Why Did Communism Last so Long?

The main, though not exclusive, answer to the question of why Communism lasted so long in most European countries lay in the political resolve and military power of the USSR. Soviet leaders, until the late 1980s, were determined to sustain the Communist systems they had created or helped to create. Even in Albania and Yugoslavia, where Communism was not Soviet-imposed, the example of the party-state, developed in the USSR, was hugely influential. And every other European Communist state would have broken with Communism earlier had it not been for Soviet overlordship. Stark reminders of this reality were issued from time to time, whether in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968. That is not to imply there were no internal sources of stability within the East European Communist states. Although, however, policies and institutions which kept the Soviet Union itself quiescent operated in Eastern Europe too, on their own they were not enough. To the extent that the regimes were deemed a foreign imposition, they were not sustainable without Soviet support. That leads naturally to the question: why did Communism survive in the Soviet Union itself for over seventy years?

In the first place there was the effectiveness of Communist institutions as instruments of social and political control. The Communist party had a presence in every substantial workplace, as did the security police, although the latter were less identifiable. In normal times the party was strictly disciplined and had a clearly defined hierarchy, with vast power concentrated in the apparatus of the Central Committee and its inner leadership – the party leader, the Politburo and the secretariat. The Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee oversaw television and radio, newspapers, journals and the book trade, and the propaganda work of both party and state institutions. There was a system of censorship with many layers. At its crudest it involved the jamming of foreign radio. Domestic television and radio were especially carefully controlled. A British television newsreader complained some years ago about having to read out too much gloomy news on the TV bulletins. That was not a problem for his Soviet and East
European counterparts, other than when they were reporting the latest calamities in the West. Domestically, until the era of glasnost, they were able to record one success after another, often accompanied by pictures of cheerful factory workers or smiling milkmaids. Newspapers, journals and books were subject to an official censorship, called Glavlit in the Soviet Union (although even to mention in print the existence of the censorship was in itself an offence – divulging a state secret). But most of the censorship was done by editors and authors themselves. They knew the limits of the possible – somewhat broader in small-circulation specialist books than they were in mass-circulation newspapers – and self-censored their work accordingly. Some writers were skilful at stretching the limits of the possible, but for the most part the system worked to keep ideas dangerous to the system from being expressed – or, if expressed, done so in such an Aesopian way that normally only someone who already shared such unorthodox ideas would spot the allusion.

In Stalin’s time, and even after it, the censorship ensured that people could become ‘unpersoned’. Thus, for example, a volume of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia including the letter ‘Z’ (which comes quite early in the Cyrillic alphabet) was already in the press when the distinguished medical scientist Vladimir Zelenin was arrested as part of the fabricated ‘doctors’ plot’ in 1952. With time at a premium, he was replaced by a short entry on the zelenaya lyagushka (the green frog) – thus, as Alec Nove observed, ‘providing the only known instance of a professor actually turning into a frog’.1 (Along with the other doctors, Zelenin was released from prison after Stalin’s death, and appeared in the 1972 volume of the third edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia at the expense of the frog.) When Beria was arrested in 1953, his entry was already in print in the second edition of this major Soviet encyclopedia. Accordingly, all its subscribers were sent a replacement entry on the Bering Straits and instructed to cut out the Beria biography and replace it with a lengthy disquisition on that sea.2 While such exclusion of people who had played an important part, for better or worse, in Soviet history was, naturally, a source of dissatisfaction for those who thought for themselves in the USSR, the censorship remained one of the pillars on which Communist states rested.

The system had a sophisticated array of rewards and punishments. In the early stages of Communist rule – and, of course, at the time of high Stalinism – arrests on a massive scale, accompanied by executions, produced a reign of terror. However, in ‘normal’ Communist times, most citizens did not have to worry about a knock on the door in the middle of the night. They understood the rules of the game and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. Everyone’s employment prospects depended on not falling
foul of the party-state. One of the most brilliant scholars I knew worked in a difficult speciality whose research was incomprehensible to the party-state authorities and did not impinge on ideology. In the mid-1970s, however, he found himself demoted from being a lecturer with a salary of 280 roubles a month to junior scientific worker with a monthly salary of 185 roubles. (The rouble at that time was worth slightly more than a dollar, according to the official exchange rate – very much less than a dollar on the black market.) The demotion was for political reasons. The scholar did not hide from his friends his view that everything that was wrong about the Soviet Union began not with Stalin, but with Lenin. Although he did not seek to broadcast his arguments, even in samizdat, not only his friends but also the KGB – which had, of course, a presence in his workplace – were well aware of what he thought. He also had foreign friends, and they included people whom he had no particular professional reason (or excuse) to meet. This was Brezhnev’s time, so for critical views expressed in a circle of friends, both Soviet and foreign, you did not – as in the Stalin era – enter the Gulag. But control over careers was an effective enough sanction. The risk of losing your job was a bigger disincentive to nonconformity than the threat of a warning from the KGB (although that was also not to be taken lightly). There were, however, people – my friend among them – who accepted career setbacks as a price worth paying for their intellectual autonomy. Naturally, he never joined the Communist Party.

Among those who did join the party, there were some who went a step further than speaking critically in private and wrote letters to the party leader or to the Central Committee to complain about decisions already taken, such as, to take a concrete example, the exile of Academician Sakharov from Moscow in 1980. If, as was often the case, someone had a job in a research institute and also a teaching post at a university, he or she would keep the first post but lose the second. Since such people should clearly not be allowed to influence the young, their university job would come to an abrupt end, thereby depriving them of half their income. Such a person would also find it difficult, if not impossible, to have his or her writings accepted for publication. There was a long ladder of recognition and retribution. The next rung down was expulsion from the Communist Party (and it was much better never to have joined the party than to carry the stigma of having been expelled), followed by dismissal from the one remaining job.

