CONCEPTUALIZING THE COLLAPSE: STALIN, GORBACHEV, AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE USSR

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Abstract
A variety of academic studies have endeavored to explain the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics for nearly a generation now. In a modest attempt to revitalize academic discussion on the downfall of Soviet power, this article puts forth an innovative conceptualization of the Soviet collapse by highlighting the findings of some of the most notable scholarly works on this subject to date. Accordingly, this article argues that it is useful to analyze the collapse of the USSR by means of a binary comparison, emphasizing the importance of certain “core policies” that were implemented at the behest of Iosif Stalin and Mikhail Gorbachev which, in turn, led to the institutional development and decline of Soviet power, respectively. As such, in examining the respective reigns and core policies of these two Soviet leaders along with the institutional foundations of Soviet power, this article stresses that perhaps academics can come to more succinctly comprehend the nature of those forces which significantly influenced the rise and fall of the USSR.

Keywords: Stalin, Gorbachev, institutional foundations, reform, Soviet Union

Introduction
25 December 2016 will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Over the course of the past generation, Russia has indeed lost a great deal. Gone are the Communist empire and the superpower status of the Soviet Union. Gone are the Marxist-Leninist ideology, the annual celebratory marking of the Great October Socialist Revolution, as well as the concept of the “Friendship of the Peoples.” In spite of all this, Russia has reconstituted itself into a major geopolitical player on the world stage. Nevertheless, the way back has been a long and arduous one for Moscow. This

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upcoming August will also mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1991 failed coup, when the GKChP (State Committee on the State of Emergency) sought to abort the enactment of the proposed new Union Treaty by removing General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev from power. Why was the attempted coup such an important event? Overall, the 1991 August coup retains significance to this day because it ended disastrously. Still, the putsch arguably succeeded in terms of ensuring the downfall of the last Soviet leader, for in the wake of the failed coup Boris Yeltsin seized the moment of opportunity and rose to political prominence. How though should we conceptualize the collapse of the USSR? To date, scholars have put forth a series of competing explanations pertaining to the Soviet collapse. In a modest attempt to revitalize discussion, this article (by analyzing the findings of some of the most notable scholarly works on this subject to date) argues on behalf of assessing the downfall of the USSR from an altogether unique perspective.

In adhering to an institutionalist perspective, this article posits that the key to understanding the Soviet collapse lays with highlighting the importance of certain “core policies” that were implemented at the behest of two Soviet leaders, Iosif Stalin and Mikhail Gorbachev. The respective core policies of these leaders contributed to the institutional development of Soviet power during the 1930s, as well as its decline over the course of the 1980s. In analyzing a variety of secondary historical sources this article thus argues that Stalin proved to be consequential in terms of laying the institutional foundations of Soviet power by advancing a set of core policies (namely collectivization, terror, and the promulgation of a multifaceted chronicle for the Soviet citizenry to embrace) throughout his reign. Conversely, in advancing his own set of core policies (perestroika [restructuring], the adoption of a more democratic variant of Soviet socialism, and glasnost [openness]) this article further posits that Gorbachev initiated the USSR’s institutional decline. In accounting for the occurrence of the Soviet collapse, this article thus argues that the governing styles of both

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1 See Sakwa (2013, pp.65-69) for an overview of the academic literature concerning the proposed causes behind the Soviet collapse.
2 In regards to Stalin and Gorbachev’s “core policies,” this article stresses their importance in terms of giving shape to the general nature of power dynamics within the Soviet Union. Accordingly, Stalin’s respective core policies notably contributed to the institutional development of Soviet power via the construction of a highly authoritarian sociopolitical system exercising control over most economic activities, while Gorbachev’s respective core policies wrought the opposite effect, spelling the institutional decline of Stalinist-inspired Soviet power dynamics.
Stalin and Gorbachev are integral to comprehending the nature of those forces which sounded the death knell of the Soviet Union a quarter-century ago. This article initially explores several of the leading academic arguments concerning the occurrence of the Soviet collapse. Thereafter, this article discusses Stalin’s role in terms of overseeing the institutional development of Soviet power by analyzing the Soviet leader’s aforementioned core policies. This article then transitions into a discussion pertaining to Gorbachev’s role in orchestrating the Soviet Union’s institutional decline by analyzing an altogether different set of core policies, coupled with the maturation of Gorbachev’s political rivalry with Yeltsin. Finally, in reflecting on the causes behind the Soviet collapse this article argues on behalf of the importance of both institutions and individuals in terms of explaining historical events of such magnitude.

Accounting for the Soviet Collapse

On 17 March 1991 the question, “Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedom of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?” was put to the Soviet populace via referendum at the behest of Mikhail Gorbachev. Out of 148.5 million people, 76.4% answered in the affirmative (Siegelbaum (a)). That said, six of the fifteen union republics did not partake in the March referendum and the Warsaw Pact was disbanded the following month thereafter (Siegelbaum (b); Sakwa 2013, pp. 68-69).

