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Abstract

The Soviet Union, like the large, multiethnic land empires in Europe that came to an end in the early 20th century (Habsburg, Imperial Russian, Ottoman), consisted of a central government ruling over far-flung regions in which particular ethnic and cultural groups were predominant. For many years, Soviet leaders were able to maintain the internal stability of the multiethnic Soviet state by relying on a mix of extreme coercion and occasional concessions to local demands. Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, he adopted sweeping political liberalization and democratization, including the first free elections ever held in the USSR. The loosening of political control in a state that had long been known for brutal repression had far-reaching consequences for social stability. The political opportunities that opened for ethnic groups in the Soviet Union to push for far-reaching change, including independence, created great difficulty for Gorbachev’s attempts to hold the Soviet Union together. Although he could have resorted to the use of large-scale violence as previous Soviet leaders had repeatedly done, he was deeply reluctant to cause mass bloodshed. His aversion to the use of mass repression was one of the key factors that precipitated the unraveling of the USSR. This article presents an in-depth analysis of Gorbachev’s responses to ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union from 1986 through 1991.
Keywords

Soviet Union – Mikhail Gorbachev – ethnic unrest – political protest – separatism – collective action – Communist Party

This article explores how the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) responded to mass ethnic unrest in the USSR during the years that Mikhail Gorbachev was CPSU General Secretary, from March 1985 to December 1991. The article draws in part on formerly secret documents that have been released since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost (official openness) allowed outside analysts to keep close track of the many instances of ethnic unrest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet government’s response to the unrest was much less easily understood at the time.\(^1\) Scholars could look at the specific policies adopted on particular occasions, but, without access to classified materials, they had no way of gauging why the authorities responded so inconsistently, using force in a few instances but acting irresolutely in many others. The archival evidence, memoirs, and other sources that have become available since 1991 shed valuable light on these matters and help to explain why the Soviet Union disintegrated the way it did – by fragmenting along the borders of the fifteen union-republics.\(^2\)

\(^1\) For an admirable and methodologically sophisticated (if not always fully convincing) study of patterns of ethnic unrest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, based on systematic gathering of public reports of disturbances, see Mark R. Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

\(^2\) The Cold War Studies program at Harvard University has collected and cataloged tens of thousands of pages of declassified documents pertaining to ethnic protests and unrest in the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1991. These materials come from archives in Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Georgia. Some other important declassified documents have been published in recent years; see, for example, “O massovoykh besporyadakh s 1957 goda,” a highly classified memorandum compiled by Soviet KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov at Gorbachev’s request in 1987, published in *Istochnik* (Moscow), No. 6 (1995), pp. 146–153. For an interesting monograph covering ethnic as well as other mass disturbances in the years after Stalin’s death, see V. A. Kozlov, *Massovye besporyadki v sssr pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve (1953-nachalo 1980-kh gg.),* rev. ed., (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 2001). Despite the title of the book, Kozlov focuses almost exclusively on the Khrushchev era, devoting only one very brief chapter (amounting to less than two percent of the total book) to mass unrest during the Brezhnev years.
1 Institutional, Demographic, and Political Context

After the Bolsheviks came to power in Petrograd in November 1917 and consolidated their hold in Soviet Russia during a fierce civil war in 1918–1921, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was formally constituted in December 1922. The USSR was set up as an ethnoterritorial federation (with the demarcation of federal, regional, and sub-regional territorial units for various national/ethnic groups), but it was a federation in name only during most of the Soviet era, when political control was heavily centralized in Moscow, especially under Joseph Stalin. During certain periods, the union-republics received somewhat greater leeway to manage their own affairs and to encourage use of the titular languages and promotion of local cultures (a process known as korenizatsiya, meaning indigenization), but these periods were followed by longer stretches in which centralized control was severely tightened and Russification of language and culture was intensified, particularly during the Stalin era. For more


than two decades before Gorbachev became CPSU General Secretary, centralization and Russification had been at a high level.

The centralized, autocratic nature of the Soviet polity militated against any sort of unofficial collective action in the USSR. Nonetheless, even though the ethnoterritorial configuration of the union was intended to contain the emergence of nationalist sentiment, that structure over time affected the choices and perceptions of various ethnic groups in ways the regime could not fully control. Because the Soviet system included certain features that tended to bolster individual ethnic identities, most notably the internal passports issued to all Soviet citizens that included a “fifth point” specifying “nationality” (for which the choice of “Soviet” was not permitted), the administrative complexion of the Soviet Union interacted with individual perceptions and thus helped shape decisions about participation in collective action.\(^5\) During the two periods of political liberalization in the USSR before 1985 (the short-lived New Economic Policy in the 1920s and the “Thaw” from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s under Nikita Khrushchev), individual and collective choices could more easily take the form of contentious action. But even during the most politically stifling periods, the identities and choices of ethnic communities were influenced by key features of the Soviet state that emphasized national/ethnic origin.

The Soviet Union was by far the world’s largest country (more than one-sixth of the world’s total landmass in its post-1945 borders), but the ethnoterritorial administrative structure was dominated by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), which constituted nearly 76 percent of the USSR’s territory. Ethnic Russians were by far the largest single ethnic group in the Soviet Union, representing more than half the country’s total population, and Russian was the prevalent language throughout the fifteen republics. During the long reigns of Stalin and Leonid Brezhnev, Russification of the non-Russian ethnic groups was especially pronounced, but it also was present in a less

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heavy-handed fashion during the periods of relative liberalization. The dominance of the RSFSR and of ethnic Russians in the Soviet Union was reflected in the disproportionate number of Russians among leading personnel in the CPSU, the Soviet armed forces, and the Soviet state security apparatus. These inequities were generally tolerated during most of the Soviet era, but they served as the backdrop for local disputes and grievances that became catalysts for mass protests once suitable political opportunities arose in 1985–1991.

Before taking office as CPSU General Secretary, Gorbachev had spent his whole career in the RSFSR – initially in Stavropol’ and then in Moscow. Partly for this reason, he had little understanding of the complex ethnic makeup of the USSR until he was forced to confront the issue as leader of the CPSU. Gorbachev himself later acknowledged his blind spot. In his memoirs and in an important retrospective essay published shortly before his death, Gorbachev admitted he “had not been aware” of the “difficult situation [he] inherited” in “interethnic and federal relations,” and he conceded that he “had not been ready” to cope with the “daunting challenge” of holding together “a conglomerate of nationalities as different as, say, Estonia and Turkmenistan.”

Gorbachev also did not comprehend how his larger political agenda would compound the “daunting challenge” he was facing. If he had refrained from shifting to a far-reaching program of political liberalization in 1988 and democratization in 1989, ethnic pressures in the Soviet Union undoubtedly would have been much easier to contain. But his embrace of a radical political agenda changed the situation drastically not only by creating political opportunities for ethnic groups to pursue remedies for their grievances, but also by attenuating his own leeway to resort to forceful crackdowns. Gorbachev later acknowledged that he had “underestimated the severity of the problems” that would arise when “all the [pent-up grievances] that had been accumulating in [interethnic relations] for decades and centuries would burst to the surface.” But he insisted that “once [spasms of ethnic unrest] emerged, we [on

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6 The disproportionate number of Soviet officials of ethnic Russian origin is evident in the detailed listings of Soviet officials compiled in the directory published every year from the 1950s through the early 1990s by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Directory of Soviet Officials, Vol. 1: National Organizations.

7 Mikhail Gorbachev, “Ponyat’ perestroiku, otstoyat’ novoe myshlenie,” published in abridged and somewhat revised form in Rossiya v global’noi politike (Moscow), No. 6 (November/December 2021), pp. 18–29. A full English translation was published as “Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective,” Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, Vol. 29, N. 3 (Summer 2021), pp. 211–238. My translations here are from the full Russian text of Gorbachev’s essay, which was published on the Russia in Global Affairs website in August 2021.
the CPSU Politburo] could no longer resort to the old methods of repression.”8 That description of the dilemma he faced – in seeking to keep the Soviet Union intact while also enacting momentous political reforms and eschewing large-scale violence and bloodshed – is a perfect encapsulation of the theme of this article.

2 Precedents Before 1985

Prior to 1985 the Soviet regime did its best to prevent information about mass ethnic unrest from becoming publicly known. Western journalists and scholars did occasionally hear about some major outbreaks of national disturbances, notably in Tbilisi in March 1956, Lithuania in 1972, Armenia in the mid-1970s, and Abkhazia in 1978. Some of the information about these incidents came from visitors or defectors who had witnessed the events, but in other cases the information derived mostly from rumors. Declassified documents in Russia and other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union reveal that mass ethnic unrest occurred with surprising frequency throughout the post-Stalin era, especially in the Caucasus, the Baltic republics, and Moldova.

In the early 1980s, for example, mass unrest emerged that presaged some of the violent clashes that took place in the USSR in the late 1980s and 1990s. The Soviet regime’s response to the ethnic unrest in the early 1980s offers a telling contrast to the way Gorbachev acted after 1985. In Moldova, a small republic in the far west of the USSR along eastern Romania and southwestern Ukraine, tensions emerged in mid-1982 between the various ethnic communities, especially the Moldovan and large Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian) communities but also with the smaller Gagauz community, a group of Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians concentrated in the southern districts of Comrat, Cciad-Lunga, Vulcănești, Basarabesca, and Taraclia.

In August 1982, the head of the USSR State Security Committee (KGB), Vitalii Fedorchuk, warned the CPSU Politburo that Gagauz “chauvinists” were trying to “stir up nationalist sentiments among politically immature people” and were demanding Gagauz autonomy, including “the introduction of the Gagauz language in schools, the publication of native-language newspapers, and the establishment of Gagauz radio and television broadcasts.”9 Fedorchuk warned

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8 Gorbachev, “Ponyat’ perestroiku, otstoyat’ novoe myshlenie,” pp. 11–12, 14.
9 “Ob avtonomistskikh nastroeniyakh sredi gagauzskogo naseleniya Moldavskoi SSR,” Memorandum No. 1588-F (Secret) from V. Fedorchuk, chairman of the Soviet KGB, to the CPSU Politburo, 4 August 1982, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii
that unless the KGB took “decisive action” against Gagauz “nationalist elements” and “chauvinists,” the “extremists” would increasingly resort to “provocations,” including violent actions to push their demands. He recommended a forceful crackdown on the protests.

The CPSU Politburo duly authorized the KGB to arrest the “nationalist ring-leaders” in the Gagauz community and to quell the incipient movement seeking the establishment of a “Gagauz autonomous region” and other changes that would “inflame nationalist sentiments” among other communities in Moldova that would also want special treatment. The Soviet regime’s swift, decisive response to the unrest in Moldova kept the republic from being further destabilized.

Much the same was true the following year when violent turmoil broke out in several regions of Dagestan inhabited by ethnic Chechens, who were protesting the lack of employment opportunities, poor living conditions, and “systematic discrimination.” By late December 1983, the situation had deteriorated so much that the CPSU General Secretary, Yurii Andropov, ordered his aides to come up with “ways to stabilize the situation.” The chairman of the Soviet KGB, Viktor Chebrikov (who had replaced Fedorchuk earlier in the year), acknowledged that miserable social and economic conditions in many regions of Dagestan accounted for the “deep dissatisfaction on the part of a large majority of the Chechen population” there, and he conceded that “demagogues” and “unsavory nationalist elements” were able to “incite provocations that threaten to turn into mass extremist demonstrations.” He assured Andropov that the KGB, in accordance with the CPSU Politburo’s orders, would be “carrying out all necessary measures to uncover and halt the malevolent actions of [Chechen] nationalists and prevent mass anti-Soviet unrest.”

