

## Ethnic conflict in the Soviet Union and its successor states

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### INTRODUCTION

The Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 ill-equipped to govern a multi-ethnic state. Marx had seriously underestimated the strength and durability of nationalist feeling in the modern world and most Russian Marxists expected economic development to bring with it the growth of class consciousness and the decline of any sense of ethnic solidarity. Moreover, unlike their Austrian counterparts, Russian Marxists were not forced to temper their theoretical assumptions about nationalism through practical experience of competing with nationalist currents and movements in a more-or-less open political system. Of the two wings of Russian Marxism, the Bolsheviks, more centralist, more authoritarian and, as regards their cadres, more Russian than their Menshevik rivals, seemed the less likely to show any sensitivity or flexibility in governing the various ethnic minorities of the former Russian empire.

Nevertheless, if Marx's theories provided few guidelines for the practical problems of governing the multi-ethnic Soviet State, they did help to legitimise Soviet control over Moscow's far-flung empire. Nineteenth-century empires were in general dominated by a single nation proclaiming its right to a leading and civilising mission because of its material power, its superior culture and the benefits these would bring to the other ethnic groups within the empire's frontiers. By the mid-twentieth century such arguments could no longer justify the rule of one nation over others. For the rulers of the USSR the existence of a supra- and anti-nationalist ideology justifying the rule of a multi-ethnic party was an important factor in the survival in an

anti-imperialist age of what was, territorially, the old Russian empire virtually unchanged.<sup>1</sup> The ability of Marxist-Leninist ideology to combat and compete with nationalist doctrines for the hearts and minds of the Soviet population has always been, and remained until the end of the Soviet regime, very important for the rulers of the USSR. Correspondingly, the discrediting of Marxism-Leninism and the unleashing of democratic forces which took place in the 1987-91 period was bound to have far-reaching centrifugal effects.

Although in 1917 the Bolsheviks paid lip-service to the principle of national self-determination, they reserved this right only to a nation's working class and stressed that the Communist Party, the class's vanguard, alone could speak on the workers' behalf. In fact, force decided which areas of the former Russian empire would come under Bolshevik sway and which would remain independent. Poland fought off a Soviet assault; Menshevik Georgia failed to do so. In the Baltic provinces and Finland, foreign intervention helped to secure victory for Bolshevism's conservative and nationalist enemies, even though Communism had widespread support in these areas, especially in Latvia. Finally, in the mid-1920s, large-scale Islamic resistance to the Soviet regime in central Asia was also crushed, partly through a crafty policy of cultivating the support of local radicals but above all by military means. If a supra-national ideology was one pillar of the Soviet multi-ethnic state, coercion - or control - was from the start a still more important one. None of the Soviet peoples were given, until 1991, any choice as regards membership of the USSR, and force was used ruthlessly against any national group seeking independence. Consciousness that Moscow possessed both the means and the will to repress would-be secessionists was a vital factor in Soviet political stability.

Yet Moscow's policy towards the non-Russians in the 1920s was by no means merely crude and coercive. For this Lenin must take much of the credit. Though deep-dyed in his orthodox Marxist contempt for nationalism, he was no Russian chauvinist and bore no ill-will towards the cultures of the USSR's national minorities. He was genuinely appalled to see arrogant, centralising intolerance developing in the Communist Party officials who made up the new imperial elite and was determined to show both Soviet non-Russians and the colonial subjects of the European empires that the USSR was not Tsarism in new clothes but an

association of equal peoples of varying cultures, races and colours. The need for this demonstration was all the more clear because of the failure of socialist revolution in Europe, the USSR's isolation, and Lenin's desire that the Soviet Union mobilise what was later called the 'third world' to overthrow imperialism's headquarters in Europe and North America.

In theory the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, formed in 1922, was a voluntary association of equal sovereign states which retained the right to subsequent secession. The non-Russian republics were all to be on the USSR's borders, so that secession would not entail chaotic internal boundary changes and population shifts. Each Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) had its own flag, national anthem, legislature (Soviet) and government. The upper house in the Union's Supreme Soviet in Moscow was made up of representatives of the republics. Under the constitution, the Union government dominated some fields of policy, notably foreign affairs and defence, but certain others were largely reserved to the republics. Although the names, number and boundaries of the republics changed slightly over time, the basic federal constitutional system survived intact for seven decades.

### COMMUNIST PARTY CONTROL AND FEDERALISM

From the start much of this federalism was a fraud. The Union was not voluntary and claiming the right of secession was a certain path to a labour camp, if not worse. The Soviets, in theory elected by the local population, were in fact rubber-stamp bodies whose members were nominated by Communist Party officials. Key institutions, such as the army and security police, were tightly centralised. The division of rights and spheres between the centre and the republics was couched in vague legal terms whose meaning was determined by the central authorities. No effective judicial review existed, the courts being totally under the Union Party leadership's control. A federation built on these foundations would have been dominated by the centre in any circumstances: given the fact that the Russian republic was larger in population and resources than all the others put together, Moscow's control was certain.