Perhaps the significance of the March referendum can be called into question. Beissinger (2002) contends that the results of the referendum are susceptible to criticism due to the abstract wording of the question itself. Accordingly, the manner in which the question was posed does not clearly reveal as to whether any newly revised USSR would have been unitary or confederal in nature (Beissinger 2002, p. 420). Although Beissinger’s critique here is noteworthy, the wording of the question may well not have mattered so much to the Soviet citizenry after all. In regards to the nature of the USSR’s institutional framework, it can be argued that the Soviet Union was essentially a “federal” state led by a “centralized” party, owing to its ethno-federal structure combined with single party rule (Hale 2008, pp. 96-97; Pipes 1964, pp. 242-243). Moreover, while the Soviet Union espoused the notion of “nationalist in form, socialist in content”

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3 This article does not seek to discount the importance of primary sources. Rather, since a great deal has been written on the subject of the Soviet collapse and scholars continue to debate the causes of this historical event, it is worthwhile to see if a novel argument can be fashioned by analyzing the scholarly findings of a variety of secondary sources.
(thereby alluding to the supremacy of the Party), the constitution nonetheless bestowed upon the Soviet Socialist Republics the right to secede (Hale 2008, p. 97). Finally, it is worth mentioning again that most Soviet citizens who partook in the March referendum were not in favor of the dismantlement of the USSR, based upon the aforementioned results. So, why did the Soviet Union collapse only a few months later?

Scholars continue to debate whether the USSR could have successfully undergone political and/or economic reform. In writing under a pseudonym, “Z” (1990) argued towards the end of Soviet rule that any efforts to reform the system would ultimately fail on account of the Party’s inability to relinquish power. In other words, the structural design of the USSR (consisting of a command economy and guided by a political system emphasizing a strict adherence to Party rule) could not undergo reform (Z 1990). Similarly, Kotkin (2001) argues that Gorbachev’s efforts to transform Soviet socialism into “socialism with a human face” significantly contributed to the collapse by laying bare the shortcomings of communism in comparison to post-World War II western capitalism (Kotkin 2001, pp. 1-3, 171-174). In contrast, Cohen (2004) claims that many aspects of the Soviet system were seemingly revisable. Accordingly, had Gorbachev pursued a different course of action in carrying out his reforms and the 1991 August coup never taken place then perhaps the Soviet leader would have succeeded in revitalizing the USSR (Cohen 2004).

On another note, Sakwa (2013) contends that the Soviet experiment represented a botched attempt at modernization in the sense that although the USSR had been “founded on the notion of emulation of the western form of modernity while claiming to resolve its defects,” such a system of rule nevertheless did not succeed in the end “to find a way of achieving similar goals by different methods” (Sakwa 2013, p. 75). In this sense, the Soviet Union failed to create an “alternative modernity” based on the absence of the “free market,” the establishment of a governing system based on “popular sovereignty,” the eradication of class-based identities, and the adoption of a “revisionist stance in international affairs” (Sakwa 2013, p. 66). But did the USSR fail because of its “limited adaptive potential” (Sakwa 2013, p. 75), or might other forces have largely ushered in the downfall of Soviet power?

Bunce (1999) posits that a unique set of institutional features largely set the stage for the Soviet Union’s downfall. Although in her work she highlights the importance of decisions made by Soviet elites, Bunce emphasizes that the arrangement of certain institutions (which in the past provided structure to the conduct of politics both within the USSR and between the Soviet Union and its
Eastern Bloc counterparts) contributed to its demise (Bunce 1999, pp. 130-136, 141-142). Domestically, Bunce contends that during the latter half of the Soviet era the preeminent power dynamics of Soviet rule (i.e. the unrivaled position of socialism as the guiding ideology to achieving development; the Party’s control over political and economic matters; the merging of the Party and state; and the permeation of the Party’s activities in people’s lives) had weakened considerably in light of the rise of a “homogenized” citizenry, economic malaise, and the Party’s abandonment of terror and endorsement of “stability in cadres” (Bunce 1999, pp. 20-37). To counter these effects, Gorbachev embarked upon a reformist course. In doing so, however, those very forces that had once been disempowered under Soviet rule became empowered due to the USSR’s own institutional design. According to Bunce, the “radial” structure that characterized Soviet-Eastern Bloc relations served to ensure that the introduction of reformist measures in the USSR would quickly spread outward to the satellites (which were completely dependent upon Moscow for their sustained survival) and thereafter blow back into the union once the ruling regimes of the Bloc were overthrown. In this aftermath, nationalist sentiments within some of the union republics became quite pronounced while ruling elites at these levels began distancing themselves from the Party and empowering the national institutions at their disposal in light of the federalist composition of the USSR. Such factors, operating in tandem with a Russian nation which sought to abandon socialism and a Soviet military not predisposed to repressing its own people, ushered in the collapse (Bunce 1999, pp. 38-52, 62-70, 84-101, 112-115, 117, 120).

Generally, Bunce’s argument remains one of the leading academic theories in accounting for the Soviet downfall. That said, this article contends that the Soviet Union had evolved into a formidable state under Stalin’s stewardship and was not destined to eventually collapse. In emphasizing this point, this article (in similar fashion to Bunce’s work) adopts an institutionalist theoretical perspective while simultaneously stressing the importance of decisions made by certain high-ranking political figures. Bearing this in mind, this article contends that the USSR underwent modernization within the confines of a unique set of institutions that were the logical outgrowth of a set of core policies promoted by Stalin during his reign. As a result of such processes, the USSR suffered from a variety of inefficiencies. The Soviet Union though demonstrated itself to be a highly resilient entity throughout the Stalinist and much of the post-Stalinist era. In trying to explain the occurrence of the Soviet collapse, this article therefore argues that Gorbachev (in his efforts to dismantle the Stalinist-inspired institutions of Soviet rule) significantly undermined the durability of Soviet power by implementing his own core policies, thereby leaving the USSR
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vulnerable to breaking apart. Hence, perhaps a productive way to comprehend the Soviet collapse lays with a comparison of the governing styles of the two Soviet leaders who largely oversaw the institutional development and (later during the twilight of the USSR) decline of Soviet power, and deciphering how the core policies of the latter sparked a ruinous unraveling of the achievements realized during the reign of the former.