By responding promptly and resolutely in suppressing ethnic unrest in these and other instances during the first half of the 1980s, the Soviet authorities were able to prevent any long-term adverse impact on the USSR’s political stability. In the absence of Gorbachev’s decision in 1987–1988 to proceed with...
far-reaching political liberalization, it is inconceivable that fissiparous ethnic tensions would have emerged on the scale they did in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Soviet Union had coped with mass ethnic violence before, and it could have done so again.\textsuperscript{14}

\section{Mass Ethnic Unrest under Gorbachev}

Ethnic unrest during the Gorbachev era could have been quelled at any number of points through the consistent application of force. The first major collective protests under Gorbachev occurred in Kazakhstan in late 1986, when large-scale demonstrations erupted in the capital, Alma-Alta, after the official mass media suddenly reported that the long-time First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party (KazCP), Dinkmukhamed Kunaev, would be replaced by an ethnic Russian, Gennadii Kolbin.\textsuperscript{15} This represented a clear breach with the standard pattern in the post-Stalin era, when a party official of the titular nationality in each union-republic served as First Secretary of the republic’s Communist Party. Although an official of Russian origin was usually appointed Second Secretary in each union-republic, the long-standing procedure of having the First Secretary come from the titular nationality was intended to preclude feelings of resentment. The elevation of Kolbin to the top post in Kazakhstan was a glaring reversal of this norm.

\footnote{On pp. 54–55 of \textit{Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State}, Mark Beissinger implies that ethnic conflicts in the Soviet Union were intensifying in the 1970s and early 1980s compared to previous decades, but elsewhere in the book (e.g., on pp. 71–73) he correctly notes that in fact ethnic conflicts during the Brezhnev era were much less numerous than during the Khrushchev years. Repression, when used consistently, was a powerful means of deterring – or, if necessary, quelling – ethnic unrest.}

\footnote{Although I have benefited a great deal from recently declassified documents obtained in Moscow and Kazakhstan, some aspects of this episode necessarily remain murky and speculative. A very useful account was compiled four years after the events by Catherine Cosman, \textit{Conflict in the Soviet Union: The Untold Story of the Clashes in Kazakhstan} (New York: Helsinki Watch, October 1993). For another early and still-useful account, see Bess Brown, “Kazakhstan: The Alma-Ata Events of 1986 Reexamined,” \textit{Report on the USSR}, Vol. 2, No. 6 (9 February 1993), pp. 25–27. For Kunaev’s version of the events, see his two volumes of memoirs: \textit{O moem vremeni: Vospominaniya} (Almaty: Yntymak, 1992), pp. 254–282; and \textit{Ot Stalina do Gorbacheva (V aspekte k istorii Kazakhstana)} (Almaty: Sanat, 1994), pp. 290–306. For the recollections of Nursultan Nazarbaev, see the interview in Irena Lewandowska, “Między sercem a rozumem,” \textit{Gazeta wyborcza} (Warsaw), 28–29 September 1996, p. 3. In the interview, Nazarbaev claims that most of the documentation about these events was destroyed, but this assertion is belied by materials that have since come to light, including those I use here.}
The deviation was all the more conspicuous insofar as Kolbin, who was originally from Nizhnii Tagil in Russia's Sverdlovsk Oblast and had served as a senior CPSU official both there and in Ul'yanskovsk on the Volga River, had spent his entire career in the RSFSR and had never even resided in Kazakhstan. On 17 December 1986, the day after Kunaev's removal and Kolbin's appointment were announced, hundreds and soon thousands of Kazakh students and workers took to the streets of Alma-Ata in a loud, angry show of opposition that was initially non-violent (albeit with destruction of property and vehicles) but quickly turned volatile. The crowd, which eventually swelled to more than 30,000, congregated in Brezhnev Square around the headquarters of the KazCP Central Committee in an impromptu mass rally. Protesters using bullhorns demanded that Kolbin's appointment be canceled and that a native Kazakh be elevated to the KazCP's top post. They organized chants of slogans denouncing the party leadership in Moscow.

Early the next day, at the behest of the CPSU Politburo and Kazakh party leaders, anti-riot units from the KGB and regular police moved en masse into the center of Alma-Ata to disperse the protests, sparking violent clashes between the demonstrators and security forces that resulted in more than 1,000 injuries and three deaths. Nearly 300 of the injuries were serious enough to require hospitalization. After the CPSU Politburo received word on 18 December from sources in Kazakhstan that the violence was causing unrest to spread to “other regions and major population centers” in the republic, the clampdown

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16 A detailed chronology of events can be gleaned from “Informatsiya ob operativnoi obstanovke v g. Alma-Ate v period massovykh besporyadkov s 17 po 21 dekabrya 1986 goda i merakh po ikh likvidatsii,” Outgoing Telegram No. 16/2235 (Top Secret) from Police-Colonel O. A. Eleonskii, head of the Alma-Ata municipal directorate for internal affairs, to the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, 25 December 1986, stored in “Dokumenty partiinykh i pravookhranitel'nykh organov, prinятые в связи с декабрьскими восстаниями 1986 года” (henceforth cited as DPPO) collection of declassified documents from Kazakhstan and Moscow, Cold War Studies (CWS) Archive, Harvard University.

17 Data on casualties are from ibid., Ll. 2–3; and “Prilozhenie k Protokolu No. 18 ot 19.12.86: Meropriyatiya TsK Komparkti Kazakhstana po realizatsii Postanovleniya Politbyuro TsK KPPSS ot 18 dekabrya 1986 goda ‘O meropriyatiyakh v svyazi s obstanovkoi v g. Alma-Ate,’” Appendix (Top Secret) to the protocol of the session of the KazCP Buro, 19–20 December 1986, in DPPO, CWS Archive. For the CPSU Politburo’s authorization of the crackdown, see “Postanovlenie Politbyuro TsK KPPSS ot 18 dekabrya 1986 goda ‘O mero-

priyatiyakh v svyazi s obstanovkoi v g. Alma-Ate,’” Resolution of the CPSU Politburo (Top Secret), 18 December, which shaped the agenda of the KazCP Buro’s emergency session that same day. See “Protokol No. 18 Zasedaniya Byuro Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kompartii Kazakhstana 19 dekabrya 1986,” along with the top-secret resolution adopted there, “Postanovlenie o realizatsii Postanovleniya Politbyuro TsK KPPSS ot 18 dekabrya 1986 goda ‘O meropriyatiyakh v svyazi s obstanovkoi v g. Alma-Ate,’” in DPPO, CWS Archive.
accelerated. Nearly 30,000 KGB and anti-riot troops were deployed with water cannon, tear gas, clubs, and electric prods to restore and maintain order. As part of this effort, the KGB and police arrested more than 2,360 people (though many were quickly released) and expelled nearly 300 students from the main Abai State University (though most were soon allowed to return). A defiant mood persisted in Alma-Ata over the next few days and lasted at least until 21 December, but all of the larger protests were suppressed on 18 December during the initial massive crackdown and the systematic arrests that ensued.

Despite the Soviet authorities’ success in defusing the immediate crisis, Gorbachev’s subsequent handling of the situation proved detrimental to the stability of the USSR. Instead of following through decisively and imposing martial law, the Soviet leader wavered and indirectly legitimized the protesters’ actions by hastily bringing in a native Kazakh, Zakesh Kamalidenov, to serve alongside Kolbin as the Second Secretary. The appointment of a native Kazakh to the post of Second Secretary under a First Secretary of Russian origin was at odds with the normal pattern and thus seemed oddly inappropriate. Nonetheless, even though Gorbachev’s gesture did not meet the protesters’ demand for the removal of Kolbin, it set a precedent that was bound to embolden activists elsewhere in the Soviet Union who were thinking of challenging the center’s control.

Gorbachev’s unwillingness to resort to mass repression in the face of popular unrest became far more evident in July 1987 when a group of 120 Crimean Tatar activists, who had been trying unsuccessfully for several weeks to meet with the Soviet leader, held a spontaneous demonstration in Red Square to demand that Crimean Tatars be allowed to return to their traditional homeland in Crimea, from which they had been deported wholesale by Stalin during World War II. In the past, protests by even a few Crimean Tatars were immediately and harshly broken up, preventing any spread or repetition of the unrest. But Gorbachev, far from ordering the demonstration to be crushed,
took a distinctly conciliatory tack, sending high-level emissaries to negotiate with the activists and creating a Politburo commission to review all their demands.

After the negotiations dragged on for two weeks without results, hundreds of Crimean Tatars staged another highly visible demonstration in Red Square, demanding to see Gorbachev and to be given the right to return to Crimea. When the new protest began on 23 July, the Soviet Politburo met to consider forceful “measures to suppress the Crimean Tatars’ demonstration,” but Gorbachev decided against a crackdown, hoping that the protests would peter out within a day or two.22 His hopes of defusing the unrest peacefully proved in vain, however. After a week went by and the Crimean Tatars were still ensconced in Red Square – an unprecedented show of defiance in the heart of Soviet power – the police finally moved in and expelled the Tatars from Moscow.

Even so, many of the activists continued to organize large protests outside the capital to press their demands. Under Brezhnev, the prospect of severe repression against Crimean Tatars had been a formidable deterrent and had essentially eliminated the Tatars’ hopes of ever being able to return to Crimea. Their decision to stage protests in Moscow in July 1987 was initially little more than an act of desperation. Gorbachev’s reluctance to dislodge the protesters, and his offers of major concessions, revived the Crimean Tatar movement and transformed it into a conspicuous example of resistance – an example that other Soviet ethnic groups could seek to emulate.

4 The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict and Its Impact

The growing evidence of Gorbachev’s reluctance to use large-scale force soon spurred numerous other serious challenges and clashes. In late 1987 and early 1988, activists in Armenia organized a mass petition drive calling for the return of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), a region within neighboring Azerbaijan populated mainly by ethnic Armenians.23 The petition, signed by hundreds of thousands of Armenians, was the initial stage of what evolved into a full-scale armed conflict between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet republics. Declassified archival documents make clear that Gorbachev


had no intention of transferring Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia (such a step, he warned at a Politburo meeting in June 1988, would “provoke genocide”), but he was unwilling to take a decisive stance against the Armenian protesters.24

The Soviet authorities did send security forces to the region in February 1988 after Azeris in Sumgait (a town near the Azerbaijani capital, Baku) carried out grisly attacks against ethnic Armenians; but the troops were given no clear-cut mission. If Soviet leaders had clamped down harshly on the Armenian activists when the petition drive and demonstrations began, they undoubtedly could have forestalled the subsequent violence. Some members of the Soviet Politburo, notably the KGB head, Chebrikov, did advocate a vigorous crackdown on the turmoil from the very start, but Gorbachev and other officials wanted to rely mainly on “political means” and to eschew the sustained use of force for as long as possible.25 At a CPSU Politburo meeting in early March 1988, Gorbachev acknowledged that “it is impossible to remain indifferent when you see what is going on there [in Sumgait].” He said he could “understand the concerns of Chebrikov and others,” but he insisted that the use of large-scale violence would be unacceptable:

Yes, the soldiers we sent to Sumgait were unarmed. But what would we have gained if they had been armed with sub-machine guns? What would have happened then in view of these atrocities?26

At Gorbachev’s behest, the CPSU Politburo decided to rely on the Soviet parliament to indicate that Nagorno-Karabakh would have to remain part of Azerbaijan – an action that conveyed no clear message and failed to stem the unrest or to alleviate the intense hostility between the two sides.

