashier the party, but this chimera of reformed socialism, which led him to embark on the 1987-1989 political reforms that unknowingly destabilized the Union, also thwarted his efforts in 1990-91 to salvage the USSR in some form. Enamored of procedural solutions and his aptitude for orchestration, he fought to hold onto the country and his own job, but the remnants of the party and the planned economy weighed him down. And on the new playing field of electoral politics that Gorbachev’s reformed socialism created, Yeltsin, the martyred “democrat,” proved to be a far more difficult challenge than had the “conservative” Ligachev in the more familiar apparat snake-pit. Yeltsin sought preeminent power by pressing Russia’s sovereignty, and in the federal system, Russia’s strength was inversely related to that of the centralized Communist Party. He also championed an immediate market economy, about which he knew nothing but which supposedly promised a better and fairer life for the little man whom he had always claimed to favor, the same illusion shared by the striking miners who supported him. In short, Yeltsin could abandon the party as well as socialism and feel he was being even more true to his lifelong ideals, while also trumping the man in the Kremlin. Nationalism did not bring down the USSR. Only the central elite, rather than the independence movements of the periphery, could destroy the Union. As illusions about “market relations” increased Yeltsin’s popularity in society and, as his success in fortifying Russian Republic institutions became manifest, his constituency at the top expanded beyond a small group of high-profile “democrats” to officials in the USSR state who saw a chance either to preserve or increase their power. After it started to sink in that the weakening of the party had subverted the Union, members of the decisive Soviet central elite began to abandon the USSR because they had somewhere to go: the Russian Republic. The coup plotters, by attempting to save their
own skins, brought matters to a head. Their evident lack of success catalyzed the divisions that Yeltsin had fostered in the Soviet military and KGB. (One of the many high-ranking officers who made calculated overtures to Yeltsin was Alexander Lebed.) After the failed putsch, Yeltsin subtracted the withering party from the administrative system and removed a number of state functionaries for complicity, but a far greater number of officers and officials parachuted their way to safety in the Russian Federation. Thus the larger truth about 1991 is that the “triumph” of democracy involved an unambiguous bid for power by Russian Republic officials, joined at various points by patriots and opportunists from the all-Union nomenklatura. Anyone who has been caught in a landslide knows the value of a large tree that suddenly comes into view and is solidly rooted. Some caught on right away, others later. Yeltsin accelerated the Russian Republic’s corporate takeover of the Union during the putsch itself. Immediately afterwards, he announced Russia’s seizure of the USSR Finance Ministry and Soviet mint. But the USSR state still formally existed as Yeltsin, apparently ill, disappeared on a seventeen-day vacation in the Crimea in September. The degree to which he and the rest of the ambitious leadership of the Russian Republic understood that they were terminating the Union remains difficult to judge. Gorbachev quotes a confidential document submitted to Yeltsin by his advisors suggesting that Russia would be better off without the other republics, but there was continual policy cockfighting in Yeltsin’s entourage. Yeltsin’s own damage-control second memoir argues creatively that he had actually been trying to save the Union. Others have suggested Yeltsin would have never signed an agreement that preserved Gorbachev’s position. In any event, matters were settled by the vacillating Ukrainian leadership. It reversed its deteriorating popularity by a declaration of independence, subject to a referendum held on December 1, which received overwhelming support. Republic heads continued to “negotiate” with USSR President Gorbachev until December 7. That evening, at a hunting lodge outside Minsk, Yeltsin met on the sly with the leaders of Ukraine (Kravchuk) and Belorussia (Shushkevich). The next day, without the knowledge of their parliaments, the three announced an accord to form the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Dunlop accepts Yeltsin’s whopper that the stealth and extra-legality of the CIS ploy were dictated by the need to ward off another military coup. In this version of events, Gorbachev’s appeal on December 10 to the military high command constitutionally subordinated to him is interpreted as an attempted putsch, while the generals’ backing of the Russian president the next day is seen as proof of Yeltsin’s having warded off a coup. In fact, Gorbachev might have dismissed USSR Defense Minister Shaposhnikov for insubordination and perhaps tried to hold on; but instead he agreed formally to dissolve the rump Union and step down. On December 27, four days prior to the date Gorbachev was supposed to vacate his Kremlin office, the receptionist called him at home to report that Yeltsin and two collaborators had already squatted the coveted space, where they downed a celebratory bottle of whisky. It was 8:30 am. Long fearing the “conservatives,” Gorbachev had mesmerized and browbeat them with what must have been intoxicating wizardry. He led them into territory that they had never imagined; they hated him for it, but were petrified of being left without him. After he drew close to them in late 1990, only to semi-abandon them in April 1991, they finally acted. Yet their scheme was based on his willingness to join in! These stalwarts dealt Gorbachev a lethal blow. But he had helped thwart them beforehand by containing them for so long and in the meantime bringing about a revolution in consciousness and institutions whose most potent symbol was the democratically elected Boris Yeltsin. If Yeltsin’s memoirs cannot