Probably the most important fact about the Soviet Union's constitution was that whereas the state apparatus was, at least in theory, federated, the Communist Party was not. The Bolshevik

leaders made no bones about the fact that the Soviet Union's ruling party was a monolithic, centralised organisation, governed by the rules of 'democratic centralism' which required absolute obedience to Moscow's commands from its members in the republics and regions. Even in Lenin's lifetime it was the party not the state which had ultimate sovereign power in Soviet Russia, and this was embodied in the supreme authority of the party's Politburo and Central Committee over all other institutions. In the 1920s, particularly after Lenin's death, the party's republican, regional and local committees grew rapidly in power, dominating other government agencies at these levels and providing the institutional base for the rise of Stalin, as party general secretary, to supreme power, a process which further undermined the position of the republican governments.

Yet, except during the oppressive period of Communist control under Stalin, federalism was never a complete fraud. The republics, admittedly to somewhat varying degrees, became focuses for local patriotism and loyalty. This was true even to some extent in central Asia, where 'nations' such as Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan and Turkmenistan were initially largely the product of Soviet administrators' efforts to impose workable territorial boundaries on often nomadic societies of clans and tribes all united in allegiance to Islam. From the outset Moscow was determined to recruit local Communists to fill the ranks of the republican parties and to administer their territories. Especially in the 1920s, but even in the post-Stalin era, Moscow's attitude towards local languages, cultures and schools was considerably less repressive than had usually been the case in the last decades of the Romanov empire.

For a non-Russian ethnic group, having one's own SSR did matter. In 1914, for instance, the Volga Tatars were, economically and culturally, the standard-bearers of Islam in the Russian empire; central Asian peoples, the Uzbeks for example, were well behind them in every way. The reversal of this situation by the 1980s reflected in some measure the fact that Uzbeks possessed their own SSR while Muslim citizens in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), like the Volga Tatars, did not. Equally, when the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh demanded the right to return to the Armenian SSR, this demand was fuelled not only by nationalist sentiment or fear of Azeri pogroms but also by the justified belief that membership of their

own SSR would provide much better protection for their culture, language and heritage. And, in the wake of democratisation and the abortive coup of August 1991, the SSRs provided the institutional platforms from which various ethnic groups staked and won their claims to self-determination.

### STALINIST CONTROL

In the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP) Moscow's respect for local languages and cultures was greater than in any other period of Soviet history but the onset of Stalin's dictatorship dramatically worsened the position of non-Russians. Though the whole Soviet rural population suffered severely under collectivisation, the area worst hit was the largely Russian region north of the Caucasus, together with the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Five million Ukrainian peasants died in the famine of 1932-3. If possible the plight of the Kazakhs, a semi-nomadic people suddenly coerced into joining miserably equipped and poorly administered collective farms, was even worse; between 1929 and 1936 the number of Kazakh households declined from 1.2 million to 565,000. Hesitation by some local cadres in executing Moscow's murderous policies led to purges. Stalin's sense that he did not totally control the party-state machine was one cause of the 'Great Terror' in the late 1930s, during which most of the USSR's political and cultural elite was exterminated. If terror declined on the eve of the war, between 1941 and 1945 a number of nationalities, including the Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans, were deported *en masse* to Soviet Asia at horrific cost in lives and suffering. After 1945 terror continued, bearing down particularly hard on the middle classes and other suspect groups in the annexed territories of the Baltic republics and the western Ukraine.

Terror was not the only element in Stalin's repression of the non-Russians. The Five-year Plans destroyed the considerable element of local economic autonomy that had existed under the NEP. Centralisation, which inevitably meant Russification, was imposed in the cultural and linguistic spheres, while non-Russians were forced to learn crudely distorted versions of their peoples' histories and were in some cases cut off from direct access to their cultural heritages and pushed into the Russian

cultural orbit by the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabets. Stalin aimed to create an inward-looking and monolithic society and to root his regime in a crude and xenophobic mass culture, homogeneous in its values and instincts. Anything that was cosmopolitan, independent-minded or that derived its culture from sources other than the Soviet classroom was to be rooted out. The assault on non-Russian elites, on ethnic religions and traditions, on the old Russian intelligentsia, especially its influential Old Bolshevik cohort, on the Jewish population - all these derived ultimately from the same source.

The relationship between the nationalities problem and telling the truth about Stalin that emerged under glasnost was one consequence of these policies. For much of the Russian intelligentsia 'coming clean' about Stalin was virtually the most important touchstone of Gorbachev's good faith. But telling the truth - or even three-quarter truths - about Stalin was bound to have different effects in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan than it did in Moscow. Powerful nationalist movements have been fuelled by memories more distant and less awful than the Ukrainian famine or collectivisation and terror in Kazakhstan.