When enmity between the Azeris and Armenians continued to deepen and violence escalated in the summer of 1988, it appeared that Gorbachev would have to take a more forceful stance and dispatch the Soviet Army to quell the unrest. Both parties to the dispute expected that an all-out crackdown was imminent, but no such crackdown ultimately occurred. As a result, activists in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh soon stepped up their efforts to reclaim the NKAO, sparking violent reprisals by Azeris. Although troops from the Soviet


26 Ibid.
Internal Affairs Ministry were again deployed to the region to try to keep order, they were not authorized to clamp down as ruthlessly as necessary to put an end to the conflict. Despite numerous outbreaks of gruesome interethnic clashes, Gorbachev continued to hesitate, allowing the situation to spin badly out of control.

Order returned for a brief while after an earthquake devastated Armenia in December 1988, giving Gorbachev an opportunity to move against some of the leaders of the Nagorno-Karabakh movement. But in the spring of 1989 he released all of them from prison, and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared anew. By the time Soviet troops were sent to confront Azerbaijani nationalists in January 1990 and Armenian nationalists in the spring of 1991, the situation had deteriorated too far to be defused other than through the use of unrelenting violence – an option that Gorbachev and many of those around him wanted to avoid at all costs.

The basic problem in this case and in other instances of mass ethnic unrest was that Gorbachev was unwilling to use violent repression consistently and on a scale that would have been needed to quell protests and deter further unrest. His reluctance to crack down stemmed not from a lack of awareness of the burgeoning instability in the country, but from a conviction that “political solutions” were the only viable way to cope with the situation. At a CPSU Politburo session in mid-October 1988, Gorbachev assured his colleagues that non-violent measures would suffice:

Looking around the country, we find many problems not only in Armenia and not only in the NKAO. Processes are also under way in the Baltic republics, in Kirgiziya and Kazakhstan, in Moldova and Ukraine. Important questions are arising everywhere .... But we should not oversimplify this. These processes are natural in conditions of democracy and glasnost .... I have to say that the information in the Central Committee is one-sided and unconstructive. Often they simply want to scare us. They think that the Politburo consists of blind fools. Some are already crying “To arms!” And on the basis of disinformation they believe that everything, so to speak, is collapsing. There is no ground for panic or for taking up arms. Such sentiments do not correspond to reality.27

More than a year later, in January 1990, Gorbachev ordered the Soviet Army to move into Baku to crush the Azerbaijani Popular Front, an invasion that killed nearly 150 civilians and wounded more than 800. This crackdown, however, had no effect on the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, which increasingly drove Armenia and Azerbaijan toward all-out war. Moreover, even though Gorbachev used large-scale force in this one instance, his lack of consistency is what proved so debilitating.

5 The Tbilisi Crackdown and Its Aftermath

The option of using armed repression against ethnic protesters fell into even greater disrepute after Soviet military forces carried out a violent crackdown against unarmed demonstrators in Tbilisi in April 1989. Mass protest rallies in the Georgian capital had begun on 4–5 April when tens of thousands of people gathered in the main square on Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Georgian House of Government. The organizers of the demonstrations sought to foment strikes, boycotts, and other acts of defiance throughout the Georgian republic, and they also began voicing what the authorities described as “nationalistic, anti-socialist, and anti-Soviet slogans,” including open calls for Georgia’s secession from the USSR, a sentiment that would have seemed unthinkable (and would certainly not have been openly voiced) even a few years earlier.

Although the demonstrations and hunger strikes remained peaceful throughout, and although the size of the protests gradually diminished, the leaders of the Georgian Communist Party were alarmed by the mass unrest and were increasingly fearful that the whole Georgian government was about...
to be overthrown. They urgently conveyed these concerns to hardline officials in Moscow, with whom they remained in contact via special channels throughout the crisis.

The situation took a fateful turn on 7 April, when Gorbachev was away on a long-planned official visit to London with two other members of the CPSU Politburo, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Aleksandr Yakovlev, one of the boldest advocates of political liberalization. The absence of these three leading proponents of reform was evident when the CPSU Politburo met on 7 April, chaired by Egor Ligachev (standing in for Gorbachev), and agreed to send Soviet military forces and anti-riot units of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) to Tbilisi to protect key buildings and roads, thus compensating for the dearth of reliable local police. That same day, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov ordered one of his deputies, Army-General Konstantin Kochetov,
and the commander of the Transcausus Military District, Colonel-General Igor Rodionov, to fly immediately to Tbilisi. After Kochetov, Rodionov, and the army and MVD detachments arrived in the Georgian capital on the evening of 7–8 April, the Georgian authorities desperately sought permission from Moscow to impose a state of emergency. Although the head of the Georgian Communist Party, Jumber Patiashvili, and a few other senior Georgian officials initially were hesitant about using force and tried to delay a final decision, other members of the Georgian Defense Council were clearly intent on violently dispersing the protests.

Those favoring repression were strongly supported by General Kochetov, who (presumably with Yazo’s blessing) was eager to crush the demonstrations and was scornful of Georgian officials who “fail to recognize the direness of the situation.” Kochetov demanded “urgent and decisive action” by the Georgian government to “quell the unrest provoked by extremist elements and deprived individuals.” Despite the pressure from Kochetov, Patiashvili and his Georgian colleagues were still hoping to receive explicit authorization from

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32 No doubt, one of the reasons that Yazo chose to send Kochetov as well as Rodionov to Tbilisi is that both men had served as commanders of the Transcausus Military District (headquartered in Tbilisi) and had long been close friends with similar career paths. Both of them had started as regiment commanders in the “Iron” Division of the Transcarpathian Military District in the early 1970s. After Kochetov was appointed commander of the “Iron” Division, he became a patron of Rodionov, who succeeded him as the division commander in 1976. Kochetov went on to become commander of the Transcausus Military District, and when he vacated that post in 1988 to become a deputy defense minister, Rodionov again succeeded him. Yazo therefore had ample reason to be confident that the two generals could work well together even under trying circumstances.

33 See, for example, “Iskhodyashchaya shifrtelegramma No. 14/sh,” encrypted telegram (Top Secret), sent to the CPSU Politburo by Jumber Patiashvili at 8:35 P.M., 7 April 1989 (received in Moscow at 8:40 P.M.), in Volkogonov Collection, Cold War Studies Archive, Harvard University, D. 17, Ll. 1–2. This same document, from the receiving end in Moscow (where the heading given to it was “Vkhodyashchaya shifrtelegramma No. 217/Sh”), was reproduced in Istoricheskii Arkhiv (Moscow), No. 3 (1993), pp. 95–96.

34 Patiashvili was wavering even as late as 8 April. In the initial session of the Defense Council that day, he wanted to wait before using force, but by the time the Defense Council reconvened later in the day he strongly supported “decisive measures to restore order in the republic.” See “Protokol’naya zapis’ zasedaniya SO GSSR ot 8-go aprelya 1989 g.,” 8 April 1989 (Top Secret), in Sak’art’velos Saiistorio Centraluri Saxelmcip’o Ark’ivi (SSCSA), Tbilisi, F. 1-12 (c), Dok. 2-2-53, Ll. 1–5; and “Protokol zasedaniya Soveta Oborony GSSR ot 8 aprelya 1989 g.,” 8 April 1989 (Top Secret), in SSCSA, F. 1-12 (c), Dok. 2-2-54, Ll. 1–7.

35 “Protokol’naya zapis’ zasedaniya SO GSSR ot 8-go aprelya 1989 g.,” L. 2. See also Kochetov’s comments at the subsequent Defense Council meeting, “Protokol zasedaniya Soveta Oborony GSSR ot 8 aprelya 1989 g.,” Ll. 2–3.
the Soviet Politburo before they implemented a crackdown. Fearing that the chance for action would soon be lost, Kochetov told them that “the magnitude of the crisis is not fully appreciated in Moscow” and that therefore “a decision [to use force] must be adopted here on the scene.” He assured the Georgian leaders that he would “inform Moscow about any decisions that are adopted,” but he exhorted them not to wait any longer before ordering the Soviet army and MVD units to “remove all demonstrators from the main city square and restore the normal functioning of the Georgian government.”

Accordingly, the Georgian Defense Council on the evening of 8 April approved “swift and resolute measures” to “restore order” and to “rectify the gravely deteriorating and increasingly catastrophic political situation.” This decision set in motion a harsh, sweeping crackdown in Tbilisi on 9 April under the direction of General Rodionov, an operation that killed 19 people, including 15 women, seriously wounded nearly 300 (including some 25 children as young as two), and exposed many thousands of bystanders to tear gas and other noxious anti-riot chemicals.

In subsequent days, many commentators and parliamentarians in the Soviet Union expressed fierce criticism of the violence and denounced the Soviet Army for its role. Gorbachev, who returned to Moscow from London with Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze late in the evening on 7 April, claimed that he had not known about the crackdown in advance. This claim was widely doubted at the time and has been challenged by many observers since then, but the newly released transcripts of Georgian government meetings (cited above) lend a great deal of credence to Gorbachev’s position and help to clear up the discrepancies in memoir accounts.

There is no doubt that Gorbachev was briefed on the Georgian situation as soon as he and Shevardnadze and Yakovlev returned to Moscow at around 11:00 PM on 7 April. Gorbachev himself acknowledges this in his memoirs. The Soviet leader received further information about the crisis in Tbilisi when the CPSU Politburo met in an emergency session on 8 April. Even so, it is doubtful that these briefings and discussions would have enabled him to learn about the impending army-MVD operation, which was decided in Tbilisi, not in Moscow.

36  “Protokol zasedaniya Soveta Oborony GSSR ot 8 aprelya 1989 g.”, L. 3.
37  Ibid., L. 5. This decision was the crucial one. It was then immediately reaffirmed by (or in the name of) the highest party and state bodies, namely, the Georgian Communist Party Bureau (Politburo) and the Georgian Council of Ministers. The formal document authorizing the crackdown, “Rasporyazhenie No. 24rs 8 aprelya 1989,” Order No. 24rs (Top Secret), was issued in the name of the Georgian Council of Ministers chaired by Zurab Chkheidze.
The transcripts of the Georgian Defense Council meetings make clear that the decision to use force was adopted by Georgian leaders without explicit authorization from the Soviet Politburo. The transcripts also make clear that the Soviet Politburo, far from authorizing a crackdown, had in fact called on the Georgian authorities to “wait another 2–3 days” before taking any action and arresting the organizers of the demonstrations. Although two high-ranking officials in Moscow – Defense Minister Yazov (acting through Deputy Defense Minister Kochetov), and the former KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov, who by this time was in charge of the CPSU commission that oversaw the MVD, the KGB, and the armed forces – apparently did give authorization for a violent crackdown on 9 April, they did so on their own without informing other members of the Politburo.