conceal the fact that Gorbachev grudgingly provided him with the possibility of office and the requisite cover for his reckless taunting of the Soviet nomenklatura, Gorbachev’s cannot disguise his scorn: the nonpareil lion-tamer of the nomenklatura and world renown ringmaster of reform was upstaged by the guy who climbs out of a Volkswagen. Yeltsin would have been eaten alive in Gorbachev’s position, but he achieved what Gorbachev never dared: power rooted in the ballot box. In the end, the Russian president proved too petty and the Soviet president too vain for the two to embrace each other, yet it took both of their complementary roles to defang a dangerous police state. Looking back at the putsch, Dunlop cites Gorbachev’s “failure” to break out of the Crimean dacha and discrepancies in reports of when communications were halted to suggest a wait-and-see complicity. Gorbachev admits that he had a loyal bodyguard contingent, but the grounds were surrounded, and there were patrol boats at sea, while the prospects of procuring an aircraft and flying through controlled airspace were uncertain. Chief Investigator Evgeni Lisov of the Russian Federation Procuracy, quoted by Dunlop, concluded that, “Gorbachev did not give any hints, obliquely or directly, to indicate that he was with the [conspirators].” Lisov added, however, that the plotters calculated that Gorbachev would join them after a few days. We may never learn the full story. The more important point is that, at various times, Gorbachev himself might have tried to institute a vigorous martial law and did not. Staggered to learn that his socialist renewal was leading to the liquidation of the system, Gorbachev more or less went along. In sanctimonious, selective, and occasionally distorted reminiscences, he presents this acquiescence as an activist strategy—a disingenuous and ultimately superfluous exercise.

Yugoslavia’s death-agony, as well as the careers of Slobodan Milosevic, Franjo Tudjman, and their tinpot henchmen, will forever provoke additional shudders over how everything might have turned out across northern Eurasia and the satellites of East Central Europe. **The discovery of property** At the end of George Orwell’s recently reissued 1945 “fairy tale,” something extraordinary occurs. Recall that having overthrown Mr. Jones in the Great Rebellion, the animals of Manor Farm set about building a new world without exploitation when the pigs, who assumed a leading role, announced they were moving from the communal barn into Mr. Jones’s old manor house. The pigs even took to wearing clothes and walking on two legs. Such a turn of events, the pigs explained, was absolutely in keeping with the spirit of the rebellion and in any case necessary, because all the surrounding farms, still run by people, remained hostile. Sure enough, a neighbor, Mr. Frederick, attacked with his men. Entering into an alliance with another human, Animal Farm survived Frederick’s onslaught. When Mr. Pilkington visited to celebrate with his pig allies, the rest of the creatures, who lived badly yet retained a sense of honor as inhabitants of the only farm owned and operated by animals, huddled against the outer windows of the manor house. They discovered the uncanny resemblance of the pigs to people and overheard Mr. Pilkington compliment the pig leader, Napoleon, on the low rations, long working hours, and absence of pampering of the lower animals on Animal Farm. Gratified, Napoleon squealed that the pigs had just decided to abolish the outmoded revolutionary name Animal Farm and revert to the original Manor Farm! Orwell’s prediction, viewed in light of the intensity with which party conservatives and central planners resisted the introduction of market-style reforms, may appear off the mark. The “pigs” seem to have fought ferociously to maintain their power and perquisites, not convert them into private property. But that was until around 1989-90. Then, factory directors began to use the laws on forming “cooperatives” to reclassify the profitable operations inside “their” factories and pocket the proceeds—a legalization