### LIMITED LET-UP

Under Stalin's successors, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, pressure on Russians and non-Russians alike was considerably reduced. The end of arbitrary mass terror and the 'thaw' brought much greater freedom of expression, the rehabilitation of parts of national cultures and a less completely twisted interpretation of history than had existed under Stalin. Indigenisation of cadres got under way again, though a solid convention was established that certain key officials in the republics, the most important being the Party Second Secretaries, should generally be Russian, watchdogs over the activities of the 'native' administrations. Ruling through the medium of local elites made it likely that Moscow would have a more sensitive grasp of local needs and feelings, and that its regime would be less offensive to native pride. A sharp look-out was kept, however, for nationalist tendencies among the republican leaderships: the Latvian First Secretary was, for instance, dismissed for this crime in 1959 and the Ukrainian one in 1972. Repression of even potentially

nationalist tendencies among the population remained ruthless, the Brezhnev regime destroying the Ukrainian dissident movement with particular ferocity. The highly centralised Stalinist economic system, tampered with by Khrushchev, was preserved almost untouched under Brezhnev, under whom central planners and all-Union ministries continued to ride roughshod over local needs and sentiment. It was Khrushchev's treatment of the Kazakhs which best illustrated just how ruthlessly the central leadership was prepared to trample on an ethnic minority when it felt that overall Soviet interests so required. The massive Slav immigration into Kazakhstan which resulted from Khrushchev's Virgin Lands scheme turned the Kazakhs into a minority in their own republic. To achieve this, Khrushchev overrode the objections of the Kazakh Party leadership, sacking their republic's bosses and replacing them with Slavs.

There were distinctions between the nationalities policies pursued by Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The former still held to some of the naive vigour and idealism of the revolutionary era. His 1961 party programme proclaimed the old faith that economic development would lead to the rapid erosion of an ethnic sense of identity and to the creation of a truly homogeneous Soviet people. Brezhnev, more conservative and more inclined to listen to those who knew something about ethnic and national realities, confined himself to claiming that an overall Soviet patriotism, as well as culture and values, had come into being and was living harmoniously alongside the pride that ethnic groups legitimately possessed in their own cultures, languages and histories. Brezhnev's overall strategy, which amounted to the satisfaction of the major vested interests and 'trust' in bureaucratic cadres, had an important impact on his treatment of the non-Russian elites. In practice, these elites were given considerable leeway to run their own republics so long as nationalism was kept under control and the local economy's performance was not too disastrous. Liberated from Stalinist purges or Khrushchev's continual shuffling of cadres, free too of a Western-style independent press, judiciary, legislature or public opinion, bureaucrats ruled in an often thoroughly lethargic, corrupt and nepotistic style; and nowhere did corruption, nepotism or the 'sabotage' of the state's economic policy go further than in central Asia.

This was, moreover, not the only worrying development in the non-Russian republics in the Brezhnev era. If stability and inertia ruled triumphant, beneath the surface anti-Soviet feeling remained very strong in the Baltic and western Ukraine, as did the sense of national identity (though not overtly of a specifically anti-Soviet variety) of the Transcaucasian peoples. In central Asia the main long-term concern of the Soviet authorities was that the still overwhelmingly rural, indigenous population was little touched by Soviet culture or values. Demographic trends reinforced this problem. Between 1897 and 1959 the Russian population had steadily increased in relation to other Soviet ethnic groups. Between 1959 and 1979 this tendency was dramatically reversed, at least where Russians were compared with the Soviet Muslim population. By 1979 Muslim birth-rates were over four times those of Russians; indeed, in the 1970s more Muslims than Russians were born in the USSR. Predictions as to future demographic trends are always uncertain but it was reasonable to expect that by the year 2000 roughly 35 per cent of Soviet males of conscript age would be Muslims. The precise long-term political consequences of this demographic trend were impossible to predict but the Soviet leadership under Brezhnev undoubtedly saw the 'yellowing' of the population as a major potential problem for their successors. If the Brezhnev regime had no answer to this problem (or, indeed, to other potential nationalist threats) save increased stress on the nationalities' need to learn Russian, it can at least be said in Brezhnev's defence that his government viewed inter-ethnic tensions more realistically than had any of his predecessors.

## GORBACHEV AND THE LOSS OF CONTROL

When Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded Konstantin Chernenko in March 1985 the nationalities issue was far from being at the top of his agenda.<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev is Russian, and his whole career had been passed within the Russian republic, which may help to explain the insensitivity to the minorities' feelings evident in the early period of his rule. The fact that, to a degree not seen for decades, Gorbachev's Politburo was almost exclusively Slav and overwhelmingly Russian may also in part have reflected the

General Secretary's lack of long-established friends and clients in the republican party machines.