The Fortress that Stalin Built

In order to comprehend the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is necessary to understand the consequentialness of the Stalinist era. In assessing this historical period from a social scientific perspective, this article posits that Stalin essentially constructed the institutional foundations of Soviet power (heretofore referred to as the “Stalinist Fortress”)\(^4\) by endorsing certain core policies, (namely collectivization, terror, and the promulgation of a state-sponsored chronicle concerning the multi-national composition, history, and global stance of the USSR).\(^5\) In turn, the implementation of such policies ensured that the Soviet Union evolved into a consolidated entity. In initiating discussion, this article commences with the close of the 1920s but not with the intention to discredit Vladimir Lenin’s contribution to the founding of the Soviet Union or the significance of the Russian Civil War (1918-1921). Rather, the Soviet Union had yet to become a consolidated entity in control of a nationally-cognizant populace during its first decade of existence. Furthermore, the policies which spurred the rise of the Soviet Union were primarily instituted during the 1930s under Stalin’s rule.

Tilly (1985/1992) describes the state-building process as a type of violent competition between rival states for political supremacy (Tilly 1985, pp. 169-191; Tilly 1992, pp. 96-126.). In a sense, the Russian Civil War can thus be conceptualized as the onset of the Soviet state-building endeavor, with one entity triumphing over another. Yet it would be wrong to assume that the state-building process simply ended with the close of the civil war, for the Bolsheviks

\(^4\) In utilizing this phrase, this article draws upon Joravsky (1985) and Viola (1987) who speak of a “fortress mentality” and “siege mentality” in the Party in regards to not tolerating debate, as well as the Party’s outlook in the aftermath of collectivization, respectively. This article also takes into consideration the “philosophical slogan” of the Stalinist era regarding the “storming” of “fortresses” as noted by Cohen (1971) and referenced by Viola (1987) (Joravsky 1985, pp. 93-113; Viola 1987, pp. 33, 209, 214; Cohen 1971, pp. 79, 266, 314-315).

\(^5\) See Sullivan (2013, pp. 457-458) for a similar argument about Stalin’s consequential role in terms of overseeing the development of the Soviet Union.
at that time did not exercise much authority over the vast lands of the former Russian empire. Lenin also halted the policy of War Communism in the aftermath of the civil war because it had devastated agricultural production and angered the peasantry. In the early days of Soviet rule the Bolsheviks were essentially forced to institute the New Economic Policy because they could not dominate the peasantry (Viola 2007, pp. 7-8). Bearing this in mind, it is noteworthy that the nature of economic relations between the Party and the peasantry during the 1920s was basically unsustainable, for “Z” (1990) contends that the intolerant political nature of the Bolsheviks rendered the New Economic Policy a temporary arrangement. In other words, it was but a matter of time before opponents of the NEP in the Politburo would gain the upper hand over its supporters because had industrialization occurred under the guise of the NEP then the Party would have eventually had to compete for power with an autonomous force in the peasantry (Z 1990, pp. 305-310).

Service (2005) contends that Stalin sought to do away with the NEP mainly through reliance on coercion (Service 2005, p. 253). In seeking to collectivize the countryside, Stalin called upon Party loyalists (deemed the “25,000ers”) along with the OGPU (later NKVD) secret police to partake in this endeavor (Viola 1987, pp. 36-120). In the end, the collectivization drive was instituted in an extremely violent manner, resulting in the deaths of millions of peasants (Fitzpatrick 1994, pp. 48-79). In liquidating the peasantry, confiscating their lands, and coercing them into working for the state on collective farms, the Party managed to quickly undergo industrialization. The Soviet state’s application of violence through collectivization (operating in tandem with industrialization) can thus be perceived through an ideological prism. Yet Stalin also implemented this core policy so that the Bolsheviks could assert nearly complete authority over the peasantry. The end result, however, was the creation of a command economy equipped with a multitude of shortcomings (Lewin 1993, pp. 272-284; Yanowitch 1977). Still, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this new economic system was the speed at which it had been built. For in spite many obstacles, the USSR had successfully completed its initial five-year plan by 1933 (Kuromiya 1990, pp. 287-288).

In furtherance of the state-building process, Stalin relied upon another core policy, terror, to cow the Soviet population into submission. By institutionalizing terror, Stalin succeeded in cementing control over society by atomizing the populace. As an instrument of rule, it is worth emphasizing that this policy was not founded by Stalin. As Applebaum (2003) notes, the usage of terror by the secret police or Cheka predated the Stalinist era (Applebaum 2003, pp. 8-9). That said, the Stalinist regime empowered successor organizations at the expense of
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the rest of society. In analyzing this core policy, it is tempting to start with 1 December 1934. After all, it is well-known that on this particular day Sergey Kirov, a high-ranking member in the Politburo, was murdered under mysterious circumstances. Although the exact details of the Kirov murder remain murky, it is clear that Stalin utilized Kirov’s death as a pretext to institute martial law, unleash the secret police, and liquidate the Party leadership (Conquest 1991, p. 37; Khlevniuk 2009, p. 127). The GULAG, the show trials of former leading Party figures, and the purging of the Red Army high command during the 1930s came to comprise the most prominent features of Stalin’s purges. The focus of our analysis here, however, concerns terror with a lower-case “t.”