For overt dissidents, people who persistently challenged the authorities, the penalties could be much more severe, ranging from imprisonment to the incarceration of perfectly sane people in psychiatric hospitals. But open dissidents, in the Soviet Union at least, were a tiny proportion of the population. Most people in the post-Stalin era had no need to fear such drastic
punishment. Under Stalin, you could find yourself in the Gulag by accident or through anonymous denunciation. In later years it was necessary actually to do something to incur the wrath of the authorities, even if that something were the kind of opposition or dissent which would be perfectly legal in a democracy. The more successful people were within a Communist state, the more, naturally, they had to lose. Those on the nomenklatura would, for example, lose their access to the special stores which sold goods and foodstuffs in short supply in the ordinary shops, and have to start queuing along with everyone else at the woefully inadequate retail outlets. Yet almost everyone could be made worse off than they already were, even without being brought before the courts. Should matters go that far, there was no such thing as an independent court of law, especially in political cases. The verdict was determined not by the judiciary but by the executive – the party-state authorities.

The censorship in the Soviet Union was sufficiently effective for most of the seven decades that a majority of people were unaware of just how much better provisioned than their own were the welfare states of Scandinavia and Western Europe. They noticed, however, improvements over time in Soviet housing, the health service, working conditions, and educational levels. And comparisons over time were more conducive to support for the system than comparisons with ‘abroad’. Education was one area in which Communist states, and the Soviet Union quite notably, did not have to fear comparison with the rest of the world. That education had its limitations, especially the ideological constraints which operated in the social sciences and humanities and prevented the dissemination of knowledge familiar in the West, but most of the European Communist countries had highly literate and numerate societies. The Soviet Union shone, in particular, in mathematics, the natural sciences and engineering.

Many talented people who would have been equally at home in a variety of disciplines deliberately chose the ‘hard sciences’ because in those fields there were few constraints on their intellectual freedom. They might only exceptionally be able to travel abroad to meet their Western counterparts, but they had access to the most advanced thought in their fields, no matter where it came from. In the major Soviet libraries in the post-Stalin era, a variety of Western scientific journals were on open shelves, but their social science or modern history equivalents were in closed sections, especially if they carried articles on the Soviet Union. A very good reason for gaining access to them would be for work on a book delineating the offences of ‘so-called “Sovietologists”’ or of ‘bourgeois falsifiers’, whether of the Soviet political system or of the October Revolution. Some of those who read these Western works were doubtless filled with righteous indignation.
Others found more to agree than to disagree with in the writings of some of the ‘bourgeois falsificators’ and contrived to provide interesting quotations from them in their published critiques. Yet the lack of access in the Soviet Union, other than by trusted specialists, to the vast literature which exposed the limitations of Marxism-Leninism and of the Soviet system (including, not least, that written by Russians but published only abroad) helped to prolong the Soviet system. It followed that when that dam was breached in the second half of the 1980s, the resulting torrent helped to sweep away what perestroika had left of the system’s foundations.

The Language of Politics

A major source of stability of the Communist system lay in its control over the language of politics. In every country there is a difference between official discourse and the way people speak in everyday conversation. The gap was especially great in Communist states. Yet the way concepts had been defined, and hammered home, by the party authorities often affected people’s thinking more than they realized. This was especially so in the Soviet Union, where a long-established Communist system had developed indigenously. It was far less true of Poland, where the society had retained more autonomy from the state, and, informally, the Catholic Church possessed much more authority than the Communist party. However, most people in most Communist states accepted the word of their rulers that they were living under ‘socialism’, even though West European socialist parties – which, in contrast with the East European Communist parties, had extensive experience of winning popular elections – viewed such a claim on behalf of one-party police states as absurd. No Western creative writer was more devastating in his portrayal of Communism than George Orwell. Yet Orwell to the end of his life regarded himself as a ‘democratic Socialist’, even to the extent of habitually using the capital ‘S’.*

* Bernard Crick cites Orwell writing, shortly before his death in 1950, about his book Nineteen Eighty-Four: ‘My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism . . . I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences’ (Crick, George Orwell: A Life, p. 569).
An example of the skilful use of language in defence of the system was the way the term ‘anti-Soviet’ was employed in the Soviet Union. Criticism of the system was equated with disloyalty to the motherland. While it would seem to be perfectly obvious that a Russian should not be judged unpatriotic for wishing to see his or her country enjoy more democracy, a different and more efficient type of economy, or a more honest examination of its history, any such demand in the unreformed Soviet system was more often than not deemed ‘anti-Soviet’. Thus, for example, Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn – whose ways of looking at the world differed greatly from each other as well as from the official Soviet worldview, but who were each Russian patriots – were both in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s denounced as ‘anti-Soviet’. In the sense of being opposed to many fundamental features of the Soviet system, they were anti-Soviet, but the term was turned by the authorities into something akin to treason. The equation of criticism of the existing political order with disloyalty to one’s country is a stratagem that has been employed by the powers-that-be in many states, but it was used especially effectively in Communist systems. Given that the term ‘anti-Soviet’ had the connotation of betrayal of one’s country, it is hardly surprising that most Soviet citizens, not least Russians, had psychological as well as political reasons for wishing to avoid the epithet being applied to them.