Gorbachev was also to some extent a Russian nationalist, if of course one remembers that in the spheres in which he moved the terms Russian and Soviet were often confused. Among the party elite, the Russian patriot was expected to be loyal to the party and to its definition of socialism, though a key element in the latter's appeal was that it represented the 'Russian way' in politics, economics and social values. Gorbachev's programme was in many ways a nationalist one. Until the 1970s Soviet leaders could still imagine that their country, though no doubt behind the West in many respects, was catching up. Since then Moscow had become aware, however, that the gap was rapidly widening again. Gorbachev's main aim was to reverse this trend. Failure to do so would have offended the leadership's self-esteem and self-confidence, its patriotism, and its faith in the Soviet system. The ability to remain a military superpower on a par with the United States would have been undermined. The price of empire would have become too great to bear, first at the periphery in the form of new advances in Africa or subsidising clients such as the Cubans and Vietnamese, then nearer home as the cost of maintaining political stability in Eastern Europe through subsidy, and where necessary invasion, became prohibitive. Domestic tranquillity would also have suffered as battles to divide a shrinking cake between institutions and regions increased and the desires of the Soviet consumer became further frustrated. Public morale and faith in the Soviet regime would have dropped still further, as would non-Russians' sense that they had anything to gain, either materially or in terms of pride, from membership of the USSR.

After Gorbachev's accession, relations between the centre and the republics revolved around a number of questions. In most republics the language issue, linked inevitably to questions of culture and education, loomed large; so, too, did concern over the environment; history, partly the study of the nations' past as a whole but, and more pressingly, searching for truth about the Stalin era, was also an area of conflict. Looming behind the historical issues discussed with increasing degrees of openness was the still taboo question of the original Russian or Soviet annexation and with it of the whole legitimacy of Soviet power.

Above all, however, what united the Soviet minorities under Gorbachev was the effects of his reform programme itself. To a

great extent the key to stable nationality relations before Gorbachev came to power was inertia. Plenty of potential grievances existed in most republics but their articulation was not only made very difficult through censorship and repression but also seemingly hopeless, given the regime's intransigence on most points. But a Soviet regime which weakened the censorship and held back its policemen; announced an era of openness and public discussion; denounced both Stalin and Brezhnev; issued ringing calls for legality and democracy; and subsequently permitted democratic elections in the Republics: this regime was bound to awaken non-Russian elements critical of many aspects of Soviet rule. For those interested in maintaining control over the nationalities, perestroika and glasnost came to represent a nightmare.

With openness and subsequent democratisation after the republican elections of March 1990, republican governmental and even party institutions became mouthpieces of local nationalist demands. They exposed a key weakness in the Soviet political system. Up to then federalism had undoubtedly contributed to Soviet political stability through its use of national symbols, its co-option of local elites and its concessions in certain fields such as cultural affairs. The price paid in terms of duplication of administrative institutions and ethnic elites' quiet sabotage of some central policies had been well worthwhile. The republics were, however, nations in embryo, with complete institutions of government, national symbols, a legitimate standing in Soviet law and even a right to secession written into the constitution. As the leaders of some of these republics became spokesmen for nationalist movements, the problems of governing the USSR worsened considerably. Early signs of this occurred in Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988, although in this case ethnic antagonisms were inter-republican rather than initially directed against Moscow. This was not the case in the Baltic republics which began their campaign against Soviet power around the same time. With the centre becoming increasingly discredited as a result of economic collapse, Gorbachev's failure to strengthen his position through election, and ultimately the disastrous coup of August 1991, republican elites were well positioned to preside over the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the transfer of power to their own power-bases.

### THE REGIONAL RESPONSE

As vast differences exist between republics, one approach to the minorities issue under and after Gorbachev is to look at each republic, or at least region, separately.

#### The Baltic republics<sup>3</sup>

Latvians and Estonians are traditionally Protestant, their histories and cultures strongly marked by German and Scandinavian influences. These former republics are richer, more industrialised and more urbanised than any others. Within their homelands, however, both Latvians (now roughly half the population of Latvia) and Estonians were threatened by low birth-rates and Russian immigration. Both Latvia and Estonia are historically small, well-defined areas which their indigenous population, like the Lithuanian, has dominated demographically since time immemorial. All three republics enjoyed independent statehood between the wars.

Once glasnost was proclaimed and the issue of Stalin put on the agenda, the position of the Soviet authorities in the Baltic was bound to become difficult. The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, by means of which the USSR acquired Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, was a piece of diplomatic realpolitik unrivalled in its ruthlessness and, as it turned out, its folly. Nothing that happened in the Baltic republics after annexation reconciled their people to Soviet rule, indeed quite the opposite. Moreover, the people, particularly of the two northern republics, tended to look on themselves as aspirant Scandinavians and to see Soviet rule as having robbed them of a high standard of living. To a greater extent than almost anywhere else in the USSR, Russians were generally not only disliked but also despised.