and enlargement of shadow economy practices. The Central Committee opened businesses with party capital, while party and state officials heading into retirement began to sell themselves, at bargain prices, the dachas that they had been using. When the Russian Republic cast aside the Union carcass and a rapid turn to the market became official policy, the seizure of the former state-owned wealth of the USSR progressed to a frenzy. Lo and behold. Exactly what everyone expected and yet did not see from the Soviet nomenklatura before 1991 took place after. The elements of the former central elite of the USSR that assumed power in the core successor republics—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—began to use considerable force to maintain their grip. Democratically elected parliaments were intimidated and/or bombed, opposition leaders arrested under various pretexts, executive authority extended by fiat, and television networks forced under strict control—all in the name of safeguarding “reform.” Whether, as Yeltsin writes, such measures were necessary to overcome the stubborn legacies of Communism and defeat dangerous people who supposedly wanted to return to the past can be debated. But there is no doubt that they were very useful in consolidating presidential power. And here’s the kicker: although its population is approximately half as large as the USSR’s had been, Russia now has even more state functionaries. (This holds true for local governments too.) The expansion of officeholders, like the desire to retain power at all costs, can be traced to the “privatization” of state property by whoever sits in office. Thus did the lead zeppelin of 1991-92 postcommunist euphoria crash and burn, and the finger-pointing begin. Tim McDaniel, an historical sociologist at UC San Diego, asserts that by slavishly trying to follow the West’s prescriptions Russia became a West manqué. Yes, Gorbachev and Yeltsin were gullible about American “partnership” and the global economic hierarchy, but every culture is unique and buffeted by the market, whose pitiless laws are repudiated at great peril. By reifying the “Russian Idea” (national traditions), McDaniel universalizes the “agony” of the impoverished intelligentsia. (Eternally apocalyptic, the intelligentsia finally lived to see the day: it helped topple a system that had provided massive subsidies for culture and shielded it from the market). But considerable new housing is under construction, innumerably more cars are congesting the roads, ever more Russian tour groups are popping up abroad, and some nine hundred thousand small businesses are operating, employing close to 15 million people and accounting for 12 percent of GDP. The Russian economy is churning, powered by bureaucrat tycoons, racketeers, citizen importer-exporters, moonlighting workers, misemployed professionals and engineers—in short, by shadowy and non-shadowy entrepreneurship as well as sheer survivalism. Inequality has always been the hallmark of capitalism and it has become glaringly visible in the new Russia: official statistics put the number of people below the poverty level at around one-quarter of the population. Pensioners and the infirm, schoolteachers and social workers, are especially badly off. Yet millions of people are doing better, particularly but not exclusively youth. The problem is not some slavish imitation of the West but Russia’s failure to “copy” the institutional framework that makes capitalist countries work. Russia lacks an impartial regulatory state. In the widespread extortion for the performance of routine public duties and the bestowal of favors on businesses that they partly own, elected and appointed officials in Russia may now outclass their infamous counterparts in Italy, Mexico, and even Nigeria. Russian criminal clusters, meanwhile, having absorbed surpluses of ex-KGB personnel and ex-subsidized sportsmen, extract tribute in exchange for “protection” against other criminals, yet sadly they are also sometimes the only means for enforcing legitimate contracts. Even worse, because of the absence
of laws, or their contradictory nature, ordinary people often must engage in formally illegal behavior to carry out their duties conscientiously. Stephen Handelman, an early Yeltsin supporter and former Moscow bureau chief (1987-92) for the Toronto Star, is even more outraged than McDaniel. Handelman became one of the first foreign observers to begin tracking the unauthorized garage sales by the military and other winked-at malfeasance. His rich anecdotes accrete like manure over the fields, but the analytical harvest is small. On the one hand, he has learned that the late-Soviet Gulag contained not just thousands of political prisoners but—guess what?—hundreds of thousands of thieves, con artists, and murderers, whose criminal “organizations” took advantage of the dissolution of the USSR. On the other hand, Handelman has come to see that rather than a staff of a million Andrei Sakharovs, the Russian bureaucracy is manned by officials of the old Soviet state who either joined forces with or muscled aside the Soviet-era gangs. Moscow’s pin-striped goodfellas sporting red carnations and machine guns are a sight to sore the eyes, but Handelman blurs them in with the everyday petty shuttlers who travel abroad and return with bales of consumer goods to be sold at street bazaars. It’s all “the mafia.” At one point he reveals that the car-theft “mafia” invested its ill-gotten profits in a legal automobile manufacturing plant—then he catches himself, lest the narrative break the boundaries he has set of “disillusionment.” He concludes that because “we” had illusions that once Communism was miraculously transcended by