The official vocabulary of politics permeated the thinking even of people who had in many respects liberated themselves from it. I recall, by way of example, a conversation from Moscow of the Brezhnev era. It took place in the late 1960s when several people were discussing a spat between the Soviet authorities and the British newspaper The Observer. The subject arose because it was in the apartment of Nelya Yevdokimova, who had translated Michael Frayn’s novel The Tin Men, and Frayn wrote for The Observer at the time. A former husband of the translator, a Pravda journalist, was present. Somewhat puzzled by the stand-off between the authorities and this particular paper, Yevdokimova said: ‘But I thought The Observer was a progressive newspaper?’ ‘Yes,’ the Pravda man replied, ‘progressive and anti-Soviet.’ Nelya laughed and said she had never heard the expression ‘progressive and anti-Soviet’ before. Even she, who had read Solzhenitsyn and many other authors in samizdat, and who told me that she regarded Britain and the Scandinavian countries as the most democratic in the world, had a mental association of the Soviet Union with progressive forces. The juxtaposition of ‘progressive’ and ‘anti-Soviet’ was funny in both senses – strange and amusing. (Her parents must have been true Bolshevik believers. ‘Nelya’ was the diminutive of her first name, ‘Ninel’, and the latter was Lenin written backwards – one of a number of new names for the new times invented in the first decades of Communist rule.)

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Informal Rules of the Game

Communist institutions, of huge importance as they were in maintaining control over the society, were supplemented by informal rules of the game which enabled the polity, society and the economy to function in ways which the formal rules alone could not achieve. To take the most obvious political example, the nomenklatura meant that an appointment of political consequence required the approval of the appropriate party committee, whether city, regional or Central Committee, but this formal requirement was modified in practice by the existence of patron–client relations. Thus, as a party official rose in the hierarchy, he tended to bring with him, or to promote in other ways, loyal subordinates from his previous posting. Even Stalin, whose purges spared no republic, had more people from the Caucasus in high positions in Moscow than were there by Andropov’s time. Khrushchev advanced people who had been his clients in Ukraine, and Brezhnev, who had served in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Moldova, promoted men who had served him in all three of those Soviet republics. Cronyism was frequently condemned in Soviet writing, and it could easily – and often did – lead to corruption. Nevertheless, personal and group loyalties softened the rigidities of the system, while also in the long run undermining the ideology.

To make a non-market economy work and to obtain goods and services in conditions of perennial shortage required further informal rules of the game. Three key Russian words for understanding what oiled the wheels of the Soviet economy and society were svyazi (connections), blat (pull) and the less widely used term, tolkach (pusher or fixer). ‘Connections’ were important for everything from obtaining theatre tickets to getting a good job. Such contacts could be inherited from parents who had already acquired a comfortable niche in the Soviet system, and they were much more useful than money. In the post-Communist world, connections still matter, but in the acquisition of goods and services they count for far less than wealth. ‘Connections’ were a privilege mainly of the new Soviet middle class – and, it goes without saying, of the elite. Blat had a more pejorative ring to it than ‘connections’. To get things through ‘pull’ still more clearly contradicted the ostensible principles of the Soviet system. Whereas someone with whom one was ‘connected’ might render a favour without expecting anything, even indirectly, in return, blat involved a reciprocal exchange of favours. Although ubiquitous in Soviet society, it was not quite respectable.

Thus, even when giving an example of blat, one Soviet interviewee denied that anything other than an act of friendship was involved: ‘It is
The phenomenon of blat was not incompatible with friendship, but it was by no means totally disinterested. There was not necessarily a direct exchange of favours between two people. There could be a long and complex chain of favours which provided such various services as access to a good hospital consultant, a nursery or school with a high reputation, consumer goods unavailable in normal state shops, spare parts for a car, scarce books, or a place in a tourist group travelling abroad. Essentially, blat was a way of getting around the system. Since the command economy was one of chronic shortage, ‘pull’ and informal relations were far more important than roubles. How much ‘pull’ a person had depended, obviously, on that individual’s position within the society, but at all social levels in the Soviet Union, there were unofficial networks which, to a certain extent, bypassed the official structures and eased some of the difficulties and frustrations of everyday life.

The command economy would scarcely have worked at all if informal practices had not oiled its wheels. An important role was played by the ‘fixer’ (tolkach), a person who when supplies failed to arrive at a factory could find ways round the problem. The tolkach was a pusher and expediter ‘who nags, begs, borrows, bribes, to ensure that the needed supplies actually arrive’. While there was some official disapproval of their activities, the pushers were none the less tolerated, for meeting production targets was the top priority for factory managers and their ministerial superiors. In the command economy if one factory fell behind schedule in its supplies to another, the knock-on effect could be huge in the absence of alternative suppliers to which other factories could turn. The semi-legal fixers, who often engaged in barter to ensure a resumption of supplies, were part of the solution. In the unreformed Soviet economy, however, regional party secretaries also played a role in easing economic shortages and snarl-ups which, in principle, should have been the business of Gosplan and the ministries. When something was in short supply in one region and the problem could not be resolved through the state’s economic agencies, a telephone call from a regional party secretary to his counterpart in another region could be the answer. Barter had a part to play there, too. The initial contact, for example, in the 1970s between Mikhail Gorbachev, the first secretary of the agricultural area of Stavropol, and Boris Yeltsin, first secretary of the industrial region of Sverdlovsk in the Urals, is described by Yeltsin in his first volume of memoirs thus: ‘Our first encounter was by telephone. Quite often we needed to extend each other a helping hand: metal and timber from the Urals, food products from Stavropol. As a rule he never gave us
anything over and above the limits imposed by Gosplan, but he did help us to build up our stocks of poultry and meat.'

Was the End of Soviet Communism Economically Determined?