It is not surprising that the Baltic republics regained their independence first. Both morally and in international law there was no question of their right to this independence. In some ways, however, their fate has been similar to that of the European colonies in the Pacific and the latter's recent history teaches useful lessons. It is true that the Fijians (see Chapter 11) were not first granted independence and then twenty years later - like the Balts - re-annexed by the colonial power as a result of a deal with Hitler. Nor was a large proportion of the Fijian

population murdered, deported or forced into emigration. But under colonial rule Europeans acquired large estates in Fiji and imported a huge Indian population to work them, turning native Fijians into a minority in their own country. Upon independence it was natural that native Fijians should seek control over their only ancestral homeland, arguing that the Indians were immigrants whose culture's survival was in any case secured by the existence of a vast Indian motherland to which they could if necessary return. But the slogan of 'Indians go home' in Fiji is no more realistic, or democratic, than the corresponding cry for Ulstermen to return to Scotland, or for Russians to get out of Latvia and Estonia. If the experience of other ethnically divided communities is a guide, stability in the Baltic may in the end require a form of power-sharing with guaranteed control over its own affairs devolved to the Russian community. It will be difficult, however, to sell this idea to Latvians and Estonians just recovering control over their homelands after decades of colonial persecution. But in some ways the most frightening aspect of the ethnic conflict in the former Baltic republics is that it is small beer in comparison to some of the inter-communal explosions which could occur in the bigger republics.

#### Central Asian republics

The contrast between the history of the Baltic and central Asian republics is almost total. In central Asia republican boundaries have almost no historical legitimacy, loyalty traditionally going to clan and Islam. No modern tradition of statehood exists in these areas and the native population, overwhelmingly rural, is far less skilled, educated or interested in national politics than in the Baltic. It is also much poorer and dispersed over a far greater area. The demographic situation is the precise opposite to that in the Baltic republics, with Muslim birth-rates soaring and Russians actually emigrating from the region in large numbers.

When Gorbachev held his referendum on preserving the union in March of 1991, there was an enormous central Asian vote in favour, and the secession of these republics towards the end of 1991 was reluctant, a result of Russian withdrawal more than a desire for independence. Yet it is unlikely that there will be any going back. Central Asian Muslims are in culture, values and history totally different from Russians. Most of them only came

under Russian rule between the 1850s and 1880s, in other words well after Algeria was acquired by France and just before the 'scramble for Africa'. Central Asia's history under Soviet rule has not been happy and plenty of skeletons are buried very shallowly.<sup>4</sup> Already politics in some of these republics, such as Uzbekistan and Tadjikistan is strongly influenced by Islamic parties. The Muslim territories of the ex-USSR are returning to their traditional place in the Islamic Middle East. As in the successor states to the Ottomans, the collapse of empire and its supra-national ideology will leave a great vacuum. States exist but genuine nations possessing historical legitimacy and ethnic homogeneity do not. The rulers of these states are likely to emulate the ruthless attempts made by the leaders of independent countries in the Middle East to create genuine nations out of disparate clans, regions and ethnic groups whose only overarching loyalty is to Islam. Battles over frontiers and minorities are certain, and larger republics will cast a greedy eye on the oil, gas, gold and other riches of their smaller neighbours. The most that one can hope for is that, as in post-colonial Africa, rulers will decide that the bad frontiers created by imperial powers are better than the anarchy that no recognised frontiers would ensure.

Potentially the most dangerous dispute in the region is between the Kazakhs and the Russians. In Kazakhstan the two communities are almost evenly balanced.<sup>5</sup> The Russians predominate in northern and western Kazakhstan where most of the republic's oil, gas and gold deposits lie. The existing demographic balance between the two communities is, however, fragile since the Kazakh birth-rate is four times the Russian one. Not much love is lost between the two races. Twenty years before Khrushchev flooded Kazakhstan with Slav immigrants, Stalin killed more than a quarter of the Kazakh population in his eighteen-month collectivisation drive. Sixteen years before that the imperial army massacred scores of thousands of Kazakhs in the wake of the 1916 rebellion. If democratic politics develop in Kazakhstan these memories will provide powerful ammunition for demagogues. In northern Kazakhstan violence has thus far been avoided between Cossack revivalism on the Russian side and, on the other, the Kazakh Azat movement, which is dedicated to the republic's territorial integrity and indigenous culture. President Nazarbaev presides intelligently over this bubbling volcano, preaching to all the message that Kazakhstan is a

potentially rich country whose economic development depends crucially on inter-ethnic peace. If Kazakhs are inspired to hold back from conflict in the knowledge that the demographic future belongs to them; if Russians can be convinced that their economic lot is better in Kazakhstan than in Russia; then maybe Kazakhstan's peace and unity can be preserved. The odds are certainly against this. A pessimist might compare Russo-Kazakh relations with those between the English and Irish, or indeed to what the latter might be had Cromwell and the famine occurred within living memory.

### Ukraine<sup>6</sup>

The situation of the Ukraine and Belorussia is different again, in that these Slav and largely Orthodox republics, whose languages are close to Russian, were viewed traditionally in Moscow both as possible allies and as potentially the easiest targets for assimilation. These hopes strongly coloured the CPSU's policies on cadres, dissent, religion and language, especially in the Ukraine. Matters were, however, complicated by the fact that whereas the bulk of the Ukraine has been ruled by Russia since the seventeenth century, western Ukraine is not only Catholic but was also annexed at the end of the Second World War in the face of bitter local resistance. Of all the evil legacies bequeathed to the Soviet leadership by Stalin, his annexation of the heartland of nationalism in the western Ukraine was one of the most unnecessary and most dangerous. The existence of this alienated national population, linguistic grievances over increasing russification, environmental disasters (Chernobyl) and, above all, the discrediting of the centre and communism in the wake of economic collapse and the abortive coup of August 1991, led to the Ukrainian ex-communist elites also jumping aboard the secessionist bandwagon, to be joined by Belorussia. A referendum in December 1991 recorded massive support for this move.