the “democrats” everyone would live happily ever after as in the suburbs of Toronto, “we” have some soul-searching to do. He even suggests that, by expecting too much, “we” share responsibility for having “lost Russia.” Russia was never lost, only the analysts were. Revolutions—whatever happens or does not happen in the streets—are struggles for power among elites. Inevitably there is some reshuffling, yet however many fresh faces rise, the “new” elite always derives substantially from the old. It makes little sense to have understood before 1991 that Soviet officials resisted decentralization and the introduction of the market because they feared losing their sinecures, and then to act shocked, shocked when prohibitions against private property are lifted and these same officials vigorously pursue their material interests. This is not to excuse insider theft in Russia. Some officials steal a great deal more than others (a few who pilfer the most are among the best administrators). Handelman shows that while large sections of the police are abetting crime and corruption, other sections are battling it. Government policies, or their absence, have made a difference and will continue to do so. Yet official corruption was not a matter of to be or not to be, but of degree. Postcommunist Russia was not the East Germany economy being privatized by a West German commission. Nor was it the tiny economies of Czechoslovakia or Hungary, or even medium-sized Poland. Russia was a monumental accumulation of non-private property, including the world’s richest array of resources—oil, gas, nickel, copper, and diamonds—suddenly priced at world levels. Overnight, when direct exports were encouraged (at IMF insistence), Russia became one of the greatest economic bonanzas the world has seen—for those with the wits and wherewithal to ship abroad. Even finished steel could be exported profitably, as scrap. Predictably, the biggest new barons came from the resource sector, the so-called syroviki—raw materials people who gathered mind-numbing fortunes, helped create the shaky financial system (writing the banking laws that were passed), and purchased the country’s newspapers and television stations. It would be fair to say that the Russian government under Yeltsin has incarnated the interests of the syroviki, whose most visible symbol is Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, the former boss of the USSR natural gas industry. In late 1992, Chernomyrdin replaced the shock...
therapist Yegor Gaidar amid laments that Russia’s market “reforms” were over. But Russia had an overabundance of shock without much therapy, owing in part to the textbook myopia of American consultants who did not see that the US market economy depends on an extensive civil service and legal infrastructure or that the planned economy was hypermonopolistic. Gaidar achieved little more than smashing the lingering price controls of planning and inciting hyperinflation. With his removal, the Yeltsin economic “reforms” were in a way just beginning, as refineries, nickel-processing plants, and other big money-makers were sold by and to people like Chernomyrdin, and the government sought to stabilize the economic environment. Instead of the party ideologues and KGB operatives, factory managers and former economic ministers now dominate. These include, besides the reigning syroviki, the promyshlenniki (manufacturers), who have not done as well because most of their property requires major new investments that have yet to be made. The city of Moscow (home to the elite) and the oil and gas regions of Siberia together account for almost as much state investment as all other regions of Russia combined. This represents a substantial deepening of trends dating back to the Brezhnev years, when growth slackened and nomenklatura lifestyles were maintained only by expanded oil and gas exports. Since 1991, Russia has become a virtual export-led economy, but unlike, say, the Asian “tigers” or their model (Japan), the former superpower sells raw materials rather than finished goods—a typical Third World or colonial profile. Against this background, many of Russia’s promyshlenniki looked to the government’s main opposition—the reinstuted Communist Party—to uphold their own and the country’s interests. Typically, American analysts interpreted calls for state investment in industry and manufacturing as a troglodyte longing for Communism rather than a national-interest reallocation of the vast sums that were fattening the offshore bank accounts of government officials and their banker-syroviki friends. In fact, the “surprisingly” strong showing of “Communist” candidates in the 1995 parliamentary elections reflected the backing of the manufacturing constituency. Chastened, the Yeltsin team sought to coopt as many promyshlenniki as possible, a goal facilitated by the fact that some military manufacturers found new customers abroad and ceased to look favorably on “sharing” wealth. Nonetheless, had the “Communist” presidential candidate in 1996, Gennadi Zyuganov been less inept, and had he taken the advice to bring the promyshlenniki into the center of his campaign rather than give pride of place to kooky Communist residuals like himself, Yeltsin’s alliance of syroviki, their banks, and some military