Terror was first employed by Stalin against the kulaks during the Party’s dekulakization campaign of 1929-1932. Those people designated as such were usually arrested or rounded up by the authorities and deported to the remote lands of the USSR, where most survivors were forced to live out their remaining days in deplorable conditions (Fitzpatrick 1994, pp. 54-59; Viola 2007). Thereafter, the employment of terror became even more widespread with Stalin’s elevation of the secret police to an organization capable of operating above the law. Stalin crafted a social environment in which his acolytes could arrest people on false charges, elicit confessions through torture, and do away with virtually anyone.

The GULAG also served as a reservoir of slave labor from which the Soviet Union could draw upon to support its industrialization drive. The economic gains though derived from the GULAG labor force are questionable (Lazarev 2003, pp. 189-197). Still, terror contributed to the state-building process, not so much by providing the Soviet Union with slave labor but by denying civil society the ability to flourish. During the Stalinist era, the Soviet power structure decimated any person who sought to criticize it. Consequently, the best and the brightest in the arts, sciences, and other professions were by and large removed from their positions, ridiculed in their professional fields, and/or liquidated by state agents, only to be replaced by Stalinist sycophants. Yet Stalin did not stop with targeting the intellectual class. In propagating the notion of evil-doers hiding amongst loyal citizens within society, Stalin also set the stage for terror to be disseminated throughout the wider populace. The General Secretary’s endorsement of terror touched off a whirlwind of fear and social anxiety, sowing trepidation within the minds of ordinary people. Soviet citizens could be reported to the secret police by covetous friends, jealous neighbors, ambitious administrators in need of fulfilling quotas, or work colleagues for speaking out

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6 Fitzpatrick (1999) defines “terror” as a type of coercive political instrument which ensures that ordinary people are “subject on an unpredictable but large-scale basis to arrest, execution, and other forms of state violence” (Fitzpatrick 1999, p. 190).
By institutionalizing terror, the Stalinist regime therefore molded the Soviet Union into a highly authoritarian system capable of silencing virtually all dissent.

Lastly, Stalin orchestrated the Soviet Union’s social development by spearheading an effort to solidify a collective consciousness within the minds of Soviet citizens. The Soviet state sought to promote a type of chronicle, highlighting the multi-national composition of the peoples, a shared history, and the global stance of the USSR. During the early Soviet era, the Bolsheviks tasked themselves with drawing up the USSR’s borders. In analyzing this effort, Hirsch (2005) challenges the conventional wisdom that the Soviet Union’s borders were designed purely according to an imperialist blueprint. In contrast, the Bolsheviks were debatably just as interested in advancing their respective ideological aims. In the 1920s, Lenin contracted with ethnographic researchers of the imperial establishment to conduct a census throughout the Russian empire for the purpose of categorizing peoples. From the onset of Soviet rule, the Bolsheviks thus sought to govern over peoples of various nationalities and develop them. In turn, they endowed such groups with the privileges to speak their native tongues and practice some of their cultural traditions within their ancestral homelands. The Bolsheviks bestowed autonomy upon such nationalities according to the logic that assisting them with the development of national consciences would gradually permit them to embrace the tenets of Marxism-Leninism (Hirsch 2005, pp. 4-10, 21-61, 101-144).

The Soviet Union was designed in such a way so that the newly minted Soviet Socialist Republics (“union republics”) were to be governed by titular nationalities (since SSRs were endowed with their own governing institutions). The Party oversaw the “institutionalization of nationhood and nationality” by drawing boundaries and empowering titular national ruling elites through its policy of korenizatsiia [“nativization”] during the 1920s and 1930s (Brubaker 1996, pp. 28-39; Slezkine 1994, p. 433). Slezkine (1994) and Brubaker (1996) further contend that the USSR went so far in terms of developing national identities that the Soviet government codified citizens as members of ethnic groups with the introduction of a domestic passport regime in the 1930s (Slezkine 1994, p. 444; Brubaker 1996, p. 31). Brubaker also argues on behalf of the notion that the idea of a “Soviet People” was portrayed as a type of “supranational” identity which coexisted alongside a variety of other “sub-state” national identities that had been officially assigned by the government (Brubaker 1996, p. 28). During the mid-1930s, however, Stalin began trumpeting the Russian nation as being “first among equals” in comparison to all of the other nationalities of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union’s state-
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Sponsored glorification of the Russian nation did not take place at the expense of all of the other national minorities, for the USSR during Stalin’s rule and throughout the post-Stalinist era openly heralded the concept of the “Friendship of the Peoples” and endorsed the public display of “national cultures” (Martin 2001, pp. 432-461).

Stalin also sought to restrict interpretations of Soviet history. In the latter half of the 1930s, Leon Trotsky penned a critique of Stalin’s rule. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky depicts Stalin as the “Soviet Thermidor” (Trotsky 1972, pp. 86-114). Shortly thereafter, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union published *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Short Course* (1939), a distorted interpretation of the early Soviet era. In discussing the 1930s, *Short Course* contrastingly depicts Stalin as a vigilant leader focused on the home front, with Trotsky and others trying to disrupt his efforts. In the end, the book portrays Stalin as the watchful steward of the USSR, guiding the country along to modernity, and champions the notion of a triumphant Party fulfilling the task of developing Soviet socialism (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1939, pp. 280-352). In summarizing the main points of *Short Course*, it is noteworthy that (owing to the formative time in which this work was introduced to the Soviet public) its distribution arguably served to further refine the contours of the Soviet chronicle by amplifying citizens’ interrelated nature.