It was Ukrainian independence which rang the death-knell of the Soviet Union. With the Ukraine gone, a rump Soviet Union became unthinkable except in the short run. Within the rump Russians would not only have been overwhelmingly dominant, they would also have been left virtually alone with the central Asians, something neither side would have relished. Ukraine's secession therefore catapulted a number of other republics

towards an independence for which they were unprepared and which they would probably not have chosen of their own volition.

The newly independent Ukraine contains 11 million Russians. It includes the Crimea, a region which has a Russian ethnic majority and the main base of the Black Sea fleet. This region was never Ukrainian before Khrushchev handed it over as an anniversary present in 1954 to celebrate 300 years of Russo-Ukrainian union. At present, except in the Crimea, the Russian community in the Ukraine is relatively quiet, in part because it thinks it will be better fed outside Russia. Eventually, however, there might be pressure from Kiev to create not merely a Ukrainian state but also a Ukrainian national-cultural identity. There certainly will be the need for Kiev to 'rationalise' (i.e., close) many of the inefficient all-union factories and mines which employ the Russian minority. It is not hard to anticipate the fanning of popular resentment both by former Communist officials in the Ukraine and by some politicians in Russia. Meanwhile Russian military leaders, in 1985 still naively confident of superpower status, will within a decade be contemplating the loss of most of their Baltic and Black Sea bases, the division of the armed forces and the collapse of their country. This scenario promises trouble. It is very difficult to predict the lines along which Russo-Ukrainian relations will develop after independence. There is relatively little historical hatred between Russians and Ukrainians (at least central and eastern Ukrainians) on which demagogues could play but plentiful room exists for mutual resentment and misunderstanding in the process of separation. It is conceivable that the Crimea could become the Kashmir of Russo-Ukrainian relations, a prospect which is all the more alarming in that in this case it would be the more powerful country which would be opposed to the territorial status quo. In this situation the logic which has driven Pakistan towards the creation of a nuclear deterrent to preserve its territorial integrity might impel the Ukraine to hold on to the weapons it already possesses. At which point there exists the probability of a wasteful arms race and even the dreadful possibility of all-out war.

Relations with Russia aside, the independent Ukraine faces other difficulties. It will have to integrate diverse provinces with three warring Christian churches and two imperial traditions - one Austrian, the other Russian - which have left very distinct

and different marks on contemporary western and central-eastern Ukraine respectively. Chernobyl and the Donbas region are ecological disasters. The government in Kiev will also have to cope with Europe's greatest swathe of rust-belt mines and industries. Donbas miners are half as productive as their equivalents in the Siberian Kuzbas and the Ukrainian coal industry is massively subsidised. Everywhere in Eastern Europe the closure of rust-belt mines and factories presents great political problems, which are exacerbated when it is a government dominated by one ethnic group which is attempting to put workers from minorities out of a job.

### The Transcaucasus

The Georgians and Armenians are, like the Belorussians and (most) Ukrainians, Orthodox Christians but similarities more or less stop there. The Georgian and Armenian languages are totally different from Russian; moreover by the standards of the Baltic, Ukraine or central Asia there are very few Russian colonists in the Transcaucasus. Birth-rates are relatively high and no Georgian, Armenian or Azeri had any reason to fear the extinction of his national culture or to struggle against Russians for jobs in the local party or state apparatus. Historically, relations between the Georgians and Armenians on the one hand and the Russians on the other have been relatively good. There was a considerable degree of local consent to the original union with Russia, and the Armenians in particular have good reason to feel that it was their Russian cousins who saved them from extermination at the hands of the Turks.

The main ethnic conflicts in the Transcaucasus do not involve the Russians directly. For Armenians, it is their conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh which holds their attention. This region in 1979 contained 162,181 people, three-quarters of whom were Armenian. Nagorno-Karabakh is in Azerbaijan and is wholly surrounded by Azerbaijani territory, though parts of it are close to the Armenian frontier. Initially assigned to Armenia in 1920, the area has been under Azerbaijani rule since 1923, which has been the cause of a number of muted protests from the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh over the last quarter-century.