39 The fact that the decision to crack down was adopted in Tbilisi, not in Moscow, helps explain why the first-hand accounts by officials who were based in Moscow diverge so markedly. Aleksandr Kapto, a senior CPSU official who took part in the Soviet Politburo meeting on 8 April, writes that the Politburo members “discussed measures to restore order in Tbilisi.” He implies that Gorbachev, on this basis, must have been aware of the plans for a forceful crackdown on 9 April. See Aleksandr Kapto Na perekrestkah zhizni: Politicheskie memuary (Moscow: Sotsial'no-politicheskii zhurnal, 1996), p. 311. Kapto’s version is similar to the accounts by a few others who were present during the high-level deliberations in Moscow, including Nikolai Ryzhkov (who was then Soviet prime minister) and Valerii Boldin (then head of the CPSU General Department and a senior aide to Gorbachev). Boldin in his memoirs claims that “Gorbachev knew everything” about the crackdown but “shifted all the blame to the military” because of his own “cowardice.” See V. I. Boldin, Krushenie p'edestala: Shtrikhi k portretu M. S. Gorbacheva (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), pp. 346–349 (quoted passage from p. 348). Ryzhkov’s version is in his Perestroika: Istoriya predatel’stv (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), pp. 214–217. It is worth noting, however, that Kapto, Ryzhkov, and Boldin all wrote their memoirs after leaving office, by which time they bore deep animosity toward Gorbachev. The accounts provided by some other former senior officials, such as Shevardnadze, are distinctly more favorable toward Gorbachev’s claims. See, for example, Eduard Shevardnadze, Moi vybor: V zashchitu svobody i demokratii (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), pp. 320–326. Moreover, the comments by Ryzhkov at a CPSU Politburo meeting shortly after the violence undercut Ryzhkov’s memoir account and corroborate Gorbachev’s denials of having known about the decision to use force. See “Zasedanie Politbyuro TsK KPSS 23 aprelya 1989 goda: O sobytiyakh v Tbilisi,” Transcript of CPSU Politburo Session (Top Secret), in AGF, F. 2, Op. 11, D. 19, Ll. 8–10. See also A. S. Chernyaev, Shest’ let s Gorbachevym: Po dnevnikovym zapisyam (Moscow: Progress, 1993), pp. 286–287. Ryzhkov’s comments, as recorded by Chernyaev, are also cited in Gorbachev’s own memoirs, Zhizni i reformy, Vol. 1, p. 515. Thus, despite the discrepancies in memoir accounts, the documentary evidence supports Gorbachev’s own version of what he knew.

40 The evidence for Yazov’s involvement in the matter is particularly strong. Kochetov certainly would not have urged the Georgian Defense Council to order the use of force unless he had received explicit instructions to that effect from Yazov. Although Yazov later told the Sobchak commission that he did not authorize the crackdown (see the excerpts from his testimony transcribed in Khozhdenie vo vlast’, pp. 88–89, 90–91), his denials are
After a brief period of hesitation, Gorbachev made the momentous decision to condemn the bloodshed and to disavow all responsibility for the soldiers' actions, which he described as “harmful to the interests of perestroika, democratization, and the renewal of our country.”41 Although Gorbachev tempered his criticism with stern warnings that the Soviet government would not permit “destructive forces” to “redraw borders or [to] break up the national-republic structure of the country,” he emphasized that he was “deeplygrieved” by the loss of life in Tbilisi. Moreover, he immediately decided to send Foreign Minister Shevardnadze to Georgia to appeal for calm and reconciliation. Shevardnadze, who was of Georgian origin and had served as head of the Georgian Internal Affairs Ministry and Communist Party in the 1970s and early 1980s before taking up his post in Moscow, left no doubt about where his (and, implicitly, Gorbachev's) sympathies lay. In an emotional speech to Georgian party officials on 14 April, Shevardnadze declared that “no one and nothing can justify the deaths of innocent people. We [must] ensure that this sort of tragedy never happens again either here or elsewhere in the Soviet Union.”42

Had Gorbachev decided instead to depict the crackdown in Tbilisi as a necessary (albeit perhaps somewhat excessive) reaction to destabilizing unrest, he would have signaled that other attempts to foment instability in the Soviet Union would likely be met with an equally vigorous response. But by essentially endorsing the harsh criticism of the repression, Gorbachev inadvertently created a “Tbilisi syndrome” that provided a rallying point for separatist groups and protest movements in the Soviet Union and gave them an incentive to step up their activities in the belief that peaceful demonstrations (even ones demanding radical change) would no longer be forcibly subdued. This latter belief gained particular impetus from the official pledge (voiced by Shevardnadze) that the Soviet government would “never permit this sort of tragedy to happen again.”

Gorbachev’s denial of responsibility for the violence and Shevardnadze’s reprobation of the troops’ actions sparked deep antagonism with General Rodionov and other generals, who felt betrayed by political leaders in Moscow and were outraged by what they perceived as the “vicious” scapegoating of

contravened by the documentary evidence, and it is not surprising that the Sobchak commission concluded that he did in fact issue an explicit order to both Kochetov and Rodionov via the telephone on 8 April.

41  “Soobshchenie M. S. Gorbacheva narodu Gruzinskoi SSR,” Zarya vostoka (Tbilisi), 13 April 1989, p. 1.

the army. Gorbachev’s demeanor also sowed hesitancy among other commanders of army units and security forces (KGB and MVD) about the possible deployment of their personnel in future crackdowns, lest they too be abandoned by Gorbachev and then subjected to relentless vilification afterward if things went awry. In all these respects, Gorbachev’s response to the Tbilisi affair circumscribed his options for relying on force against protesters.

6 Instability in Moldova

In Moldova, as in other Soviet republics (notably the Baltic states, Georgia, and Armenia), the political liberalization under Gorbachev in the late 1980s allowed long-suppressed nationalist sentiments to reemerge. Lively discussions arose in Moldova in early to mid-1988 about the status of the republic’s language and culture. These exchanges, mostly among intellectuals, led to the formation of the “Democratic Movement in Support of Perestroika,” which pressed for the adoption of Romanian as the republic’s sole official language.

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43 The complaints voiced by Rodionov and other military officers about the scapegoating of the army were only partly warranted. Although Rodionov later claimed – in numerous interviews and memoirs – that he had been opposed to the crackdown and had tried until the last minute to forestall it, the bulk of the evidence (including his own testimony to the Sobchak commission, as transcribed in Sobchak, Tbilisskii izlom, pp. 110–111, 129–130) belies his assertions. When Rodionov arrived in Tbilisi on the evening of 7–8 April, he did not yet have authorization for a crackdown and was therefore not urging that the army be used for that purpose, but by the following day, after he spoke with Yazov on the phone, he seemed fully ready to oversee the operation. The newly available transcripts of the Georgian Defense Council meetings on 8 April leave no doubt that, by that point, Rodionov did not object to the crackdown in principle and was worried only that the Georgian leaders were hesitant about granting their explicit consent. The transcripts contravene Rodionov’s subsequent assertions that on 8 April he urged the Georgians not to embroil the army in internal political disputes and warned them he did not have enough troops to enforce martial law. See, for example, the misleading post-facto accounts in Kapto, Na perekrestkakh zhizni, p. 321; Aleksandr Zhilin, “General Igor’ Rodionov: Vozvrashchenie iz ssylki,” Moskovskie novosti (Moscow), No. 29 (21–28 July 1996), p. 7; Nataliya Gevorkyan, “General Rodionov: Prikazy ne obsuzhayutsya,” Kommersant (Moscow), No. 27 (23 July 1996), pp. 6–7; and the interview with Shevardnadze in Leonid Pleshakov, “Ubezhdat’ pravdu,” Ogonek (Moscow), No. 11 (March 1990), pp. 2–6.

language (instead of Russian) and for the use of the Latin script. Although the Democratic Movement won some limited but important concessions (including a landmark report issued by the Moldovan parliament in December 1988 recommending adoption of the Romanian language and use of the Latin alphabet), the reluctance of the Moldovan Communist authorities to take bolder steps triggered a resurgence of political unrest.

In May 1989 a network of “informal” opposition groups in Moldova, supported by prominent writers, artists, scholars, and linguists, joined together to form the Popular Front of Moldova, an umbrella organization that was supposed to emulate the popular fronts in the Baltic states in pressing for faster political and economic change.\(^{45}\) In late June 1989, the Popular Front organized mass demonstrations in Chișinău to denounce the Nazi-Soviet Pact (which facilitated the Soviet occupation of Moldova) and the subsequent annexation of Romanian territory by the USSR.

This initial show of strength by the Popular Front was soon followed by numerous other events that pushed the organization to move toward an explicitly pan-Romanian stance. On 27 August 1989, the Popular Front sponsored vast rallies in Chișinău, numbering well over 100,000 participants, who demanded that Romanian be adopted as the republic’s official language. Four days later, on 31 August, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet (chaired by a reform Communist, Mircea Snegur) passed three laws stipulating that Romanian and Moldovan were “linguistically identical” and that Moldovan/Romanian would be used in place of Russian for all official “political, economic, social, and cultural matters.”\(^{46}\) The laws also required that the Latin alphabet be used instead of Cyrillic. The legislation provided for the continued use of Russian, but only as a “language of communication among nationalities” (limbă de comunicare între națiuni).

Although the language laws were not meant to be applied in a draconian manner during the initial changeover (as witnessed by the continued frequent use of Russian in the Moldovan parliament’s sessions), their adoption marked a turning point in the Moldovan SSR in three key respects:

First, the laws greatly strengthened the Popular Front of Moldova – albeit only temporarily – and reinforced its emphasis on Romanian nationalism as the motif for Moldovan statehood.

Second, the adoption of the laws was a signal achievement for up-and-coming intellectuals and political elites in Soviet Moldova as they sought to displace

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46 Actele legislative ale r.s.s. Moldovenesti cu privire la decretarea limbii moldovenesti limbă de stat și revenirea ei la grafia latină (Chișinău: Cartea Moldovenească, 1990).
Russian-speaking functionaries who had long dominated the republic’s Academy of Sciences and political hierarchy. Although discussions of the language laws were usually couched in ethnic and linguistic terms, the laws in fact had profound implications for upward mobility in the republic. On the one hand, this development empowered Romanian-speaking elites who were more inclined to press for separation from the Soviet Union and either independence or union with Romania. On the other hand, it created a sense of threat among Russian-speaking elites, who realized that their control of intellectual and political life in Moldova would be undermined. Many of the Russian-speaking elites looked increasingly to Moscow for support against their Romanian-speaking rivals and were staunchly committed to preserving Moldova’s status in the USSR.

Third, in addition to stoking conflicts among rival groups of elites, the language laws fomented ethnic/linguistic rifts within the broader population. Although calls for independence and swift “reunification” with Romania did not become commonplace until after the ouster of Nicolae Ceaușescu in late December 1989, the prospect of the further “Romanianization” of Moldova was unpalatable for the Slavic minorities in the republic, who constituted a sizable part of the population, especially in Transnistria and in the largest cities further west. (Russians accounted for roughly 13 percent of the republic’s total population, Ukrainians for just over 14 percent, and Bulgarians for nearly 2 percent.) Very few members of the Slavic nationalities had ever learned Romanian, and they feared they would be marginalized and demoted to second-class status in a republic that forced them to use a language they did not know and did not want to learn. Similar forebodings existed among Gagauz residents, most of whom also did not know Moldovan.

The anxiety of the Slavic and Gagauz communities gave rise to mass protests and large-scale strikes in dozens of factories both before and after the language laws were adopted. The leaders of the Slavic groups in Transnistria set up a United Council of Work Collectives (OSTK) in the summer of 1989 for the explicit purpose of “combatting Romanian nationalism” and upholding Moldova’s status as a union-republic of the Soviet Union. The OSTK

47 This point is rightly emphasized in King, *The Moldovans*, pp. 131–138.
48 Ibid., pp. 138–140.
allied itself with the Internationalist Movement for Unity (Interdvizhenie “Unitatea-Edinstvo”), a pro-Russian grouping that became the focal point for Russian-speakers in Moldova (especially Transnistria) who were seeking redress of their grievances. Leaders of the Gagauz community likewise sought autonomy for their homeland and went on to proclaim Turkish as their official language.50

The extreme volatility of the situation in Soviet Moldova became evident in November 1989 when violent anti-government demonstrations erupted in Chişinău during the official celebrations of the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Protesters firebombed the headquarters of the Moldovan Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD), prompting the government to declare a state of emergency and to ban all public gatherings indefinitely.51 Far from decreasing, however, the turmoil in Moldova continued to increase as a result of the revolutionary changes in Romania in December 1989 against Nicolae Ceauşescu’s regime. Soon after Ceauşescu was overthrown and executed, the subject of “reunification” with Romania – a subject that had long been officially taboo – came to the fore. Initially, only a relatively small group of intellectuals from the Popular Front were willing to raise the issue, but their proposals were so alarming to the large Slavic communities in Moldova that the Transnistrian government voted in January 1990 to declare the whole of Transnistria a “self-governing, independent territory” (samoupravlyaemaya nezavisimaya territoriya), a status that the central government in Chişinău immediately sought to annul.