Although the Soviet Union was the richest country in the world in terms of natural resources – and that remains true of post-Soviet Russia – economic performance failed to match this potential. Indeed, there was a long-term decline in the rate of economic growth from the 1950s to the 1980s. The fall in the price of oil in the second half of the eighties hit the Soviet economy especially hard. However, accounts of the end of the Communism and of the Soviet Union which rely on economic determinism, as in essence does that of the former Russian acting prime minister, Yegor Gaidar, are ultimately unconvincing. Gaidar is willing to believe that Mikhail Gorbachev gave up the whole of Eastern Europe and made large unilateral reductions of armaments purely for economic reasons, and that also for economic reasons he did not use the force that would be required to put a stop to restive Soviet republics’ quest for independence. With the Soviet Union, rather than Eastern Europe, in mind at this point, Gaidar writes: ‘Preserving the empire without using force was impossible; holding on to power without preserving it was impossible as well. Using mass repression would obviate the possibility of getting large, long-term, politically motivated credits that would at least postpone the looming state bankruptcy.’

There are several problems with an explanation of political actions in such economic-determinist terms. Without political liberalization and democratization, massive use of force would not have been required to keep the Soviet republics quiescent. Gaidar suggests that Gorbachev was willing to risk the extreme wrath of the armed forces by ‘losing’ Eastern Europe. He was prepared, by not resorting to forcible repression, to risk losing also large parts of the Soviet Union and, concomitantly, the support of virtually all of the party-state organs. And he holds that Gorbachev pursued such extremely dangerous policies for economic reasons. Yet if Gorbachev had been as obsessed with the economy as Gaidar imagines he was, that was a very strange and roundabout way to deal with it. He took risks which, in Gaidar’s own terms, made it impossible for him to hold on to power. Yet he was unwilling to risk moving to market prices, which, as Gaidar insists, was the key to beginning to resolve the issue of shortages and growing economic calamity. That seems very paradoxical, but it is a paradox which is easily resolved, simply because the premise – that all Gorbachev’s most important decisions, and non-decisions, were
motivated by economic considerations – is wrong. As we have seen in earlier chapters, Gorbachev was far more actively concerned with political than economic reform, although that removed many traditional levers of power. Chinese Communist leaders have been much more fearful of that kind of reform than of marketizing measures, which, so far, they have survived quite comfortably.

The idea that the Soviet Union was doomed to collapse when it did because of poor economic performance is misleading at a more general level. Prolonged economic failure does not by itself lead to the downfall of a highly authoritarian regime. Given the extent to which, for reasons substantially independent of the condition of the economy, liberalization and democratization occurred in the second half of the 1980s, the severe economic problems were a very important contributory factor to the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, an unreformed Soviet Union would have dealt with dissatisfaction – the manifestations of which would have been on a much more modest scale – in the traditional way. Authoritarian rulers of Third World countries, such as Sese Seko Mobuto in the Congo (then Zaire), misgoverned for decades, presiding over corrupt and inefficient regimes which were economic basket cases. An economically inefficient and socially unjust system is not doomed to imminent extinction merely on those accounts. The link between economic failure and turning out a government which exists in democracies (although even there it is not an iron law) does not apply in the same way to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. The Soviet Union, furthermore, as should be clear, had a far more sophisticated system of controls than any Third World country.

A Communist system could not have continued in the Soviet Union for ever – no system lasts for ever – but it could have continued for significantly longer than it did if fundamental reform had not been undertaken. On the eve of perestroika the dissident movement in the USSR had been effectively crushed. The Soviet state was confronted by a vast range of problems, although hardly as great a threat to its survival as the years of the Second World War or the task of rebuilding a devastated country in the immediate post-war years. After muddling through the remaining years of the twentieth century, a Soviet Union which had not changed the fundamentals of the political system would have benefited from the huge increase in energy prices which did so much to bolster the economy of post-Soviet Russia and the popularity of Vladimir Putin, its president between 2000 and 2008.

The Soviet Union had also a number of non-economic sources of support. The fact that it was regarded in the outside world as a superpower – which it owed to its military strength, size, and natural resources rather than economic efficiency – was a source of pride for a majority of citizens of the
USSR. The same was true of various successes, ranging from the conquest of space to its world chess champions and tally of Olympic Games medals. The survival of the Communist system and of the Soviet Union for over seventy years owed a good deal also to the services offered by the state – and not only the secret services. Free universal education and health care, together with full employment, were valued by a majority of the population. Here, too, the censorship played its part – the Soviet regime’s success over many decades in reducing to a minimum knowledge that far higher standards of welfare were enjoyed in Western Europe (minus the political oppression and secret police surveillance).

The conventional wisdom about the Soviet Union in early 1985 was expressed by the chair (a retired British ambassador) of a conference attended by American, British and European politicians, officials, academics and journalists when he summed up the proceedings by saying: ‘There’s one thing we all know. The Soviet Union isn’t going to change’. There were murmurs of agreement all round the table. By 1992 the collapse of Communism was regarded as ‘over-determined’ and axiomatic by many of the same people. A wiser voice in 1992 was that of the Stanford University scholar Alexander Dallin, who wrote:

To claim that the Soviet system was bound to crash amounts to committing what Reinhard Bendix . . . called ‘the fallacy of retrospective determinism’ – denying the choices (however constrained) that the actors had available before acting . . . We must take care not to introduce retrospectively a clarity, let alone inevitability, where there was contingency and complexity.