The last facet of the Soviet chronicle concerns the global stance of the USSR under Stalin. Soviet foreign policy during the 1930s was mainly characterized by isolationism. This was so because Stalin early on advanced the cause of “socialism in one country” (Service 2005, p. 136; Cohen 1971, pp. 147-148). Perhaps Stalin was attracted to this doctrine because it bided him time to implement his other core policies. On this point, such a foreign policy arguably fit nicely with Stalin’s fomenting of domestic threats. But Stalin also harbored a negative outlook towards the West in general, grounded in his own understanding of international relations. Service (2005) provides a window into Stalin’s views on foreign affairs by highlighting some of the General Secretary’s remarks made in a famous speech which he delivered in 1931 at a conference (Service 2005, p. 272). Similarly, Zubok (2007) argues that in addition to his “dark, mistrusting mind and cruel, vindictive personality,” Stalin’s conceptualization of international relations was primarily realist in nature, coupled with some revisionist aspects (as displayed in Stalin’s desire to seek out opportunities to expand the USSR’s imperialist hold over Europe) (Zubok 2007, pp. 16-21). In depicting Western powers as the enemies of Soviet socialism, Stalin therefore further contributed to the evolution of the Soviet chronicle by driving a stake
between the USSR and the West. Taken together, by adhering to a governing style characterized by extreme violence, treachery, paranoia, and a wanton disregard for human life for nearly a generation, Stalin presided over the construction of the institutional foundations of Soviet power. By the twilight of Stalin’s rule, the Soviet Union had become a highly authoritarian political system exercising a substantial degree of control over most social and economic activities.

**Storming the Stalinist Fortress**

By invading the Soviet Union in June of 1941 Nazi Germany sought to destroy the Stalinist Fortress and conquer the USSR. As fate would have it, however, Soviet military forces triumphed over their adversaries and dealt a devastating blow to Fascism with the USSR’s victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). That said, the first attempt to overhaul the Stalinist Fortress from within also ended in failure. During his tenure as First Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev sought to expose the crimes of the Stalinist regime through his destalinization campaign, as well as inject new life into the Party by proposing fixed terms in office for apparatchiks. In response, the defenders of the Stalinist Fortress shook Khrushchev off by ousting him in a coup (Kotkin 2001, pp. 37-38). As such, the notion of reform went into a period of hibernation with the First Secretary’s removal.

Yurchak (2005) notes that although the period associated with Leonid Brezhnev’s rule is widely perceived as a time of zastoi [“stagnation”], the time during which Brezhnev served as General Secretary only came to be seen as such after Gorbachev came to power, on account of the notion that reform by then had come to be seen as necessary. Furthermore, at no time during the Brezhnev era did the system appear susceptible to collapse because “authoritative discourse” within the USSR (consisting of “rituals” and “performatif acts” to demonstrate the resiliency and legitimacy of Soviet power) had not yet come under reevaluation (Yurchak 2005, pp. 1-33). The Soviet Union under Brezhnev was also successful in cloaking the country’s economic overreliance on producing heavy industry outputs due to the substantial revenues derived from the sale of oil reserves (Kotkin 2001, pp. 15-17). Thus, Brezhnev’s reign is best conceptualized as a time in which the Party decided for the most part to keep

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7 See Service (2005, pp. 592-595) for a discussion on Khrushchev’s destalinization campaign and its aftereffects. See also Dyker (2013, pp. 8-9) for a discussion on how Khrushchev’s assault against the Soviet apparatchiks led to his political downfall.
the institutional foundations of the Stalinist Fortress intact. Yet with Brezhnev’s passing and Gorbachev’s eventual ascendancy to the helm of power the notion of reform would go on to assume pronounced importance in an economic and political sense once again.

Following the death of Stalin, it is important to emphasize that the USSR’s institutional foundations began to undergo some modifications. Zimmerman (2014) argues that the practice of terror largely became deinstitutionalized in the early post-Stalinist era and (as a consequence) the future losers of high-level political contests did not (on account of their losing) forfeit their lives (Zimmerman 2014, pp. 130-131, 137). In addition, the Party in the post-Stalinist era (particularly during the reign of Brezhnev) no longer sought to regularly mobilize citizens in furtherance of state goals. Instead, people were largely permitted to go about their daily lives without state interference, provided that they did not publicly challenge the supremacy of the Party (Zimmerman 2014, pp. 132, 146-148, 154-161).

The Gorbachevian era, however, signaled a drastic break with Stalinism. Gorbachev’s rise to power was spurred by the successive deaths of Soviet leaders Brezhnev (d. 1982), Yuri Andropov (d. 1984), and Konstantin Chernenko (d. 1985), as well as other figures such as Mikhail Suslov (d. 1982) and Dmitry Ustinov (d. 1984). The passing of the “Old Guard” therefore paved the way for a new generation of leadership (Kotkin 2001, pp. 49-57, 176). Upon assuming office, the new General Secretary’s governing style began exhibiting many differences from that of his predecessors. In particular, Gorbachev sought to alter the workings of the command economy, initiate a change in the conduct of Soviet politics within both the domestic and international arenas, and revise the Soviet chronicle. Over time, such modifications weakened the institutional foundations of Soviet power. Hence, by implementing his own set of core policies (perestroika, democratic Soviet socialism, and glasnost), this article posits that Gorbachev presided over the USSR’s institutional decline.