Apprehension among the Russian-speaking and Gagauz minorities in Moldova increased sharply during the first few months after Ceauşescu was gone. The strong showing of the Popular Front of Moldova in the republic-wide parliamentary elections in February 1990, coming on the heels of the sweeping changes in Romania, lent new impetus to the campaign for separation from the Soviet Union and “reunification” with Romania. In April 1990 the Moldovan government adopted the Romanian tricolor (blue-yellow-red) as the state flag, inscribing it with the coat of arms used by the Principality of

50 See the pamphlet put out by S. S. Kuroglo et al., O sozdании Gagauzskoi Avtonomnoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki v sostave Moldavskoi SSR, Comrat, 1989. This pamphlet evoked a vehement, sustained response in R. Yunku (Iuncu), K voprosu o gagauzskoi avtonomii (Chişinău: Cartea Moldovenească, 1990), which dismissed the notion of Gagauz autonomy as “absurd.”

Moldova under Romanian rule. The Moldovan government also adopted the Romanian anthem as the state anthem. During the parliamentary debate on these matters, the Popular Front called openly for a pan-Romanian merger, a proposal that was formally codified in the action program adopted by the Front in June 1990.

When the border between Moldova and Romania was opened in early May 1990 – for the first time in more than forty years – hundreds of thousands of Moldovan and Romanian citizens ventured across in either direction. Later that month, Moldovan protesters in Chişinău, who were closely aligned with the Popular Front, physically attacked several Russian-speaking members of the Moldovan parliament, a move that prompted 100 other Russian-speaking deputies to walk out and demand a harsh official response. The OSTK and Edinstvo, which had performed well during the February 1990 elections in Transnistria, led a wave of counter-protests and strikes against the “onslaught of Romanian chauvinism,” precipitating ever greater turmoil in Moldova.

The continued surge of unrest among the Slavic and Gagauz minorities, amid warnings that Romania and Moldova would soon be reunited, spurred the Transnistrian government in Tiraspol and the Gagauz authorities in southern Moldova to take bolder action. In the summer of 1990, Moldovan officials sought to prevent the Gagauz-Khalk (Gagauz Movement) from establishing an autonomous or independent region, but the Chişinău government’s directives merely provoked a series of defiant countermoves by the Gagauz-Khalk, who turned ever more strongly against the central government. In early September 1990, after the authorities in Transnistria declared the establishment of an autonomous republic (the Transnistrian-Moldovan SSR), the Moldovan government decided to clamp down not only on the Gagauz region but also on Transnistria. On 4 September, the Moldovan parliament elected Snegur to the post of president and voted to introduce “presidential rule.”

52 The Moldovan coat of arms, showing an eagle with an olive branch in its beak, a scepter in its left talon, and a cross in its right talon, is emblazoned on the central (yellow) portion of the flag. In front of the eagle is a shield, colored red on top and blue below, with a bison’s head in the center. The sun is depicted just to the left of the bison’s head, and a crescent of the moon is on the right. Above the head is a multi-pronged star.

53 “Podul de flori de la Prut,” Dreptatea (Bucharest), 9 May 1990, pp. 1, 4.

54 Novokhatkii and Kartavyi, “Kogda zhe nastupit mir i soglasie?” p. 63; and Yakovlev, Ternistyj put’ k spravedlivosti, pp. 82–88.

was followed several weeks later by the imposition of a state of emergency and a ban on public meetings in the Gagauz region and Transnistria.  

Despite these measures, violent instability in the minority regions continued to grow. In early November 1990, anti-riot police from the Moldovan MVD clashed with Transnistrian paramilitaries in Dubosari, killing six. Two weeks later, a funeral service in Chişinău for a Romanian who had been killed in a fight with a Russian gave way to large-scale demonstrations and fierce assaults on Russian-speakers by supporters of the Moldovan Popular Front. Further violent confrontations occurred in November and December 1990, spurring many residents to flee.

The escalating bloodshed in Moldova stirred deep apprehension in Moscow. Soviet leaders were already confronted by powerful separatist movements in the Baltic republics and the Caucasus, and the violent turmoil in Moldova merely exacerbated those problems. On 22 December 1990, Gorbachev issued a presidential decree nullifying the Gagauz and Transnistrian governments’ declarations of sovereignty, while also calling on the Moldovan Supreme Soviet to reconsider legislation that was widely perceived as discriminatory by the republic’s minorities. That same day, the head of the Soviet KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, appeared before the Soviet parliament and warned that a full-scale crackdown would soon be needed to “restore order in the country.”

Within Moldova itself, however, these strictures from Moscow were far outweighed by the deep animosity between competing groups. All the parties to the conflicts in Moldova – the Russian-speaking groups, the Gagauz minority, and the Moldovan government – simply ignored Gorbachev’s directives. (Indeed, just a day after the Soviet president issued his decree, a mass protest rally in Chişinău turned into a deadly mêlée.) Although the intensity of violence in Moldova diminished temporarily in early 1991, Soviet leaders found no lasting way to ameliorate the situation, especially in light of what they saw as Romania’s increasingly unhelpful role.

58 “KGB protiv sabotazha: Vystuplenie V. A. Kryuchkova na IV S”ezde narodnykh deputatov SSSR,” Pravda (Moscow), 23 December 1990, pp. 1–2. The speech was broadcast in its entirety on Soviet television. Eleven days earlier, Kryuchkov had given a similar speech in which he pledged that the KGB would do whatever was necessary to wipe out “destructive elements” whose “extremist radical political goals” were “very well funded and morally supported from abroad” and were aimed at “shattering our society and government and destroying Soviet rule.”
Under Ceaușescu, the Romanian government had made little attempt to conceal its irredentist ambitions vis-à-vis Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina; and in the post-Ceaușescu era those sentiments became even more pronounced. All of the newly formed political parties in post-Ceaușescu Romania championed the return of “sacred territory” lost to the Soviet Union in 1944. Although individual Romanian leaders initially were cautious about taking steps that could inflame Moldova’s internal conflicts; the newly elected government in Bucharest soon found it expedient to raise the territorial issue more conspicuously. The shift to a bolder stance was designed in part to appeal to the electorate in Romania (a country in which irredentist goals were widely supported), but it also corresponded to the fluid and rapidly changing situation in Moldova.

Although the Popular Front of Moldova ultimately was unable to sustain broad public support for its bid to seek “reunification” with Romania – the drop in support was apparent by the end of 1991 even among ethnic Romanians, not to mention among minority groups – the campaign for reunification temporarily (in 1990 and early 1991) acquired great momentum after it was endorsed by many of the republic’s leading intellectuals and politicians. Moldovan schools adopted history textbooks supplied by the Romanian government, and Moldovan students received scholarships from Bucharest to attend classes in Romania. The ever more frequent calls in Moldova for “reunification” with the “motherland” induced senior Romanian officials, including Prime Minister Petru Roman, to conclude that there was fertile ground to exploit.

Moldova continued to move steadily away from Soviet rule in the spring and summer of 1991, but it did so by shifting toward independence rather than a pan-Romanian solution. Despite Moscow’s concerns about Romanian irredentism in the wake of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s downfall, the burst of pan-Romanianism that swept through Moldova gradually diminished. Although support in Moldova for a full merger with Romania was widespread in 1989 and 1990, it faded markedly in the latter half of 1991, particularly when Moldovans realized there was another alternative to living under Soviet rule – namely, the option of an independent Moldovan state.

Except in Transnistria, very few residents of Moldova wanted to remain part of the Soviet Union after 1989, but most Moldovans came to view independence

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as preferable to re-integration into Romania for a multitude of reasons: the lack of economic complementarity between Moldova and Romania, the continued (and sometimes quite vivid) political and economic instability in Romania after Ceaușescu’s overthrow, the growing concern in Moldova that the small republic might be overwhelmed and harmed by a merger with its much larger neighbor to the west, the anxiety among Moldovans about the possible impact of reunification on interethnic relations, memories of the unappealing legacy of Romanian rule in Moldova during the interwar years, the ascendance of Moldovan politicians (notably Mircea Snegur) who promoted independence as the best option, the sharp decline in support for the Popular Front after it became too heavy-handed in pressing for immediate reunification, and the growing belief that cultural reunification (the use of the same language, the adoption of common symbols, the teaching of common history, etc.) was both desirable and feasible without striving for political reunification.61

The Moldovan parliament’s declaration of independence on 27 August 1991, shortly after the coup attempt in Moscow had collapsed, not only marked the end of Moldova’s role within the Soviet Union, but also signaled a clear choice for independence over pan-Romanianism.62 That choice was reaffirmed by the overwhelming election of Snegur as president in December 1991.63

7 Baltic Independence Movements

The three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – were brought under Soviet rule in 1940 in accordance with the secret protocol to the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The Soviet Union lost control of the Baltic republics during the war with Germany, but after the war ended in 1945 the three states were forcibly re-incorporated into the USSR, a status that endured for some 45 years. Despite the passage of time, large segments of the populations in Estonia,


63 Snegur won 98 percent of the vote on a turnout of 83 percent. A boycott of the vote by the Popular Front did not significantly limit the turnout, but the nearly unanimous vote for Snegur was attributable in part to the withdrawal of two other candidates and the restrictive nature of the election laws. That said, there is no doubt that Snegur would have won decisively even if the competition had been stiffer.
Lithuania, and Latvia remained just as strongly opposed to the Soviet occupation in the late 1980s as they had been in 1945.64

When political strictures in the Soviet Union loosened a great deal in the late 1980s, separatist yearnings quickly came to the surface in the Baltic republics. By the fall of 1988, mass “popular fronts” had been formed in all three Baltic states (Sąjūdis in Lithuania, Eestimaa Rahvarinne in Estonia, and Latvijas Tautas Fronte in Latvia) to press for greater political freedom, respect for human rights, and far-reaching administrative autonomy. Numerous other unofficial groups sprang up to seek redress of national grievances. These groups initially were supportive of Gorbachev and his policies of perestroika and glasnost, but over time, as political liberalization in the USSR gathered pace, many of the newly formed organizations in the Baltic republics evolved into de facto separatist movements seeking outright independence.65


Soviet rule in the Baltics was further complicated by the sweeping changes under way in Eastern Europe in 1989–1990. The collapse of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe emboldened the popular fronts and other unofficial groups in the Baltic republics, spurring them to pursue much more ambitious objectives. The emergence of a multiparty democratic system in Hungary in 1989–1990 had an especially powerful impact in Estonia, where large numbers of people viewed it as a “model to follow.” Similarly, in Lithuania, a republic with close historical and cultural ties to Poland, the reemergence of Solidarity (Solidarność) in late 1988 and early 1989 generated widespread public interest and discussion. After a government led by Solidarity came to power in Warsaw in August 1989, the spillover from Poland into Lithuania drastically increased. In a warm congratulatory letter to the new Polish prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Sąjūdis stressed that “your victory is also our victory.”

A few months later a delegation from Sąjūdis traveled to Poland at the invitation of the Civic Parliamentary Club (an organization closely tied to the new Polish government) to consider how Lithuania could realize its “declared readiness to follow Poland’s own path” in discarding all the vestiges of Communist rule.