promyshlenniki could have been unseated. Though given a post-1991 reprieve, the nominal Communists appear to have discredited themselves beyond salvation, yet it remains a possibility that the remaining industrialists, not to mention the still extensive working class, could help bring forth a new candidate (or party) to displace the current power group. One potential winning slogan could be “an end to corruption”—meaning, in practical terms, the use of export, privatization, and tax revenues for construction, purchasing new technology, and providing social services, along the lines of what Mayor Yuri Luzhkov has done within Moscow. Whether popular pressures help curb the economic cannibalism of comprador oligarchies and compel a national government that governs in the national interest, the key point of contemporary Russian politics is that no one can come to power or rule without taking into account the forces who own the country’s property. There is, therefore, no possibility of a return to Communism. Whatever their hopes, the Communists lack the instruments for a restoration and anyway, influential groups would block such a scenario. It was the energy interests who took the initiative in the 1996 Russian
presidential election and approached the floundering Yeltsin through Anatoly Chubais, the former privatization minister (1992-95) who gave it all away. These money types insisted that Yeltsin not cancel the elections, promising to help. They financed and ran the campaigns not only of Yeltsin but also of the first round’s third-place finisher, Alexander Lebed, who backed Yeltsin in the run-off against Zyuganov. That Lebed and Yeltsin then had a falling out because the former flaunted his own presidential ambitions when the latter went under the knife has been taken as a sign of the inordinate volatility of Russian politics. Yes, the long-hidden Kremlin intrigues Gorbachev describes in his memoir are now in plain view and compete for media attention with the apocalyptic threats of the Communist-dominated legislature. Beyond the noise, however, there is a certain equilibrium deriving from the concerns of small and large property owners, who strongly support low inflation, a stable currency, and the legitimacy of elections (if only to calm stock markets), even as some of them stop at nothing to gain control over the vast part of the country’s property still being privatized and to form Zaibatsu. Russia’s instability comes not from presidential intrigues or from the strident clashes between the executive branch and the nearly irrelevant Duma, or even from misnamed “clan” wars among rival oligarchies, but from the dearth of productive investment in industrial restructuring and new manufacturing, notwithstanding formidable export profits, and from the absence of any dividing line between public office and the private sphere. Whether the power brokers in Russia who run and/or are friendly with the national and increasing important regional governments will use their riches to develop the country for the long term and better institutionalize the market economy remains to be seen. Some commentators invoke analogies to the nineteenth-century American “robber barons,” who supposedly employed their ill-gained fortunes to promote the general good. In fact, the stabilization of a market society and market infrastructure in America took place over a long period and largely as a result of popular pressures to curtail arbitrariness and injustice, usually against the robber barons’ objections. Be that as it may, there are some encouraging signs that the Russian superelite has at least acknowledged the problems of bargain-basement insider privatization, tax favoritism, and generally chaotic public finance, formidable challenges no less acute at the local level. Whatever the continuing deficiencies of Russia’s market system, however, the much-feared Red-Brown coalition has failed to materialize. David Remnick’s unsentimental survey of Russia’s “strange and contradictory landscape,” consumed as it is with the supposed double-Z threat (neo-fascist Zhirinovsky and neo-Communist Zyuganov), demonstrates all the same that despite the rumors of possible uprisings in the decomposed army and the sensational murders of bankers and journalists, Russia’s politics are not militarized but monetized. A writer for The New Yorker, Remnick observes that Russia’s fastest growing service industry is security. Yet he also notes that considerable power has de facto devolved to the regions, the media are highly developed (if manipulated), and the population well-educated and skilled. Underscoring the tens of billions in capital flight and the mass tax evasion, Remnick has in effect shown that Russia is not caught in a Weimar syndrome but a Latin American one. High crime and unchecked corruption make the illusion of authoritarianism tempting. But Russia has effected the basic “transition” to private property, elections, and demagogy. The end of empire? For most of its history, the Russian empire was a highly vulnerable great power striving for more than it could achieve, ambitions that were a source of pride but also of great misery. Under the strain of WWI, the empire dissolved, yet its territory and its great-power mission were restored in a new form, the USSR. WWII brought the USSR deeper into Europe