Eastern European and Asian Communism

Since the Soviet Union’s longevity was the key to the length of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, this chapter has focused on the reasons why Communism lasted as long as it did on Soviet soil. However, many – though not all – of the supports for the system applied also in Eastern Europe. That is true of the highly effective institutional controls, including the party presence in every sizeable workplace, the censorship, and the role of the secret police. It applies, albeit to a lesser extent, to some of the achievements of the Communist system in the realms of education, health provision and full employment. The extent to which these services were a source of support for the regime varied according to people’s expectations and comparative knowledge of the non-Communist world. In east-central Europe – East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and
Poland – there was a greater awareness of conditions in Western Europe than there was in most parts of the Soviet Union. There were other factors which did not apply to Eastern Europe. Whereas the international importance of the Soviet Union was a matter of pride not only for Russians but for most Soviet citizens, of different nationalities, it was regarded very differently in Eastern Europe. Only in Bulgaria and, to a considerable extent, in Czechoslovakia before (but not after) 1968 was there quite broad pro-Russian and pro-Soviet sentiment.

The ways of getting round the system and the shortage economy discussed in the Soviet context applied also in other Communist states. They were engendered more by the system, and its intrinsic failures, than by cultural tradition. Nevertheless, the response to the problems had its culturally specific features. The phenomenon of blat in the Soviet Union has been compared with that of guanxi in China (although, as the Chinese term literally translates as ‘connections’, it could also be compared with the Russian svyazi). Both terms refer to ‘the use of personal networks for getting things done’. The Chinese practice of guanxi has its specific features, with the exchange of gifts and favours, including banquets. It is more related to kinship than was blat in Russia, and the moral obligation to reciprocate a gift is stronger. Not to return a favour would be not only imprudent (as in the case of blat) but an unthinkable breach of loyalty and rejection of emotional ties. Nevertheless, cultural differences notwithstanding, in both countries these practices flourished and became socially important in conditions of a shortage economy and of the failure of official channels of distribution to meet people’s needs. Since in China as well as Russia it is now possible to purchase many formerly scarce goods and services for hard cash, in some respects guanxi is less significant in society than it was. (In both countries, however, the market economy is of a type in which officials can make or break a business. Thus, in Communist China, as with svyazi and blat in post-Soviet Russia, guanxi remains important for business purposes. It flourishes especially in the relationship between entrepreneurs and local officials and, more generally, smooths access to influential people, state contracts, bank loans, favourable tax incentives and ‘exemptions from troublesome laws and regulations’.)

Finally, when considering why Communist regimes lasted so long, it is important to mention nationalism, even though that counts also as a major contributory factor to the regimes’ dissolution. National sentiment worked for or against Communism at different times and, especially, in different places. In the Soviet Union there was a significant element of Russian nationalism in what the regime preferred to call Soviet patriotism. That, naturally, worked best for the Russian 50 per cent of the Soviet population,
but some of the other nationalities in the USSR, as we have seen in earlier chapters, also had their nationhood advanced (even if inadvertently) by social change and institutional structures in the Soviet period. Throughout most of Eastern Europe, where Communism was seen as an alien system emanating from the Soviet Union, nationalist feelings were, of course, in conflict with Communism, no matter how hard the regimes tried to produce a narrative which linked the system with the ‘most progressive’ part of that particular nation’s past.

Outside Europe, though, Communists were able to draw on the theme of national liberation and anti-colonialism to attract broader support than could be achieved by an appeal to Communist ideology alone. In China, even though the Communists fought a bitter civil war with the Nationalists, the Communist Party itself made a powerful appeal to those who wished to see China reassert itself as a nation after a century and a half of humiliation at the hands of foreigners. In Vietnam and Cuba, anti-imperialist sentiments and national pride were also of great importance both in the foundation of the regimes and for their persistence. These three Third World countries all had indigenous revolutions, and while that has been no guarantee of survival (as the cases of Russia, Yugoslavia and Albania demonstrated), it can at least safely be said that indigenous revolution is a better predictor of Communist survival than non-indigenous founding of the regime.
Communist systems had, as we have seen, many ways of surviving, even though their command economies performed less efficiently than market economies, their societies were unfree, and their polities lacked democratic accountability. Lack of freedom and lack of accountability in the short run assisted survival by obscuring and outweighing the relative economic failure. In the long run, they were at least as likely as economic stagnation to be the undoing of Communism. However, as Keynes remarked, in the long run we are all dead. Why the system ended when it did in the various European Communist states is a topic already addressed in Chapter 26. In this chapter, the main focus is on the Soviet Union. The reason for that is straightforward. The Soviet state held the key which could unlock doors throughout Eastern Europe. If it ceased to be Communist, it was clear that the survival hopes for Communism in all other Warsaw Pact countries were minimal. In contrast, Communism in Asia has been more resilient. While that has owed much to lack of information about – or opportunities to explore – possible alternatives, it is also related to transition from predominantly agricultural to industrialized economies. Although that was true also of a number of European Communist states, it was more comprehensively true of their Asian counterparts. The massive social mobility which resulted was in the short and medium term a support for the regimes which had overseen such sweeping change.

On a long time-scale, social and economic factors are of fundamental importance in explaining how Communism came to be rejected in the Soviet Union and, as a consequence, collapsed in Eastern Europe. The more immediate reasons for the dramatic changes of the late 1980s were, however, the result of particular political choices. The choices that were made owed a lot initially to the stimulus of relative economic failure, but the radical political changes which were introduced in the Soviet Union after 1985 were by no means economically determined. Since, however, everyone by the mid-1980s could agree that the Soviet economy was not performing well, that weakened the conservative opposition to reform proposals. Moreover,
it was initially easier to put forward ideas for political reform by arguing (rightly or wrongly) that they were essential for economic progress. Before long, though, political change was advocated for its own sake.