High-ranking Soviet officials were aware that the sweeping political changes in Eastern Europe were inspiring Baltic national groups to pursue similar results for their own republics. Shortly after the new Polish government was formed under Mazowiecki, the Soviet embassy in Warsaw and Soviet intelligence officials in Poland warned that Solidarity had “sharply stepped up its contacts with a variety of ‘independent’ political movements” in the USSR, including Sąjūdis in Lithuania, the “national fronts” in Latvia and Estonia.


67 Interview in “Nam nuzhna ser'eznaya politika,” Sovetskaya Estoniya (Tallinn), 7 December 1989, p. 2.


unofficial “youth organizations in the Baltic republics,” and other “informal groups” in Lithuania and Estonia seeking national independence.70

Gorbachev realized that in the near term he could not prevent the surge of restiveness in the Baltic states, but he hoped to limit it and ultimately to reverse it. In late August 1989, at his behest, the CPSU Politburo published an official statement, “On the Situation in the Soviet Baltic Republics,” in all the major newspapers of the USSR. The statement, issued in the name of the CPSU Central Committee, firmly ruled out any change in the status of the Baltic republics and denounced the “unsavory political forces” in the three states that were trying to “foment discord” and “cast aspersions on the legitimacy of Soviet rule.”71 Similarly, in early September 1989, when a foreign journalist asked one of Gorbachev’s senior advisers, Evgenii Primakov, whether the Solidarity-led government in Poland would provide “an example for the other [East European] countries to follow,” Primakov responded that “it is up to [the East European] countries themselves to form their own governments without external interference,” but he emphasized that this principle did not apply to the Soviet Union’s three Baltic republics: “Poland is a sovereign state, whereas Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are federal republics of the USSR.”72

Two weeks later, at a long-awaited CPSU Central Committee plenum on nationalities policy, Gorbachev stepped up his efforts to rein in the Baltic republics.73 In a lengthy opening speech he emphasized that “there is no basis for questioning the decision by the Baltic republics [in 1940] to join the USSR and the choice made by the people there to be part of the Soviet Union.” The

70 Ibid., L. 1. See also the report prepared jointly by the CPSU Department for Party Construction and Cadre Work, the CPSU Ideology Department, and the CPSU State-Legal Department, “TsK KPPS: O krizisnykh yavleniyakh v obschestvenno-politicheskoi zhizni Litovskoi SSR,” Memorandum No. 2577 (Top Secret), 26 August 1989, and the attached CPSU Politburo resolution, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 9, D. 28, Ll. 1–11.


72 “Press-konferentsiya v Londone Predsedatelya Soveta soyuza Verkhovnogo soveta sssr E. M. Primakova”.

73 This plenum, focusing on nationality problems in the Soviet Union, was originally scheduled for February 1988 (when violent conflict emerged between Armenia and Azerbaijan), but it was delayed by more than a year-and-a-half. All versions of the transcripts as well as related documents are available in the collections “Plenum Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza – XXVII Sozyv: Materialy Plenuma Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPPS 19–20 sentyabrya 1989 goda,” 19–20 September 1989 (Secret), stored in RGANI, F. 2, Op. 5, Dd. 292–339.
changes under way in Eastern Europe, he added, would not be acceptable in the Baltic states: “Claims that national self-determination in the USSR has not been achieved in reality, and attempts to equate self-determination with secession (and thereby impair this universal principle of resolving the problem of nationalities), are futile and should be vigorously condemned.” Other speakers at the plenum echoed Gorbachev’s “grave concern about the Baltic situation and the actions of certain separatist groups” that were challenging the legitimacy of Soviet rule. In a campaign orchestrated by leaders of the CPSU, several speakers demanded that the Politburo take stronger action:

We must foreclose any possibility and any need for a particular republic to secede from the union. ... The situation in the Baltic republics is increasingly perilous. We are confronted by blatant nationalism and chauvinism and the incitement of interethnic strife, yet no reprisals are being taken against these illegal actions. ... It is incomprehensible that the CC Politburo is showing such tolerance and is failing to prevent the party from falling apart and the economy from being destabilized. With great conviction and resolve, I support what [Gorbachev] has said in his report about the need to establish discipline and order everywhere, especially in the Baltic republics. It is now no longer sufficient to evaluate the situation and report the facts. We must take decisive action to defend the fundamental values of the proletarian interethnic composition of the Soviet federation.

In the final few months of 1989, as events in Eastern Europe moved ever faster, Soviet officials continued to assert that no comparable developments would be permitted in the Baltic states. In mid-November 1989, just after the hardline Communist regime in East Germany had collapsed, Gorbachev summoned the First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party (LitCP), Algirdas Brazauskas, and other high-ranking LitCP officials to Moscow for “consultations” with the CPSU Politburo. Brazauskas subsequently told Lithuanian television that “the meeting, which lasted many hours and involved most of the

members of the [Soviet] Politburo, was onerous, and we had to endure many bitter complaints about the general political situation in Lithuania.”77 A few days after Brazauskas returned to Vilnius, Czechoslovakia was engulfed by its “Velvet Revolution,” which brought a sudden, decisive end to the hardline Communist regime in Prague.

The upheavals in Czechoslovakia evoked no expressions of concern in Moscow, but the Soviet authorities continued to insist that the Baltic states would not be permitted to follow the same route. One of Gorbachev’s closest foreign policy aides, Vadim Zagladin, declared in late November 1989 “that the Soviet Union will not allow its Baltic republics to copy the dramatic political reforms in Eastern Europe.”78 Other Soviet officials stressed the same point, and Soviet military commanders proclaimed that the Soviet armed forces were ready to “combat destructive, anti-state elements” and to use military force, if necessary, to prevent the Baltic republics from seceding.79

Moscow’s increasingly hard line toward the Baltic states failed to deter the Lithuanian parliament from voting in early December 1989 to remove the provision in the republic’s constitution that guaranteed the maintenance of Communist rule. This move was widely hailed in Lithuania, including by the leaders of the LitCP, who followed up two weeks later by holding a party congress that overwhelmingly endorsed a measure to reconstitute the LitCP as an independent entity rather than a mere branch of the CPSU. The LitCP’s defiance prompted Gorbachev to convene an emergency plenum of the CPSU Central Committee on 25–26 December to confront what he said was a “real threat of civil conflict.”80 He vowed to seek approval for measures that would “block insidious attempts to disrupt the USSR’s constitutional order.”

Gorbachev in his opening speech at the plenum claimed that Lithuanian separatists were “attempting to internationalize the so-called Baltic question” by urging the East European (and Western) governments to “bring pressure to bear on the Soviet leadership.”81 He warned that Sąjūdis was aspiring to “seize

78 TASS, 29 November 1989. Zagladin made these comments during a visit to Rome.
79 See, for example, the speech by Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Dmitrii Yazov at the September 1989 plenum of the CPSU Central Committee, “Plenum Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza,” Pravda (Moscow), 22 September 1989, p. 4; Colonel M. Ziemin’sh, “Trebovaniya ostayutsya prezhnimi,” Krasnaya zvezda (Moscow), 28 January 1990, p. 2; and the comments of Vice-Admiral A. Kornienko in “O pozitsiyakh edinstva,” Krasnaya zvezda (Moscow), 28 December 1989, p. 3.
81 Ibid., p. 2. The various transcripts and related documents from this plenum are stored in “Plenum Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza – XXVII
power [in Vilnius] via a ‘parliamentary route,’” to “dismantle socialist gains in the republic,” and to push for full independence:

Sąjūdis has embarked on a path of confrontation and a struggle for real power. ... Envoy from Sąjūdis and other political groupings are making repeated trips abroad in pursuit of this objective and are even trying to arrange official political and economic negotiations [in Eastern Europe] on behalf of their peoples, and are often doing so in a most inflammatory way.82

Gorbachev accused the Lithuanians of “dealing a blow to political reform” in the Soviet Union and of trying to “provoke the CPSU into a reaction that will undermine many of the elements of perestroika.” He emphasized that the CPSU, unlike the “ideological turncoats” in the LitCP, would not “make endless concessions to the right-wing demands” of “nationalist, separatist, and patently anti-Soviet elements” in Sąjūdis that were attempting to “discredit socialism” and “restore a bourgeois order along with a highly authoritarian, right-wing regime that existed in the past.”83

Gorbachev’s thinly-veiled threats about the Baltic states gained new impetus in mid-January 1990 when the Soviet Army moved en masse into Azerbaijan. Ostensibly, the incursion was designed to halt pogroms against ethnic Armenians; but in reality, as Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Dmitrii Yazov acknowledged, the operation was intended to crush the Azerbaijani Popular Front, which had been seeking independence for Azerbaijan, inspired in part by the Baltic example.84 (Pogroms against Armenians had been taking place in early 1990, but the violence had subsided by the time Soviet troops entered the republic.) Gorbachev, Yazov, and other senior officials hoped that, in addition to reestablishing control over Azerbaijan, the intervention would serve as a demonstration to other republics of the potential costs of pursuing secession.

For a brief while, the operation in Azerbaijan induced a degree of caution among activists in the Baltic states, but the effect was short-lived. Gorbachev’s

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82  “Sud’ba perestroiki – v edinstve partii,” p. 2.
83  Ibid. See also the lead editorial “Mezhnatsional’noe edinstvo KPSS,” Pravda (Moscow), 28 December 1989, p. 1.
failure to clamp down elsewhere in the Soviet Union gave a fillip to Baltic separatist leaders who believed that the incursion into Azerbaijan was an aberration, rather than the start of a broader campaign to quell unrest and disband separatist movements. That perception, as it spread ever more widely, caused the public mood in the Baltic republics to wax increasingly defiant. In the elections for republic-wide offices in the Soviet Union in February and March 1990, pro-independence slates of candidates won overwhelmingly in all three of the Baltic states, giving them control of the governments there.

The rapid growth of pro-independence sentiment in the Baltic republics provoked consternation within the KGB’s senior ranks. The central KGB headquarters, in conjunction with republic branches, had set up a special “director for the protection of the Soviet constitutional order” in late August 1989. The new directorate was intended to combat a wide range of internal threats, including “subversives,” “anti-Soviet organizations that are actively trying to foment anti-socialist demonstrations and mass disturbances,” and “hostile elements that are planning to bring about the forcible overthrow of the Soviet government.”

In February 1990 the head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, reported to Gorbachev that the state security apparatus would be taking a wide range of additional measures to counter “nationalist, anti-socialist, and extremist forces” in the USSR and to discredit and undermine individuals and groups responsible for “separatist processes, anti-constitutional actions, and other destructive phenomena.”

A few months later, two senior KGB officials in Vilnius informed their superiors in Moscow that even after the Soviet authorities imposed economic sanctions against Lithuania in March–April 1990 to try to force the government in Vilnius to revoke its declaration of independence, Sąjūdis and the large majority of Lithuanians were unwilling to back down:

The anti-socialist, chauvinist, and separatist elements have gained the upper hand and are pursuing their subversive aims, looking to foreign governments for support. They say that “if the Soviet government could

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do nothing to prevent the downfall of its socialist allies [in Eastern Europe], why do we have anything to fear?” The danger that socialist gains in the republic will be lost is now greater than ever.87

Given the dramatic nature of the events in Eastern Europe, the prospect of independence for the Baltic states finally seemed plausible, and the governments and populations there were no longer willing to settle for less. Nor were they inclined to wait much longer before pushing for a clean break.