The command economy played an integral role in overseeing the industrialization of the USSR. The fact of the matter though is that such a system was incapable of maintaining pace with the West after nearly three decades of intense competition. In spite of its early successes, the USSR had significantly fallen behind the West economically, making it out to be a lagging superpower

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8 Still, it is noteworthy that after Khrushchev’s ouster, the Party did not engage in a “reversion to full Stalinism,” for “terror” was never institutionalized by Brezhnev to the extent that it had been under Stalin (Service 2005, p. 595).
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(Treisman 2011, pp. 13-14; Brown 2007, p. 6). In particular, industrial production had slowed down considerably in the post-Stalinist era while agriculture never really rebounded from the devastating effects of collectivization (Dyker 2013, pp. 3-7). Gorbachev firmly believed that the Soviet Union needed to undergo reform. In attempting to revamp the Soviet economy, he sought to allow for some level of market incentives to stimulate production levels. Such hopes turned out to be unrealized on account of unforeseen consequences. One of Gorbachev's economic directives was the 1988 “Law on State Enterprises,” designed so that Soviet industries could both fulfill production quotas and (upon doing so) make a profit by choosing what to produce and at what rate afterwards. Not everything worked out so well, however, for while prices remained under state control managers (who were now beholden to their workers on account of this law calling for the holding of elections) kept raising wages, leading to inflation and the weakening of the Soviet economy (Treisman 2011, pp. 16, 32). Other shocks (such as the decline in world oil prices during the 1980s, the Soviet government’s decision to borrow a substantial amount of funding from the West, and Gorbachev’s restrictions on the production and sale of alcohol) took their toll as well, causing the USSR to incur substantial financial losses (Treisman 2011, pp. 14-15, 31). Yet in proclaiming perestroika as the solution to the Soviet Union’s malaise and implementing unsound economic directives of his own, Gorbachev began calling into question the long-term feasibility of the command system, thereby kick-starting the process of chipping away at the Stalinist Fortress.

On the domestic scene, Gorbachev strove to recast the USSR’s Stalinist-inspired brand of Soviet socialism into his own version of “socialism with a human face” (Kotkin 2001, pp. 2-3). Perhaps his greatest achievement proved to be the revitalization of civil society. Gorbachev encouraged Soviet intellectuals to provide substance to what he referred to as the “blank pages” of history (Nove 1990, p. 37). But in order for this to happen, civil society had to be permitted to express its voice, thus entailing a need on behalf of the Soviet leadership to refrain from utilizing terror as a political instrument. Surprisingly, Gorbachev’s revitalization of civil society surpassed even that of Khrushchev’s destalinization campaign, setting into motion a countrywide debate on a variety of controversial issues under glasnost (Taubman & Taubman 1990; Nove 1990, pp. 73-102, 191-223). Gorbachev further demonstrated his penchant for change by releasing dissident Andrey Sakharov from internal exile, initiating shake-ups within the Party at the regional and local levels, and overseeing the founding of the Congress of People’s Deputies which selected membership in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (Treisman 2011, pp. 14-17). Overall, Gorbachev was willing to move towards democracy due to his belief in the need to revise Soviet socialism.
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Soviet foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States and Europe during the Gorbachevian era was also revolutionary in nature (particularly in comparison to Stalin’s isolationist and belligerent stance towards the West throughout much of his reign) (Zubok 2007, pp. 316-317). The Soviet government’s response to the mass protests across Eastern Europe during the autumn of 1989 reveals Gorbachev’s inherent belief in a more democratic variant of Soviet socialism. Historically, Khrushchev and Brezhnev felt compelled to violently suppress the popular uprisings in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). When faced with a similar situation in 1989, however, Gorbachev did not respond in kind. Instead, the Soviet leader held firm to a foreign policy based on “noninterference” in this instance, arguing on behalf of the principle that Europeans should be permitted to resolve their own political matters. In pursuing such a course of action, Gorbachev though forfeited a hard-won prize in terms of realist geopolitical thinking, in return for what amounted to only short-lived fanfare from the West (Zubok 2007, pp. 321-330).

It is somewhat difficult to explain why Gorbachev, a product of the Soviet political establishment and a former pupil of Yuri Andropov, pursued such policies at home and on the international stage. Did Gorbachev truly understand the significance of what he was doing? Or did he only come to comprehend the consequences of his actions when it already had become too late to reverse course? To explain Gorbachev’s democratizing impulse is no easy matter. Perhaps the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl in 1986 served as a catalyzing moment in his mind, thereby causing him to embrace a reformist agenda (Hosking 1990, pp. 128-129; Kotkin 2001, pp. 67-68; Brown 2007, p. 11). Or maybe he was simply an ineffective leader, in the sense that his personal idiosyncrasies wrought policy blunders (Zubok 2007, pp. 311-321). On this point, Zubok (2007) argues that while Gorbachev fashioned himself as an “idealized Lenin” he turned out to be (in contrast to Stalin) a poor “state-builder” (Zubok 2007, p. 315). Yet Gorbachev’s disapproval of Stalin’s system of rule also likely figured prominently into his decision-making calculus. Kotkin (2001) notes that Gorbachev could not abandon his reformist measures amidst those moments of revolutionary change, for doing so would have tarnished his “international reputation” and challenged his personal beliefs (Kotkin 2001, p. 177). By valuing the promise of reform over a reliance on brute force, Gorbachev thus threw caution to the wind. In retrospect, it appears that Gorbachev did not adequately gauge the degree to which the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe had grown illegitimate in the eyes of their citizens, which in turn rendered the ruling elites there vulnerable to overthrow absent military support from Moscow (Brown 2007, p. 4).
Through his encouragement of the revitalization of civil society Gorbachev also shook the very foundations of the Stalinist Fortress by challenging certain facets of the aforementioned Soviet chronicle. Initially, it was thought that the overriding purpose of glasnost was to expose Stalin as an abomination once and for all, so that the USSR could finalize a divorce with the former General Secretary and come to institutionalize a more democratically-oriented political system (Kotkin 2001, p. 70). In this sense, Gorbachev (as Khrushchev had endeavored before him in an effort to reform the Soviet political system) sought to thoroughly discredit his predecessor’s dictatorial governing style (Dyker 2013, pp. 7-8), and he did so by authorizing the publication of a variety of articles in newspapers and journals, exposing the crimes of the Stalinist regime (Hosking 1990, pp. 130-131). Although the Gorbachevian intellectual assault against Stalin’s fictitious portrayal of Soviet history was a commendable development at the time, glasnost turned out to be an unregulated enterprise.