Nationalism contributed greatly to the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, but in the Soviet Union it became a powerful force leading to the break-up of the USSR only after fundamental changes had already taken place in the political system. Ultimately, it was the combination of new ideas, institutional power (the commanding heights of the political system having fallen into the hands of radical reformers), and political choices (when other options could have been chosen) which led to the end of Communist rule in Europe.

Social Change

Over time, the successes of Communism as well as the failures increased the system’s vulnerability. In the Soviet Union of 1939, only 11 per cent of the population had received more than an elementary education. By 1984 the percentage who had attended at least secondary school had risen to 87 per cent. The more educated the population became, the more they were inclined to seek information denied to them by the party-state authorities. Those who knew foreign languages could do so more readily, since broadcasts other than in the languages of the particular Communist state were not, as a rule, jammed. By the mid-1980s the Soviet Union had quite a large, educated middle class.* The proportion of people with higher education had grown substantially in the post-Stalin years. In 1954 just a little over 1 per cent of the population had completed higher education. By 1984 there were well over five million students currently in higher education and eighteen and a half million people who had completed such an education, the latter making up almost 7 per cent of the total population of the USSR.¹

This meant that the percentage of the adult population with a higher education was in double figures – and particularly high in Moscow and Leningrad. By nurturing a highly educated population, Communism

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* The term ‘middle class’ was not used in the Soviet Union with reference to Soviet society until the perestroika era. Even then, it was defined in very different ways – as was the more common term, ‘intelligentsia’, which could refer to all who had received a higher education or, more narrowly and normatively, to people of critical and independent minds. The notion of middle class in the late Soviet period is discussed briefly in G.G. Diligenskiy, Lyudi srednego klassa (Obshchestvennoe mnenie, Moscow, 2002), pp. 102–10.
contained the seeds of its own destruction. It became harder to treat adults like Victorian children who should be seen but not heard and who should simply accept that those in authority knew what was good for them. It became, for example, increasingly anomalous that educated Soviet citizens could not travel just as freely as did the Westerners they saw visiting their own country. It was no less frustrating that they should be denied access to books or films of their own choice as distinct from those that party-state officials decided were suitable for them. For open-minded members of the Soviet political elite who had been given the opportunity to travel abroad, that experience was important. Seeing for themselves countries that were both more democratic and more prosperous than the Soviet Union significantly influenced the outlook of Mikhail Gorbachev and that of the second most important reformer of the perestroika years, Alexander Yakovlev.

Demographically, Communist parties became more representative of

* Notwithstanding the difficulties, many intellectuals within the Soviet Union as well as in Eastern Europe read far more widely in foreign literature than did their Western counterparts. The very fact that something was difficult to obtain added to its attraction. It is also the case that, even in Russia (where, as already noted, there were works considered taboo that were, nevertheless, published in Estonia), the Brezhnev era saw the publication of far more English-language novels translated into Russian than there were contemporary Russian novels translated into English. Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh were among the most popular English translated authors. Among British novelists who began to publish only in the post-Second World War period, those whose work appeared in Russian during the Brezhnev years included Melvyn Bragg, Basil Davidson, Margaret Drabble, Michael Frayn, William Golding, Susan Hill, Iris Murdoch, Piers Paul Read, Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, Raymond Williams and John Wyndham. It goes without saying that works which cast the Communist system in an unfavourable light were not translated into the languages of Communist states until the perestroika era, but much mainstream English-language fiction did appear. One unclassifiable work which was extremely popular in Communist Europe was C. Northcote Parkinson’s Parkinson’s Law (John Murray, London, 1957). Among the appreciative readers of the Russian translation of Parkinson’s Law, published in Moscow in 100,000 copies in the mid-1970s, was the first secretary of the Communist Party in the Stavropol region, Mikhail Gorbachev (as he revealed during his first visit to London in 1984). I remember a Hungarian sociologist, who visited Glasgow University in the late 1960s, saying that he did not understand why Parkinson’s Law was regarded as a satirical and humorous work. It was deadly serious! Since the bureaucratic empire-building within Communist systems outdid Western bureaucracy, many of Parkinson’s ‘laws’ brought instant recognition.
their societies over time. All major social groups were represented, although some much more than others. The highly educated and city dwellers had a disproportionately large presence in the party. In all Communist parties the full-time officials wielded more power than any other group, although at certain times and places (especially China during the Cultural Revolution) officialdom was attacked in the name of revolutionary renewal. In the major ruling parties well-educated specialists became over time a larger component of the party membership. Where liberalization took place from above, as in Hungary, their reformist influence was important. In Poland, the outstanding example of democratization from below, a larger proportion of social scientists than in other European Communist states were able to pursue their careers without joining the Communist party. But Poland was in a more significant way unique, being the only country in which organized workers were in the vanguard of a movement against Communist rule. Together with their supporters within the intelligentsia, they would probably have brought about systemic change in Poland at the beginning, rather than the end, of the 1980s but for their consciousness of Poland’s geopolitical position and their taking into account the possibility of Soviet intervention.

Economic Problems

If the successes of the Communist era, including educational advances, were part of the explanation of the transformative change of the second half of the eighties, it was an accumulation of serious problems that was the initial trigger for radical reform. Even though economic reform was to become a lower priority for Gorbachev than political reform, and less of a preoccupation than ending the Cold War, the most important initial stimuli to perestroika were economic. The slowdown over time in the rate of economic growth, the fact that technological innovation was occurring faster in the newly industrialized countries of Asia than in the Soviet Union, and the excessive burden placed by the military-industrial complex on the Soviet exchequer were major concerns for Gorbachev and his supporters. This relative economic failure was accompanied by a host of social problems which had accumulated during the Brezhnev era – a declining birth rate, an increase in the infant mortality rate, an increased death rate among middle-aged men and (linked to the last point) a major problem of alcoholism.