The growing defiance in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia indicated that the KGB officers in Vilnius were right in arguing that the Baltic states’ quest for independence was facilitated by the sweeping changes under way in Poland and other Warsaw Pact countries that until recently had been under Moscow’s hegemonic sway. In mid-February 1990 the Soviet embassy in Poland sent a cable to the CPSU Politburo warning that contacts between Solidarity and Sąjūdīs, far from diminishing, were “sharply increasing.”88 These person-to-person contacts were supplemented by a spate of articles in the Polish press that strongly endorsed the Lithuanian parliament’s landmark decision in March 1990 to promulgate a formal declaration of independence.89 Buoyed by this external support, Lithuanian leaders were more inclined than ever to press ahead in their challenge to the Soviet regime. They wanted to take advantage of the “unique opportunity now before us” to “end decades of military occupation,” to “forge a new political order,” and to achieve “a comprehensive national revival” based on “human rights and freedom.”90

When Gorbachev used economic coercion and political pressure in March and April 1990 to rein in Lithuania’s steady drift toward independence, the Lithuanian government once again received assistance from the new leaders in Eastern Europe. The head of Poland’s Solidarity movement, Lech Wałęsa, sent a public letter to Gorbachev in late March 1990 urging him to grant Lithuania the same “right of choice” that Gorbachev had extended to the East European countries in 1989:

88  “O kontaktakh ‘Solidarnosti’ s ‘nezavisimymi’ politicheskimi dvizheniyami,” Ll. 1–2.
89  See, for example the article by Małgorzata Leczycka, “Pragniemy żyć w bezpiecznej Europie,” Rzeczpospolita (Warsaw), 23 April 1990, p. 7. The declaration was adopted on 11 March.
To violate Lithuania’s sovereignty is a step directed against the process of construction of a new democratic order in Europe. The history of the USSR and Eastern Europe proves that force and threats used with a view to solving political problems are invalid measures that the international community has condemned on numerous occasions.91

Other prominent figures from Poland’s Solidarity movement made similar statements and tried to encourage the United States and other Western countries to speak up publicly on behalf of the Lithuanians. Bronisław Geremek, who was both a leading adviser to the Polish government and a member of the Polish parliament, raised the matter in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, in April 1990. Like many other observers in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states at the time, Geremek was concerned that U.S. officials were so committed to backing Gorbachev that they would be unwilling to offer public support for the Baltic peoples. He told the assembled journalists and politicians that acquiescence in a crackdown would be a grave mistake:

I hope that the United States administration and all West European governments will understand both sides of this problem [the Soviet-Lithuanian conflict] – that the Lithuanians have the right to struggle for freedom and national independence and that one should see in what way the Soviet Union can accept and cope with this new situation.92

Increasingly, the Polish government and Polish civic groups also sought to move beyond verbal support for the Baltic republics and to take concrete measures that would facilitate Baltic independence. In May 1990 the official Polish Press Agency signed an agreement on cooperation with the Lithuanian Telegraphic Agency, a step that Polish officials depicted as an arrangement between the press agencies of two sovereign states.93 Non-governmental groups in Poland were active in publishing newsletters, pamphlets, and other literature for the Baltic republics – materials that were too sensitive to publish at the official presses in the USSR. In May 1990, Colonel Vyacheslav Eschikov, the commander of Soviet Border Guards in the Baltic Military District, warned

that “in recent months there has been large-scale smuggling from Poland of Lithuanian independence literature.” Although it is true, as Eschikov indicated, that “anti-Soviet” publications were being “smuggled in,” many other pro-independence materials were brought in openly by Polish tourists and organizations and also by many West European tourists.

The bulk of external support for the independence of the Baltic countries came from Polish officials, but all of the other East European governments also spoke up at key moments. In Bulgaria, for example, the authorities sternly criticized the Soviet Union for its use of economic coercion against Lithuania in April 1990. This rebuke was spurred in part by a public outcry in Bulgaria, including several mass protest rallies in Sofia condemning the Soviet Union’s actions in the Baltics. Hungarian officials likewise denounced the “heavy-handed pressure” on Lithuania and hailed the Estonian parliament’s vote in late March 1990 that formally “restored the statehood of the Republic of Estonia” and nullified all Soviet institutions. Even the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ), which in earlier years had been staunchly loyal to the Soviet Union, expressed support for the Baltic independence movements. Responding to an appeal from the LitCP in April 1990, the KSČ called on the Soviet government to accept the Baltic “nations’ right to self-determination, freedom, and democracy” and warned that, otherwise, “the important values and processes resulting from Soviet perestroika” would go for naught.97

Despite the dramatic rise of the Baltic independence movements, their fate seemed in doubt in January 1991 when Gorbachev authorized a violent crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia.98 In late December 1990 and early January 1991, as it became clear that the Soviet government was preparing to use violent repression in the Baltic republics under the pretext of arresting draft evaders and enforcing military conscription, the leaders of those republics did everything possible to ensure that civil resistance would be entirely non-violent. On 20 December the Lithuanian government admonished all residents to

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94 Telewizja Polska, 4 May 1990. See also “Opozycyjni,” Gazeta wyborcza (Warsaw), 5 May 1990, p. 2.
95 “Deklaratsiya,” Narodna armiya (Sofia), 20 April 1990, p. 3.
98 For a useful account of these events, based in part on declassified KGB and party documents, see Georgii Urushadze, Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s vрагами: Sem’ dni za kul’rami vlasti (St. Petersburg: Institut Evropeiskogo Doma, 1995), pp. 270–289. Among other worthwhile accounts are Senn, Gorbachev’s Failure in Lithuania, pp. 127–141; Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire, pp. 561–571; and Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State, pp. 378–380.
“stay calm and to avoid being provoked by the rude behavior and arrogance of [Soviet] military forces.”99 The Lithuanian government distributed guidelines throughout the republic urging protesters to “adhere to the principles of non-violence.”100 When the Soviet Army moved in, the leaders of Sąjūdis repeatedly called on Lithuanians to “resist the provocations of foreign [Soviet] soldiers and to refrain from any acts of physical violence that would give a pretext to the enemy to cause more bloodshed.”101 Over loudspeakers, the Lithuanian government broadcast messages in Russian appealing to Soviet troops not to “shoot at unarmed civilians.” Although fourteen civilians were killed in Lithuania on 13 January 1991 and seven were killed in Latvia a week later, the peaceful conduct of the demonstrators during both of the crackdowns helped to avert a much higher death toll.102

The non-violent nature of the resistance in the Baltic states proved crucial in other respects as well. Widely televised images of unarmed protesters confronted by Soviet tanks, machine guns, and anti-riot troops elicited strong expressions of support for the Baltic peoples from key officials and commentators in Soviet republics and from around the world. Large public rallies denouncing the crackdowns were held in major cities throughout the western Soviet Union. Protests involving more than 250,000 people were organized in Moscow on 20 January 1991 by the “Democratic Russia” movement, a group of parliamentarians and other political figures in the USSR who espoused the introduction of Western-style democracy and human rights. The vast turnout at the protest rally in Moscow, as people of all ages and backgrounds came to denounce the crackdowns in Lithuania and Latvia, alarmed high-ranking KGB and CPSU officials, who warned that the rally was an “anti-Soviet” and “anti-Communist” show of political “support for Baltic separatists,” who would...
be emboldened by it.\textsuperscript{103} These officials were clearly hoping that Gorbachev would proceed with a harsher, more decisive crackdown.

Even as some Soviet officials advocated greater repression, opposition to the initial crackdown continued to escalate. Municipal councils and parliaments in Moscow and Leningrad and the governments of Moldova, Ukraine, and several other union-republics demanded that Gorbachev “immediately cease the illegal and anti-constitutional use of military force against unarmed civilians and legally elected governments.” Yeltsin, as head of the Russian government, called on Russian soldiers deployed in the Baltic states not to obey “those [in Moscow] who want to solve political problems” by relying on violent repression:

Before attacking civilian sites on Baltic soil, remember your native land and think about your own republic and the present and future of your own nation. Violence against justice and against the Baltic nations will cause new and severe crises in Russia itself and will worsen the plight of Russians living in other republics.\textsuperscript{104}

In both Lithuania and Latvia, the local police sided with the demonstrators, and public support for independence rose to 98–99 percent among ethnic Lithuanians and Latvians and to 75–80 percent among ethnic Russians.\textsuperscript{105} Similar trends were evident in Estonia, which had not come under attack. All of these results would have been far less plausible if the resistance had been violent.

The repression against unarmed demonstrators also sparked vast public demonstrations against the Soviet Union in Europe and North America. Hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered in front of Soviet embassies and demanded recognition of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as independent states. The demonstrators called for “a complete end to Soviet aggression in the Baltics.”\textsuperscript{106} Even in countries that had earlier enthusiastically welcomed the


\textsuperscript{106} Vladimir Munzelov, “Sofiyantsi skandirakha ‘Stalin-Brezhnev-Gorbachov’: Pred posolstvom na SSSR,” Demokratsiya (Soﬁa), 14 January 1991, p. 1; and Stefan Prodev, “Nie pak sie tuk,” Duma (Soﬁa), 8 April 1991, p. 6. See also the special section on “Reactions to Events in
reforms in the USSR, public officials and commentators joined the Democratic Russia movement in the USSR in harshly criticizing the Soviet clampdown. Both the Czechoslovak and the Bulgarian governments threatened to withdraw immediately from the Warsaw Pact unless the violence ceased.107 Throughout the crisis, East European officials provided crucial information to the Baltic governments and served as conduits for them to the outside world. Especially noteworthy was the role of Polish Television (Telewizja Polska), whose broadcasts of on-the-scene footage and critical commentary reached more than 60 percent of households in the Baltic states.108

The sharp response of the Democratic Russia movement and many others in the USSR and Europe to the Soviet crackdown sparked dismay in the upper levels of the CPSU about the apparent willingness of pro-democracy activists and ordinary people in Russia and other republics to “find common cause with elements in the Soviet Union that are casting doubt on the future of socialism and the existence of the USSR as a unified state.”109 In a resolution adopted on 22 January 1991, shortly after Soviet troops had forcibly occupied key buildings in Lithuania and Latvia, the CPSU Secretariat (headed by Gorbachev) expressed irritation that “East European officials, who earlier regarded perestroika [in the Soviet Union] as a factor that helped them achieve democratic reforms of their own systems, are now interfering without the slightest hesitation in the USSR’s internal affairs.”110 The resolution stressed the “great importance of ensuring that the [East European] states conduct friendly policies toward us and do not become founts of anti-Sovietism or serve as external catalysts of separatism and centrifugal tendencies in the Soviet Union.” The document stipulated that the Soviet government could “neutralize or at least diminish the anti-Soviet tendencies in the East European countries” by “reestablishing our ‘presence’ in the region” and by using “the export of energy sources to Eastern Europe as the


109 “Postanovlenie Sekretariata TsK Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza No. St-15/2 ot 22.01.91 g.: O razvitii obstanovki v Vostochnoi Evrope i nashei politike v etom regione,” St-15/2 (Top Secret), 22 January 1991, with attached memorandum from the CPSU International Department, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. , D. , Ll. 1–14. The International Department memorandum later on was declassified and published in Izvestiya TsK KPPSS (Moscow), No. 3 (March 1991), pp. 12–17.

110 “O razvitii obstanovki v Vostochnoi Evrope i nashei politike v etom regione,” L. 7.
most important instrument of our general strategy in the region,” if necessary through full-scale embargos.\footnote{111}

Soviet officials who were advocating a much more forceful response to separatist movements in the USSR were unable to persuade the highest leaders to take decisive action. Gorbachev halted the crackdown in the Baltic republics halfway through, stopping well short of the planned imposition of emergency rule and the installation of “national salvation fronts” that would endorse the forcible removal of separatist governments and the imprisonment of leaders and activists who had been seeking independence.\footnote{112} The KGB director, Kryuchkov, had been looking forward to the January 1991 operation as a crucial first step in implementing the full-scale “restoration of order” he had called for in a speech to the Soviet parliament a few weeks earlier. He was stunned and dismayed when Gorbachev called off the repression short of the planned goal. Kryuchkov regarded the turnaround as yet another sign of Gorbachev’s unwillingness to shed blood on the scale Kryuchkov believed was necessary to preserve the union.\footnote{113}

Kryuchkov was even more taken aback when Gorbachev claimed not to have known about the crackdown in advance and not to have authorized it. Documents that became available after the collapse of the Soviet Union confirmed that Gorbachev did indeed authorize the KGB to crack down and was involved in the operation at every stage.\footnote{114} The fact that he halted the repres-

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sion halfway through and publicly denied having known about it did tend, as Kryuchkov argued, to reinforce the widespread public impression in the USSR that Gorbachev was diffident and weak.