and Asia, but the postwar competition with the US stretched the USSR and its people
to the breaking point, a circumstance acknowledged by Gorbachev and cited by
apologists for Ronald Reagan’s military spending spree. Because officials of the Bush
administration showed “restraint” as the conquerors of Berlin began a humiliating
retreat without having lost a battlefield engagement—a spectacle not seen since
Napoleon’s evacuation along the same roads from the other direction—they, too, have
awarded themselves high honors. The kudos have been misappropriated. Gorbachev
served up the severed head of his superpower on a silver platter and still had to
employ all his artifice to cajole two American administrations to the
banquet. Gorbachev does not disclose whose idea it was to have a Soviet “tourist”
on the grounds of the Kremlin buttonhole the affable Reagan in front of journalists
and make him concede he no longer thought the USSR was an “evil empire.” But had
the Soviet Union been anything like what Reagan, the CIA, and American
policymakers thought, it would never have liquidated itself, let alone in a peaceful
manner. If unbearable military competition with the U.S. had been the foremost
concern that necessitated change, why would the Soviet leader have exhausted
himself trying to democratize and have the Communist Party live up to its vanguard
role? Why, having achieved disarmament, would he continue to pursue socialist
renewal as “conservatives” and the KGB warned him the homeland was at risk? Why,
once it was clear to the whole world that the survival of the centuries-old state was at
stake, did the Soviet leader not employ the massive resources at his command and
deliver a knockout blow to the republic drives for independence? Because the
principal consideration was not military competitiveness but the ideals of the October
revolution. Gorbachev confirms what everyone long suspected: he never had a
majority in the Politburo. He made full use of the prestige of the general secretaryship
and refrained from praising any of the Politburo members in front of the rest while
making sure to convey his support for each in private. But for all his authority and
hocus-pocus, he could have continually gotten his way only because everything he set
out to do was in the name of the revolution: revitalize the Communist Party, raise
industrial output’s quantity and quality, activate the masses, reinvigorate the soviets.
At the core of his thinking lay the assumption that the Soviet people shared his
commitment to the “socialist choice” of 1917. They did, and then they did not. The
renunciation of KGB coercion meant that everything rested on consent, just when
people acquired new comparative information whose long suppression magnified its
significance. Glasnost quickened a conceptual reevaluation of socialism’s supposed
superiority to capitalism that censorship had mostly retarded. But whence all the crack
Soviet journalists and the ravenous Soviet reading public? The land of relentless
propaganda had a literacy rate far higher than the United States. Glasnost made
clear that socialism had lost the competition with the world’s most advanced countries
that it assumed voluntarily in 1917 and could not have won in the postwar period even
without the astronomical spending made on missiles and tanks. It was not the fantasy
of Star Wars (the KGB had sounded the geopolitical alarm well before Reagan came
along and accelerated the deterioration in America’s schools and cities), nor even the
important resolve of containment, but the defeat of interwar fascism, the postwar
capitalist economic boom and accompanying investments in social welfare that were
decisive. These changes meant that socialism could not provide a better standard of
living, a more substantial safety net and just society, or a superior political order to
that of the capitalist democracies. And it was the USSR that sacrificed 20 million
lives to defeat Nazism. And it was the fear of the Soviet model’s spread that helped
force the capitalist expansion in job programs, unemployment benefits, pensions,
medical subsidies, accident insurance, school lunches. And it was American cold-war
hotheads who not only opposed social welfare, but time after time damaged the
ultimate weapon of strength, open and democratic government. The triumphalism is,
as they say on Sundays, wide to the right. Deceptively gratifying to the right, the
Soviet collapse also appears misleadingly obvious, as book after garden-variety book
now “reveals.” Socialism’s and the USSR’s simultaneous demise could have been
foreseen only by someone who knew that socialism was born as non-capitalism and
enjoyed a measure of popular support dependent on the image of capitalism; that,
rather than being mono-organizational, the Soviet administrative structure was
bifurcated into party and state; that the USSR was both unitary and a federation of
nations it helped foster; that the integrity of the Union rested on the existence of the
party; that the Communist Party was not just incompatible with press freedoms and
civic associations but administratively redundant; and that the October revolution was
accompanied by ideals, which endured all the nightmares. In hindsight, what is