One of the greatest failures of Communist economic systems was in creating new technology. As the Hungarian economist János Kornai noted,
the economies of the Communist world compared very unfavourably in this respect with market economies. Among the reasons for the poor performance were the meagreness of the rewards for success and the weakness of the penalties for failure. High efficiency and speedy technological development did not bring any special advantages; continuing to produce the same old product did not count as failure. Shortfalls and waste, arising in part from technological inertia, were ‘automatically excused in retrospect by the soft budget constraint’. Kornai’s concept of ‘soft budget constraint’ highlights important defects of the command economy, in which ‘soft’ credit can be obtained, the budget is not controlled by the need to make a profit (as it is in a market economy), and prices are determined bureaucratically. When extra costs were incurred, prices were allowed to rise, either openly or in a disguised form through a lowering of the quality of the product (which was not usually high to begin with). And purchasers, whether of consumer goods or producer goods, did not have the option of taking their custom elsewhere.

In the Brezhnev era, countless books and articles were published in the Soviet Union on the ‘scientific and technical revolution’. Yet this was not where that revolution was happening. Conservative Soviet Communists placed a lot of faith in computers as the ultimate panacea for solving the problems of economic planning, believing that they would show that those calling for movement towards a market economy were misguided. Yet computerization did not turn out to be a substitute for the market. A cartoon – in Hungary – captured this when it showed a group of serious-looking men standing beside a massive bank of computers, waiting for the answer to all the country’s economic problems. One of them reads out the verdict the computer has come up with: ‘It says that supply should be adjusted to meet demand.’ In spite of the enthusiasm of Soviet technocrats for computers, the USSR was particularly backward in information technology. Making that point, the head of the Soviet section of the British Foreign Office, Nigel Broomfield, in an internal government document in 1983, accurately predicted that ‘the Soviet system will change from within’ and ‘whether it will collapse or evolve is perhaps the key question’. What would be decisive, he maintained, was ‘economic failure and the inability to understand and control the technological communications revolution which is now sweeping the developed world’.

The Soviet Union’s inability to participate in the information revolution meant that it was, indeed, ill equipped to benefit from economic globalization. So long, however, as the rulers of the Soviet state were more concerned with maintaining their sovereign, and highly authoritarian, control over domestic developments, being laggards in information technology was not
a wholly negative factor for them. As became very clear in 2008, to be part of the global economy had its down side. Among the countries to suffer serious economic difficulties as a result of the global financial crisis were post-Soviet Russia – and, still more, Ukraine. Standing aside from the revolution in information technology certainly prevented the Soviet Union from maximizing its economic potential. Even if it had continued to stand apart, however, and had eschewed political changes of the kind introduced during perestroika, this would not necessarily have led to economic or political collapse. The rest of Europe would still have bought Soviet oil and gas. Moreover, China’s Communist rulers in the twenty-first century have found a halfway house of participation in information technology, whereby parts of the internet (containing politically awkward information) are closed off to Chinese citizens, while those parts which are economically useful remain open.

Nationalism

There was no uniform path from Communism to post-Communism (and the latter term, rather than democracy, is used advisedly, for post-Communist states include many authoritarian and hybrid regimes). Communist parties changed over time. All, sooner or later, diluted or even abandoned their original revolutionary ideology. Some, more than others, began to reflect values more broadly held within their own societies. The party, in some places more than others, embraced distinctively national sentiments. Thus, for example, after becoming First Secretary of the Communist Party of Lithuania in October 1988, Algirdas-Mikolas Brazauskas cautiously, but increasingly, espoused the Lithuanian national cause and got into arguments not only with conservative Communists but also with the reformist wing of the Soviet leadership in Moscow, while being attacked at home by his anti-Communist domestic rival, Vytautas Landsbergis.7 When, however, a party leader in a multinational state became aggressively nationalist, as did Milošević in Serbia, the result could be disastrous.

Nationalism was always a potential threat to Communist rule, though some liberalization of the system was needed before that potential became reality. Its potency was especially great in multinational Communist states. In particular, nationalism was never far below the surface of Yugoslav or Soviet life. There were those both within Communist states and outside who dismissed it as a serious threat to the systems with the argument that – as distinct from hard economic facts – nationality is a slippery and subjective concept and difficult to delineate with any precision. However, if
enough people share a subjective perception – even if it is based on myth, as is all national identity to a greater or lesser degree – this becomes part of the objective reality with which politicians have to deal. The two main ways in which Communist rulers responded to that reality were through severe repression of any demonstration of nationalism and by manipulation of symbols of national identity to steal some of the clothes of anti-Communist nationalists. Even the East German Communist authorities got in on the act. Martin Luther, Frederick the Great and Bismarck were among the major figures from a Prussian past who were co-opted as part of the GDR’s supposedly distinctive inheritance. During the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union, Peter the Great and even Ivan the Terrible were viewed as ‘progressive for their time’, creators of a greater Russia, and precursors of the great Stalin.

The more ethnically heterogeneous the society, the more difficult a trick this was, however, to pull off. Russian nationalism or Serbian nationalism could be used to rally Russians or Serbs, but was liable to alienate other nationalities within the Soviet and Yugoslav states. Moreover, with federal structures based on national boundary lines, regional differences and grievances became bound up with national sentiment. Even so, nationalism did not lead to the demise of Communist rule in any country until the radical reforms of the Soviet perestroika had made their mark. And in the case of the USSR, nationalism’s role in the dismantling of the Soviet state was substantially more important than the part it played in the transformation of the Communist system. The strength and political significance of nationalism in the last years of the Soviet Union were unintended consequences of the far-reaching changes introduced from above by Gorbachev in 1987–88.