There appears to have been little to no consideration as to whether Soviet citizens (upon learning the truth about the horrors which transpired throughout the course of Stalin’s rule) would be able to cope with the rapid exposure to a plethora of new and highly controversial information. On this point, “Z” (1990) and Kotkin (2001) contend that glasnost weakened the Soviet citizenry’s faith in socialism and delegitimized the Party’s claim to power in the eyes of a more politically aware populace (Z 1990, pp. 324-325; Kotkin 2001, pp. 69-70). Recent research conducted by Sullivan (2013) also indicates that some Russian citizens still evaluate the unstructured public airing of the most appalling features of the Soviet past as destabilizing to the fabric of society (Sullivan 2013, pp. 468-469). Taken together, Gorbachev’s implementation of reformist measures coupled with his rebranding of the Soviet chronicle gravely undermined the system which Stalin had built up over the duration of his reign.

Lastly, in trying to account for the occurrence of the Soviet collapse it is necessary to highlight the significance of elite feuding, as well as the occurrence of the 1991 August coup. Looking back, Stalin proved to be extremely effective at remaining in power. Gorbachev, in contrast, showed himself to be a much less competent potentate, and this is most evident in the staging of the coup itself. Moreover, the significance of the attempted coup should not go understated, for in its aftermath certain ruling elites (most notably in the Ukrainian SSR) assessed the value of adhering to a possibly “exploitative” future governing
system and ultimately opted in favor of secession (Hale 2008, pp. 134-137). That said, although elite decision-making in the aftermath of the failed coup clearly influenced the USSR’s fate, what also merits our attention here is how Boris Yeltsin came to overtake Gorbachev.

In focusing on the late Soviet era, Treisman (2011) traces the origins of the volatile relationship between Gorbachev and Yeltsin back to a public falling out. Prior to the souring of relations between these two political heavyweights, Gorbachev had initially awarded Yeltsin the post of First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, owing to his admirable work ethic and endorsement of *perestroika*. But Yeltsin overstepped his bounds by criticizing Gorbachev’s alleged lack of support for the reformist cause at a meeting of the Central Committee in October of 1987. Gorbachev exacted his revenge by demoting and humiliating Yeltsin. Yet Gorbachev’s decision proved to be extremely shortsighted, for his abrasive handling of Yeltsin transformed an unpredictable ally into an embittered foe (Treisman 2011, pp. 17-19).

Upon regaining his political footing, Yeltsin (who would go on to be elected President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in June of 1991) began undermining Gorbachev. In June of 1990 the RSFSR issued a public declaration of “sovereignty,” argued on behalf of Russian over Soviet laws, and issued ownership claims over “Soviet property” in Russia (Hale 2004, pp. 189-190). To further complicate matters (and in response to the Soviet leader’s loosening of societal restrictions), an outpouring of protests flowed amidst the backdrop of this feud. Sensing a change in the popular mood, Yeltsin tapped into the prevailing Russian nationalist sentiment (Beissinger 2002, pp. 390-401, 409-411). In the end, however, it was the attempted coup that spurred Gorbachev’s undoing. For in its aftermath, he could neither turn to Yeltsin nor mend ties with those who had just sought to oust him. Gorbachev thus found himself to be alone, standing amidst the rubble of the Stalinist Fortress.

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9 Furthermore, Hale (2004) argues that in declaring independence, Ukraine’s leaders did not seek to empower the Commonwealth of Independent States, owing to a lack of “trust” between them and Yeltsin (Hale 2004, p. 190).

10 That said, it is important to highlight that other factors were influencing Yeltsin’s decision-making calculus at the time. On this point, Treisman (2011) argues that many of Yeltsin’s policies were in line with Russian public opinion; that Yeltsin tried to find common ground with Gorbachev regarding the institutional makeup of a reformed Soviet Union even after the failed coup; and that on account of the collapsing economy, bureaucrats appropriating state-owned resources, and Ukraine’s declaration of independence, Yeltsin had to act quickly (Treisman 2011, pp. 170-175).
What if the 1991 August coup had somehow been averted? Realistically, even if an attempted coup had never been staged, Gorbachev would still have faced a steep uphill climb, with him literally having to start from the beginning in constructing new governing institutions to hold everything together (assuming the new Union Treaty went into effect). After all, the new Union Treaty would have replaced the word “Socialist” with “Sovereign” in the USSR’s title, as well as granted legal supremacy and control over natural resources to the union republics (Siegelbaum (b)). The fact of the matter though is that an extralegal move was made against Gorbachev prior to the ratification of the treaty, which resulted in making the Soviet leader into the last of his kind. The significance of the 1991 August coup therefore lays not with its occurrence, but with when it transpired. It happened at a time when Party rule had become thoroughly discredited, the institutions of Soviet power had significantly declined, and Gorbachev was at his most vulnerable. Hence, the Soviet collapse was not a preordained event, but the outcome of a series of policies endorsed by a well-intentioned leader who (in his efforts to reform the USSR from within) inadvertently imperiled the system and triggered a violent backlash, thereby assuring his own political doom.