The onset of Gorbachev persuaded some Armenians that long-



held grievances might now be remedied but a monster petition from Nagorno-Karabakh, calling for incorporation into Armenia, was rejected by Moscow in February 1988. For the Politburo, there was no easy solution to this problem. To have refused Armenian demands would have been to poison relations with a traditional friend and to face lasting problems of public order. To have acceded to Armenia's request to annex the region would have infuriated the Azeris and would have invited a spate of demands for similar treatment from other groups equally discontented with the territorial status quo. Arbitrarily to have raised Nagorno-Karabakh's status to that of an autonomous republic or to have subordinated it directly to the RSFSR, also unconstitutional actions if opposed by the Azerbaijani SSR, would have been to risk the impression of bowing to demonstrators' pressure while very probably satisfying none of the parties to the dispute. Moscow responded traditionally by refusing concessions on the territorial issue but directing extra funds to meet the demands of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh in the fields of education, culture and access to the Armenian media. Not surprisingly, these attempts at Russian 'arbitration' did not satisfy the Armenians and violence escalated, exposing in a humiliating manner the hollowness of claims to have created a 'Soviet people'.

Predictably, after the collapse of the USSR, the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia became the first conflict between former Soviet republics to turn into all-out war. The Armenians won the first round in this struggle by driving the Azeris out of Nagorno-Karabakh and conquering a corridor of land between the disputed region and Armenia. No Azerbaijani leadership could, however, accept this result and survive. Baku is therefore counter-attacking in order to regain Nagorno-Karabakh and itself drive a corridor through Armenia to the isolated Azeri province of Nakhichevan. As in some other inter-ethnic conflicts in the former USSR the risk exists that outside powers will become involved. Turkey not only sympathises with the Azeris, a Turkic people, but also has rights recognised by international treaties to uphold the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Meanwhile Muslim Iran, nervous at the prospect of instability and even secession in its Azeri-dominated northern provinces, secretly tilts towards Christian Armenia.

### Moldavia (Moldova)

In Moldavia outside intervention is even likelier than in the Caucasus. The province was annexed from Romania by Stalin in 1940. To secure Moscow's hold, Stalin added to Moldavia a strip of land on the left bank of the River Dniester, most of whose population were Ukrainian or Russian. As Moldavia moved towards independence in 1990-1, the self-proclaimed Trans-Dniester region began to assert its right first to autonomy and ultimately, in 1992, reunion with Russia. As is often the case, an initial conflict over language and historical symbols moved into 'small-scale' inter-communal rioting and murder, and by 1992, into outright war between Romanian-speaking Moldavians and the Slavs of the Trans-Dniester region. Solutions to this conflict are complicated by the fact that 40 per cent of the Trans-Dniester population are Romanian-speakers and more than half of the Russian population lives outside the Trans-Dniester area. 'Ethnic cleansing' is therefore already under way. Both Moldavian-Romanian and Trans-Dniester forces are well supplied from former Soviet arsenals. Neither the Russian nor Romanian governments can afford for domestic political reasons to turn a blind eye to the fate of their co-nationals in Moldavia. The Ukrainian government is as directly though more equivocally involved, unable to ignore the claims of Moldavia's Ukrainian minority but terrified that any assertion of Moscow's power in favour of Russians outside the Russian republic could set awful precedents for the Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The threat of all-out war in the cause of 'frontier rectification' from Romania all the way to the Russo-Ukrainian border is a distinct possibility.

### Russia

The disintegration of the Soviet empire did not follow primarily from the strength of peripheral secessionist movements. In a rather unusual turn of events, the Russian heartland also opted out of the system in 1990-1, and the victorious section of its elite led by Yeltsin was not interested in maintaining empire by force. Whereas the English nationalist identifies wholeheartedly with the Union Jack and gloried in the British empire, the Russian

was always more equivocal in his support for the Tsarist and Soviet empire. In part this is for the simple reason that life under the imperial state, Tsarist and Soviet, has been thoroughly unpleasant for most Russians, who, unlike the English, had never either chosen or controlled the state's rulers. Moreover, unlike most English, the majority of Russians had good reason to believe that they were, in economic terms, losers rather than gainers from empire.

There was also, however, a deeper feeling that the state and its rulers were culturally alien to Russia. The nineteenth-century Slavophiles, on whose ideas so much of later conservative thinking has been based, saw Petersburg's cosmopolitan court and aristocracy, the capital city's western architecture, and the soulless, impersonal rationalism of the imperial bureaucratic machine as deeply un-Russian. When after the revolution there was created a Marxist state which proceeded to destroy the Russian church, village and even language (i.e. Sovspeak) such sentiments grew in force. Represented most famously today by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, they were a powerful factor in the collapse of the USSR. They competed with a more imperial, statist Russian nationalism which gloried in the Soviet Union's superpower status and the size of its dominions.

These two strands of Russian nationalism, mutually exclusive at their extremes, in watered-down form can be found together in individuals, in political parties and in Yeltsin's government. Burdened with the terrible political costs of, first, financial stabilisation and then economic restructuring, both the Yeltsin government and Russia's democratic parties also risk being torn asunder by the question of what support, if any, should be given to the Russian minorities outside the Russian republic. No Russian government can turn a blind eye to the fate of the 26 million Russians who live outside its borders.<sup>7</sup> If, on the one hand, the need for political stability and Western support to achieve economic recovery deters Moscow from extremist nationalism, on the other hand the blows to Russian national pride and self-confidence could in time prove unendurable. The fact that Yeltsin personally and the whole Russian democratic movement can be blamed for undermining the Soviet regime, destroying the Russian empire, and thereby dooming millions of Russians to alien rule is a major extra handicap burdening those

who are struggling to create lasting democracy in Russia. The fate of northern Eurasia at least will depend in large part on how Russian nationalism develops in the 1990s.