Although Gorbachev shifted back to a more conciliatory policy vis-à-vis the union republics in April 1991, he still displayed no willingness to accommodate the Baltic states’ efforts to regain their independence. He warned that the Baltic republics would not survive economically if they broke away from the Soviet Union, and he repeatedly said that only far-reaching autonomy, not independence, could be on the agenda. Even though Soviet leaders did their best to thwart the “intrigues of separatists” in Vilnius who were “as determined as ever to restore the independence of the Baltic republics,” the material and verbal support provided to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by pro-democracy elements in Russia and by the East European governments helped to offset the strong pressure exerted by Moscow. Among other things, the Polish government sponsored an important agreement in the spring of 1991 between Polish Television and the Baltic television services regarding the joint production of programs. This arrangement enabled the Baltic television stations to circumvent the censorship that was reimposed on Soviet-controlled broadcasts in early 1991, thus ensuring that reliable information was available to viewers in the Baltic republics when events came to a head in the summer of 1991.

For a brief while during the hardline coup d’état in Moscow in August 1991, it appeared that the efforts of the Baltic peoples might all go for naught, but the abrupt collapse of the coup fatally debilitated the USSR and ensured that the Baltic states could finally achieve their goal of formal independence. Even if Gorbachev had been willing to use force on a scale large enough to prevent the Baltic republics from seceding – something that is doubtful – the power vacuum that emerged after the failed coup undermined whatever capacity he once had to pursue military options.

8 The Challenges from Russia and Ukraine

Gorbachev’s unwillingness to rely consistently on violence to keep the Soviet Union from unraveling might not have been a fatal problem if the challenges to meetings, from Gorbachev’s conversations with foreign officials, and from meetings between Gorbachev and his advisers.


Official Responses to Ethnic Unrest in the USSR

Central authority had been limited to outlying areas such as the Baltic republics, Moldova, and the Caucasus republics. The loss (de facto or otherwise) of those republics would not have been tantamount to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Far more serious, however, were the challenges posed by Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin exploited the ethnoterritorial configuration of the USSR to try to eclipse the Soviet regime and establish Russia as the center of authority. In the context of the far-reaching liberalization introduced by Gorbachev, the federal structure of the Soviet Union proved inimical to the Soviet regime insofar as it enabled the preponderant “ethnic” actor (Russia) to wage a battle against the central government.117 In the pre-Gorbachev era, no such challenge would have been possible, but in 1990–1991 the situation was remarkably fluid, and Russia’s bid for ascendance posed a mortal danger to the Soviet regime. The greatly disproportionate size and importance of Russia in the Soviet state prevented Gorbachev from easily fending off this challenge. If the union-republics had been of roughly equal size and strength, Gorbachev might have been able to play them off against one another. But the dominance of Russia in the Soviet federation enabled Yeltsin to confront the Soviet government directly.

The danger that Russia posed, however, was to the Soviet regime, not to the Soviet state per se. The ascendance of Russia need not have meant the dissolution of the USSR. Yeltsin was willing to support independence for the Baltic republics and perhaps Georgia and Moldova, but, by all indications, he was hoping to preserve the rest of the union, especially the links with Ukraine and Belarus.118 The disintegration of the Soviet Union ultimately was driven mainly by Ukraine’s bid for independence in the aftermath of the aborted August 1991 coup. Yeltsin initially did not realize how much the coup had changed the prevailing sentiment in Ukraine, and he sought to work out new arrangements for a Slavic union (plus Central Asia), perhaps with Gorbachev kept on as a figurehead. But when a popular referendum in Ukraine on 1 December 1991 resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence, Yeltsin had to change course and abandon further attempts to preserve the union. The result was the Belovezhskaya Pushcha meeting on 7–8 December and the Alma-Ata meeting


two weeks later at which the leaders of the Slavic and Central Asian republics signed accords that formally codified the dissolution of the USSR.

In that sense, Ukraine was the most important “ethnic” contributor to the breakup of the Soviet Union – an outcome that was tinged with irony. During most of the Gorbachev era, proponents of separatism in Ukraine had made little headway, especially in the central and eastern provinces of the republic. Although coal miners in Ukraine's Donets'k Basin and Chervonohrad went on strike in July 1989, they did so in the hope of working with Gorbachev rather than against him. In October 1990, students in Kyiv held two weeks of protests, but they ended their walkout as soon as the Ukrainian prime minister was replaced. Compared to other republics in the USSR, Ukraine overall had been a veritable island of stability in a sea of turmoil. When the Soviet government held a countrywide referendum in March 1991 to gauge support for maintaining the union – the only time a popular referendum of any sort was ever held in the USSR – a large majority of eligible voters in Ukraine cast ballots in favor of “preserving the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation.”

By all indications, this sentiment persisted well into the summer of 1991, just before hardliners in Moscow launched their abortive coup.

The abrupt, far-reaching change of mood in Ukraine in the wake of the failed coup drove the breakup. The political opportunity structure in the republic expanded so much for individuals and groups at all levels that the drive for independence became unstoppable. The Ukrainian parliament swiftly endorsed the new mood by overwhelmingly adopting an independence declaration on 24 August 1991, three days after the coup in Moscow had collapsed. When Ukraine held its republic-wide referendum on 1 December 1991, more than 92 percent of those who turned out (the turnout was nearly 85 percent

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119 See the detailed, province-by-province tabulations in *Radyans’ka Ukraina* (Kyiv), 23 March 1991, p. 1. Two questions were on the ballot in Ukraine. The first, which was asked all around the Soviet Union, was: “Do you believe it is necessary to preserve the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics, in which the rights and freedoms of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?” The second question, which was asked specifically in Ukraine (at the initiative of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet), was: “Do you agree that Ukraine should be part of a union of sovereign states based on the principles of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine?” More than 70 percent of voters in Ukraine answered “yes” to the first question, and more than 80 percent answered “yes” to the second. Only in three provinces of western Ukraine was the “yes” vote relatively low, and in one of these (Ivano-Frankivs’k) the second question still passed by a majority. Everywhere else in Ukraine, the “yes” vote for both questions was overwhelming.

of the total electorate) voted in favor of full independence. Even regions of Ukraine that were predominantly inhabited by ethnic Russians, notably Crimea and Donbas, voted by large majorities in support of Ukraine’s independence. This decisive shift of mood in Ukraine rendered moot any hope Yeltsin might have had of preserving a Slavic union. Even if he had wanted to try to hold the union together by force, the time for that option was long past. It was no longer possible to keep Ukraine in the fold.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed inconceivable before Gorbachev came to power, but one of the consequences of his policies – obviously an unintended consequence – was the growing public perception in the RSFSR that the demise of the Soviet state was inevitable and thus was not worth resisting. Although Russians were not inclined to rise up against Soviet rule, the important thing by the end of 1991 was that all the major social groups in the RSFSR no longer had a stake in the future existence of the USSR and were therefore disinclined to try to preserve it. This, of course, does not mean that a majority of Russians were actively hoping for the demise of the Soviet Union, especially before August 1991. In the March 1991 referendum, Russians voted heavily in favor of preserving the USSR as a “renewed federation of equal sovereign republics.” That formulation was deliberately vague, but the overwhelming vote in support suggested that a large majority were hoping that a union could be maintained.

Even though sentiment in the RSFSR (as everywhere else) changed after the aborted coup in August 1991, the likelihood is that if a referendum had been held shortly after the coup, a majority of Russians once again would have voted in favor of retaining the union minus the Baltic states, Georgia, and Moldova. (Actually, a substantial number of Russians might have been willing to relinquish Central Asia as well, but the Central Asian states themselves were not inclined in that direction.) The point to be emphasized, however, is that support in Russia for the preservation of the Soviet Union was mostly passive. Even the majority of Russians who wanted to retain the bulk of the USSR were not going to take to the streets or engage in other forms of collective action to demand the nullification of the accords signed in Belovezhskaya Pushcha and Alma-Ata.

Conclusions

The declassification of archival materials in the former Soviet Union since 1991 has been highly imperfect, and several of the most important archives in Russia have never been accessible. Even so, the vast quantities of documents that have been released about the Gorbachev period, including notes and transcripts from sessions of policymaking organs, have been invaluable for analyzing how the Soviet government dealt with ethnic conflicts and unrest from 1985 through 1991. Much the same is true of documents released in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, which cumulatively highlight the inconsistency of Moscow’s responses to ethnic unrest.

By failing to take prompt and decisive action to contain mass ethnic turmoil after 1985, Gorbachev effectively deprived himself of the full latitude he needed to use military force in the future. The impact of his inconsistent and irresolute responses to ethnic unrest was compounded by his decision in April 1989 to denounce the violence in Tbilisi. In so doing, he antagonized senior army and KGB commanders, who felt they had been unfairly blamed for an ill-conceived mission. Gorbachev’s repudiation of the violence also changed the expectations of potential protesters in Georgia and elsewhere about the likelihood of encountering repression, giving them greater confidence that defiance would go unpunished. The deterrent effect of the crackdown in Georgia was thus dissipated. Although Gorbachev ordered a large-scale military intervention in Azerbaijan in January 1990 (and did not subsequently disavow it), he was unwilling after that to use repression consistently enough to hold the country together. The crackdown in the Baltic republics in early 1991 was much more limited and halfhearted than the KGB and army had been urging.

Gorbachev’s disinclination to use force with ruthless consistency was a monumental change for a country that had lived under repressive tyranny for seven decades, but it was not necessarily compatible with his desire to preserve the Soviet Union. In Anatomy of Revolution, Crane Brinton points out that if an authoritarian regime begins to liberalize and is then faced with a surge of opposition, a vacillating response is likely to prove disastrous. In instances when the authorities in such countries were “more than half ashamed to use force, and therefore used it badly, so that on the whole those on whom force was inflicted were stimulated rather than repressed,” the entire polity could be destabilized.122 Gorbachev’s limited use of force in the Baltic republics in early 1991 ended up causing a backlash, spurring more people in those republics to support and take part in the main nationalist movements. His hesitancy

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also proved costly in Moscow, where many came to question the wisdom of relying on violence to maintain control.

By contrast, in the one case when Gorbachev authorized the use of overwhelming force – against the Azerbaijani Popular Front in January 1990 – it proved highly effective. The inconsistency of the Soviet government’s use of force elsewhere tended to embolden the opposition and undercut the regime’s own “internal consensus” about the prospects for restoring order.123

A large, multiethnic, authoritarian state like the Soviet Union is apt to be vulnerable to fissiparous pressures unless there is a widespread perception in society that the country’s rulers are willing to use whatever level of violence is needed to hold the state together. Leaders in the Soviet Union prior to Gorbachev were widely seen both inside and outside the USSR as willing to rely on brutal force whenever necessary to maintain public order. That perception, which had been borne out in many instances of repressive violence from the Stalin era on, steadily eroded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, emboldening those who wanted to challenge the Soviet regime. Until the end of 1991, Gorbachev made desperate attempts to keep the Soviet Union intact, but ultimately his aversion to large-scale bloodshed vitiated that goal and spurred the collapse of the USSR.

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