**Conclusion**

This article argues that perhaps a productive way to conceptualize the Soviet collapse is by means of adhering to an institutionalist perspective and engaging in a binary comparison concentrating on the governing styles of the two most consequential leaders of the USSR. It is accurate to say that the Soviet Union’s “sprint to modernity had slowed to a crawl” by the onset of the Gorbachevian era, particularly in comparison to the United States (Treisman 2011, pp. 13-14). However, the USSR was not on the precipice of collapsing under its own weight since it unquestionably remained a superpower within the international system, irrespective of its many shortcomings. Bearing this in mind, it is rather unsurprising that Gorbachev’s assault on the Stalinist Fortress angered hardline dissenters (who eventually sought to put a stop to his reformist measures by force), for Gorbachev sought to undo a system of rule which had (in spite of tremendous sacrifices) nonetheless engendered many noteworthy advancements in terms of education, mathematics, industrial development, space exploration, and military power (Treisman 2011, p. 13). Yet the 1991 August coup seemingly could not have averted the downfall of the Soviet Union, for the attempt to maintain power through brute force only further discredited the Party’s political legitimacy at a time when it had seemingly reached its nadir. Situated in a post-failed coup political atmosphere, Yeltsin decided to abandon
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all hope for the ratification of a new Union Treaty. In the end, Gorbachev ultimately suffered a tragic fate because he was a quixotic leader. He ardently believed in the idea that the Soviet Union could undergo reform, so long as he willed it. However, his utopian dream of perfecting Soviet socialism devolved into a real-life nightmare due to the rigidness of the Stalinist Fortress, coupled with his inability to manage the changes which he himself had set into motion. Hence, Gorbachev’s implementation of reformist measures triggered the weakening of the system, the staging of the 1991 August coup, and his own political ruin.

To argue that the Soviet collapse was an historical inevitability or simply one man’s fault is wholly insufficient. Neither Stalin nor Gorbachev ushered in the end of Soviet rule on their own accord, and the USSR was not predestined to suffer a total collapse. Academics should also refrain from explaining the occurrence of the Soviet collapse by proclaiming that the system suffered from “contradictions” (Sakwa 2013, pp. 66-68). After all, no social order is beyond reproach and the USSR managed to overcome various ordeals despite its inconsistencies. Instead, this article has sought to account for the Soviet downfall by analyzing the core policies endorsed by Stalin and Gorbachev, coupled with the consequences of the latter’s well-intentioned yet haphazard implementation of reformist measures. Gorbachev sought not simply to reform the USSR but to build it anew according to a different blueprint. Perhaps a fruitful way to conceptualize the Soviet downfall thus entails envisioning a failed attempt at carrying out a controlled demolition.

In closing, this article stresses the notion that institutions clearly matter in terms of explaining various phenomena, but so do those individuals in positions of power who are tasked with adhering to those institutions. In a modest attempt to explain the occurrence of the Soviet collapse, this article therefore argues on behalf of the importance of both institutions and individuals. Specifically, by advancing his own set of core policies, Stalin was able to largely pave the institutional foundations of the USSR. The exercise of power during the Stalinist era (and throughout much of the post-Stalinist era) thus flowed according to the contours of institutions sculpted during the course of his reign. Decades later, Gorbachev’s assault (which was brought about by the implementation of his own set of core policies) against the Stalinist-inspired features of Soviet rule destabilized the very exercise of power. Based upon this argument, it would

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11 Hale (2008) argues that Yeltsin supported the notion of a new Union Treaty even after the failed coup. However, the decisive factor which influenced Yeltsin to opt for the dissolution of the USSR was the Ukrainian SSR’s push to secede (Hale 2008, pp. 112-114).
seem that even though the USSR was not destined to suffer a collapse, it could not successfully undergo reform either (or at least not without jeopardizing its own survivability). As such, the Soviet collapse stands today as an informative example of the complexities involved in endeavoring to alter the flow of power within an institutional context.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my thanks to the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at The George Washington University in Washington DC, the A. Michael Hoffman Dissertation Fellowship program, and the following members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Henry E. Hale (The George Washington University); Dean/Dr. James Goldgeier (American University); Dr. Henry Farrell (The George Washington University); Dr. Muriel A. Atkin (The George Washington University); and Dr. Eric M. McGlinchey (George Mason University). I would also like to express my gratitude to the reviewers of East European Quarterly for their comments and suggestions on how to improve my work.

**Funding Source**

The research presented in this article was conducted as a portion of my dissertation study while serving as a doctoral candidate at The George Washington University in Washington DC. I am very grateful for the generous financial support provided through the Hoffman Dissertation Fellowship (2011-2012). This funding source did not assume any role in the design of my work.
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