remarkable is not that this structure collapsed, but that contrary to expectation, the
enormous Soviet nomenklatura did not go to the wall. What neutralized the
nomenklatura’s capacity and will to hold onto the system with all its might was not
policy in Washington but Gorbachev’s quest for a non-existent reformed socialism,
combined with the ineffectiveness of the “conservative” hope Ligachev. The Soviet
leader compelled the elite to take their own system’s promises seriously. Many
obliged enthusiastically, others reluctantly or not at all, but how could they openly
refuse? Dumbfounded by the spiral of events and Gorbachev’s acquiescence, the
foremost representatives of the nomenklatura, following their own hapless mutiny,
eventually accused him of treason. But he and his quest had emerged from the soul of
the system. The revolution’s ideals—a world of abundance, justice, and people’s
power—also informed Yeltsin’s anti-Communist populism. Many sensed, and
glasnost made clear, that the ideals were embedded in institutions that made them not
only unrealized and but unrealizable. Those institutions, from the party-state and the
planned economy to the KGB, brought forth such horrors that they evoked outrage in
society and among the more conscientious officials. It was outrage, not indifference,
precisely because the ideals were powerful and some party members and most of the
people clung to them in their own ways. Yes, for many there were no revolutionary
ideas to uphold, just a system to overthrow (the dissidents) or perpetuate (the
Brezhnevites). But anyone who spent time in the USSR during the late 1980s and
eyearly 1990s knows just how passionately hopeful much of the country was. It was an
ambivalent hope, full of deeply ingrained skepticism and rooted in a visceral
separation of the Communist Party from Soviet (people’s) power and justice. This is
what Gorbachev tapped during the 1989 Congress of People’s Deputies when the
country was riveted to its television sets for two weeks. Then, Yeltsin came along and
brought the promise of the ideals without the party and apparatchiks! It was too good
to be true, and the people, as well as many suddenly former party members, embraced
him like they had no one else. When Yeltsin started out he was probably no less
sincere than Gorbachev had been, but it was obvious that he had even less of a grasp
of postcommunism than Gorbachev had had of the old system. The realities of the
market and the administrative incompetence of the “democrats” provided a rude
awakening, and Yeltsin became a vehicle for the human detritus of the various Soviet-
era institutions that had been produced by the October revolution, choked the
revolutionary ideals, and been dissolved by Gorbachev’s efforts to bring them to life.
True, the traumatized nomenklatura underwent spasms, yet much of it survived, under
new conditions in which the richest showed they prefer elections and in 1996 could
talk the populist Russian president into going along. At the same time, officeholders,
freed from Communist Party “discipline” and legitimated by elections, turned out to
be far more brazen than they had been when Yuri Andropov began assembling a team
of earnest apparatchiks to wage war against corruption. The acclaim, and then
loathing, for Yeltsin provide further evidence that long-held dreams for a better, more
just world were structures in the Soviet socio-political landscape, and the main
chemical agent in the system’s unexpected, peaceful dissolution. Many members
of the old Soviet elite who lost out or regret the disappearance of the USSR now
advise that Gorbachev should have followed the so-called Chinese model of reforms.
No less committed to the rule of the party, the Chinese leadership under Deng
bolstered the party’s standing by permitting a real market economy and cracking
down mercilessly whenever the reform process began to extend beyond certain
political boundaries. Tiananmen upset neither the party’s grip nor economic growth.
But the Chinese have a largely peasant economy. Old-style heavy industry in China is
in deplorable shape yet never reached anything remotely close to the proportions it
did in the USSR. Also, China’s growth has been fueled by the investment of overseas
Chinese (and secondarily Japan); Russia had no Hong Kong or Taiwan. Finally, the
results, particularly the official corruption, are not necessarily so different from what
we see in Russia. And China’s reforms are not yet finished. Be that as it may, China
offers yet further proof that revolutionary ideals brought down the USSR. Instead of a
Deng or Beria-type realist, Soviet reforms were carried out by a Khrushchevian true-
believer. And what of our own Sovietologists? They continue to squabble over the
meaning of 1991. One side (the left) had staked its reputation on the argument that a
reform group would materialize and change the system, perhaps making it
democratic; the other (the right) had insisted that the system was incapable of reform.
Since Soviet socialism was unreformable and Gorbachev the reformer presided over
the system’s docile replacement by a democratically elected government, each side
refuses to concede defeat, a boldness backed by tenure. Both were wrong. Neither had
a clue about the party’s redundancy and the brittleness of the administrative structure.