Russia itself is a vast country of different peoples, and it is possible that it too will fragment along ethnic lines. Already, Chechen-Ingush and Tatarstan have made efforts to ensure that the disintegration of the Soviet empire does not stop at Russia's borders. Indeed it is just conceivable that even the Russian-majority areas of the Russian republic will fragment, as the Spanish community of South America did in the early nineteenth century and the English-speaking Americans almost did in the 1860s. The odds, however, are against this. Fragmentation would run against the whole grain of Russian history. Moreover, feeling threatened and humiliated by non-Russian neighbours, the Russians are more likely to stick closer together than to risk separation. With Moscow in confusion, local autonomy is often not only desired but also a necessity for effective solutions to local problems. It remains a far cry from this to permanent division of the Russian land. In 1942, for instance, Australia and New Zealand discovered that Britain could no longer defend them and found an alternative protector in the USA. That was the end effectively of Britain's Pacific empire. But it is difficult to imagine Russia's Pacific provinces seeking an alternative protector to Moscow and hard to think where they might find one.

The aftermath of the Ottoman empire's collapse presents worrying possible parallels with events in the former USSR. With the empire gone and its imperial Ottoman ideology discredited, Ataturk reconstituted the Turkish rump-state on a national basis. Turkish nationalism, derided and controlled by the Ottomans, was given free rein. The Kurdish minority, unwilling and unable to assimilate into the Turkish nation, was harshly treated. The empire's collapse ushered in a ferocious struggle for the borderlands and it was Ataturk's victory in this war which won him the charisma that underpinned his republican regime. It is conceivable that amidst the ruins of empire somewhat similar developments could occur in Russia.

It is true that the ex-Soviet officer corps lacks the prestige, political experience and maturity of its twentieth-century Ottoman equivalent. The latter had lived through 150 years of decline before 1914 and, through the Young Turk movement, a

decade of intensive political activity and education in the years immediately before imperial collapse. By contrast, Soviet generals, like their Tsarist counterparts, were narrow military specialists with little political wisdom or experience. The last few years in Russia have, however, forced the army into politics and have begun to teach its leaders the political art. If the initial White generals in 1918 were political children, by 1920 Wrangel was a much more sophisticated politician from a younger generation that had begun to learn the lessons of the revolutionary years. By the time Wrangel came to lead the White movement victory was beyond the generals' grasp. Lenin had seized his opportunity and ruthlessly consolidated the Bolshevik's grasp on power. This time around there are no Lenins. The time for a Russian Ataturk may well come in the 1990s.

Countering this pessimistic scenario is an increasing awareness in late twentieth-century developed societies that empires do not pay. Germany and Japan, defeated in war and deprived of their colonies, learned the lesson that it is the skills and the work ethic of the metropolitan population, not the possession of empire, which is the key to power and prosperity in the modern world. The responsibilities and burdens of empire and great-power military status are more often a liability than an asset. Intelligent young Russian generals may understand this.

## CONCLUSION

On the one hand, obvious benefits could flow from the demise of Communist control in the Soviet Union. The Soviet neo-Stalinist regime was a brutal and incompetent tyranny which criminally mismanaged the country's human and natural resources. In the long term, its demise should allow this vast area of the globe not only to live better itself but also to make the contribution to the world's economic prosperity that the region's vast resources and its peoples' relatively good education warrants. However, it is also clear that the end of the empire has ushered in a period of great instability in relations among the former Soviet peoples. It will require statesmanship of the highest order and a considerable amount of good fortune if any major part of this region is to have a democratic and peaceful future.

## NOTES

- 1 On the transition from Russian to Soviet empire, see R. Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, Mass., 1964.
- 2 R. Karikins, *Ethnic Relations in the USSR*, Winchester, Mass., 1986, is an excellent study of the nationalities issue on the eve of Gorbachev's reforms.
- 3 For background on the Baltic republics, see R. Misiunas and R. Taagepera, *The Baltic States, Years of Dependence, 1940-1980*, London, 1980.
- 4 For more details on Islam in the former Soviet Union, see A. Bennigsen and M. Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, London, 1983.
- 5 For background on Kazakhstan, see M. Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, Stanford, 1987.
- 6 For a good review of pre-Gorbachev politics in the Ukraine, see B. Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-century Ukraine*, London, 1985.
- 7 Here potentially is fertile ground to be exploited by chauvinist politicians in Moscow. The role of just 1.5 million Pieds Noirs in Algeria or 900,000 Ulster Protestants is a warning of just how significant these 25 million Russians could be.