Neither had a clear picture of the nationalities dynamic in the context of the federative
nature of the Soviet state. The right’s realism about the system’s coercion and
insoluble contradictions was willfully blind to the elements of consent and positive
content in the revolution’s aspirations. The peaceful dissolution, for which the right
has pirated awards, was effected by the very mechanism, reform socialism, that the
right denied had any significance—and that much of the left had erroneously thought
would make the system humanely socialist. The majority left’s helpless naivété on
the Soviet system came with a hardnosed critique of the harmful excesses of the
necessary cold-war crusade. Only a very few analysts, such as Orwell, managed a
sober and subtle appraisal of Soviet realities while maintaining a sharp critical eye on
their own society. That stance, so complicated by the Russian revolution, has now
become far easier, and remains no less timely. Many former Sovietologists claim
to have metamorphosed into students of transitions (!), but career-long postures
continue to inform their views on contemporary Russia. Those who held out hope for
Soviet reform scathingly condemn Yeltsin and postcommunism (à la McDaniel),
sometimes even expressing nostalgia for Gorbachev. Those who denied the
redeemability of Communism belittle Gorbachev and pooh-pooh the corruption and
authoritarianism of Yeltsin (à la Dunlop). (Handelman exercises his journalist’s
prerogative to go from one side to the other and back.) Some former Sovietologists
have, however, tried a new tack. Following the unexpected disappearance of their
subject of study, they have taken to warning that the Russian state has little “national
identity” and/or is in danger of breaking apart. They might try considering the case of Austria, which in 1918 lost an empire many times its size and bordered on a huge Germany state that spoke the same language, yet went on to develop a strong post-imperial identity in conditions arguably far more challenging than are Russia’s. As for the danger of dissolution, Russia is more ethnically homogenous than Belgium, Spain, or Great Britain, while Russia’s largest ethno-political units, such as Tatarstan and Yakutia (Sakha), are internal and in any case not comparable to Ukraine, let alone the Baltics. True, the reach of Russian sovereignty in the Caucasus remains ambiguous, but the kind of international recognition granted to the former Soviet republics is unlikely to come for small separatist enclaves on one of Russia’s outer edges. Russia’s dilemma is not possible break-up but productive use of its enormous wealth and on that basis, world integration. Russia has little prospect of joining any of the world’s three main trading blocs, two of which partially overlap security systems (NAFTA, Europe/NATO, Pacific Rim/US-Japan). The US is the centerpiece of each. The relative balance of power in the Asia/Pacific region has risen to a level competitive, if not superior, to Europe, while Russia is now farther from the heart of Europe than it has been since the eighteenth century. (That Gorbachev, who had an army in place, failed to fix in writing Bush’s and Baker’s verbal promise over German unification not to expand NATO eastward constitutes a diplomatic blunder at least equal to any Roosevelt has been accused of committing at Yalta.) Russia is not even fully integrated into its own NAFTA, the CIS. Because of energy supplies, ethnic diasporas, and sheer size, Russia will continue to wield clout throughout the territories it used to rule. But even more tightly than the USSR, Russia appears sandwiched between two economically superior blocs. Is this wise? Inescapable? The payback for centuries of imperialism? For the time being and perhaps far into the future, any aspirations Russia may have to reclaim its empire (and resume a global role) cannot be attained. Even more striking than the loss of the means to carry out a broad imperial mission has been the loss of Russian will to do so. Opinion polls are unequivocal, even allowing for large margins of error: a craving for respect remains strong, but the debacle of the Chechen war seems to have extinguished most lingering ambitions for imperial “greatness.” Whether this historic turnabout endures will be decided by Russia’s leaders and people. Yet it is striking that Washington has been quick to take credit for causing and managing the dissolution of the other superpower while denying that its current efforts to “consolidate” the imperial demarche will influence Russia’s geopolitical future. Russia is invited to participate in as many NATO “discussions” and “activities” as possible, while NATO is set to expand eastward into the territories of the former Warsaw Pact, and perhaps beyond. If Russia can survive without an imperial identity, if anyone who comes to power there will be assisted or co-opted by business elites, if Russia’s need for Western capital and markets provides unmatched leverage, if Russia agrees to joint military exercises with the U.S. in Central Asia, what could be the harm of NATO expansion? NATO expansionists insist that their actions are in no way directed at moving the neo-containment goalposts against Russia (just as Japanese consumers who use disposable wooden chopsticks could well say that they do not intend to denude the world’s rainforests). Anyway, aside from a refusal to ratify disarmament treaties it badly needs, Russia cannot really do much about it. But history knows time-frames longer than political careers. Stalin did not live to see that his great military-diplomatic “triumph” at Yalta was a miscalculation. Will American statesmen live to see their ineptly disguised NATO provocation generate the very enemy that is today nowhere in sight? Will they be around to explain why a large and strategically important
country for the US was alienated in order to accommodate countries that had no choice but to be staunch friends of the US even if not offered entry into the military alliance? Will they be alive to answer for the incongruity that the costly structures of the cold war were expanded after the victory and the remaining superpower further overextended itself? The greatest clusters of postcommunist debris may be in Washington.

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