Critical Thinking within the Party

The closest precursor to perestroika was the Prague Spring. Quite early in the Gorbachev era, the new spokesman of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gennady Gerasimov, himself a within-system reformer of long-standing, was asked what the difference was between the Prague Spring and perestroika. His droll reply was ‘Twenty years.’ In both instances the movement for change came from within the Communist Party and reached fruition when the coming to power of a new party leader altered the balance of forces within the political elite. There were, of course, some fundamental differences between the two cases. Dubček, unlike Gorbachev, was the facilitator rather than the driver of reform within the party leadership. A decent and fairly open-minded man, Dubček leaned more in the direction of his
reformist colleagues than in that of the conservatives within a deeply divided Central Committee and Politburo. Another major difference was that far-reaching reform in Czechoslovakia was interrupted after only eight months, whereas its Soviet equivalent lasted for almost seven years. Moreover, influential as the Prague Spring was within the international Communist movement – especially on the West European ‘Eurocommunists’ – it was incomparably less important than liberalizing and democratizing change within the Soviet Union. That paved the way for the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe.

The development of critical thinking within the party intelligentsia in the years leading up to the Czechoslovak reforms and those in the Soviet Union between 1985 and 1989 (discussed in Chapters 19 and 20) is crucial to understanding both the Prague Spring and perestroika. For many observers such spectacular change came out of the blue, but its preconditions were established in both countries well in advance of actual measures of liberalization and democratization. In Communist states generally, and in the Soviet Union specifically, the vast majority of leading specialists in the social sciences – academic lawyers as well as economists, sociologists and political analysts – were members of the Communist Party. It was from their ranks that the most influential ideas for change emanated. The availability of fresh and critical thinking on the political and economic system, and from within the ruling party itself, was of decisive importance when chance, rather more than conscious choice, produced party leaders open to fresh ideas and innovative policy. However, the system was such that, barring revolution – an undertaking so hazardous in Communist states that it was rarely attempted – only change at the apex of the political hierarchy could determine whether fresh and critical thinking would remain a mere intellectual diversion or whether it would influence the real world of politics.

Reform-minded intellectuals who remained in the ruling parties throughout decades in which only minimal reform occurred were often regarded as time-servers by those of a critical turn of mind who chose to stay outside the party’s ranks. They could be accused of self-deception in believing that only from within the official structures could they hope to bring about radical reform or (for their aims were generally more modest) at least influence the direction of state policy. There is no uniform answer across the whole Communist world to the question of whether ‘within-system reformers’ (or ‘intrastructural dissenters’) were right or wrong in their assessment that the most realistic way of bringing about change for the better was from inside the party. In more than half the Communist states, in so far as there was such a presence of reformist intellectuals within the ruling party, there was very little to show for it. However, in Hungary to a considerable extent,
in Czechoslovakia until the reform movement was snuffed out by Soviet
tanks, and in the crucially important cases of the Soviet Union and China,
intra-party reform was more decisive than pressures from outside the party
ranks in changing the system in highly significant ways.\footnote{11}

It is clear that only a minority of people joined the party with the idea
of reforming it from within. One who can be believed when she says she
did join with that aim in view is Ludmilla Alexeyeva, who later became a
prominent Soviet dissident, having decided that ‘my belief that the party
could be reformed from within was nothing but an illusion’.\footnote{12} Yet though
the Communist Party was not successfully reformed in the Soviet Union
– most of its leading officials supported the August coup of 1991, which was
intended to turn the clock back to pre-perestroika times – it was from inside
the party that the changes to the entire political system were introduced
and promoted. Initiated by Gorbachev, listening to the advice of ‘intra-
structural dissenters’ who had endured a long wait for a reformer in the
Kremlin, the changes were pushed through in the face of foot-dragging and
opposition from the party conservatives, some of whom were eventually
sufficiently desperate to put the general secretary (who was also president)
under house arrest.

If only a minority of radical reformers within the CPSU joined the party
with the express intention of changing the system, that raises the question
of what changed the minds of the party reformers. I have already quoted, in
Chapter 19, the remark of a Czech economist that ‘the greatest stimulus to
change is failure’. To recognize an unsatisfactory economic performance or
lack of freedom as failure, however, requires some standard of comparison.
Even then, the policy implications of failure have to be determined – more
discipline and tighter controls, or more market and a new respect for civil
liberties? Some of the influence on party reformers, as we have seen in
Chapter 23, came directly from the West. People within the political elite and
leading specialists in various fields, who were also party members, had much
more chance of travelling to Western countries than had the average citizen
in Communist countries, and what they saw and heard had an impact.

Nevertheless, the initial stimulus to think differently often came from people
who were, in some sense, writing from ‘within the ideology’, rather than as
opponents of it. As Kornai put it, referring to a time when he was ‘still half or
three-quarters a Communist’: ‘The works that affect a person most strongly in
the state of mind I was then in are not ones diametrically opposed to the views
held hitherto by the doubter – that is, not those attacking the Communist Party
from without.’\footnote{13} He himself was influenced at that early period of his intellectual
evolution by the Yugoslav Communist theorist Edvard Kardelj and by Isaac
Deutscher’s biography of Stalin (which he read in German). Many reformers
within the ranks of ruling parties broke with Communist orthodoxy in stages. First of all they came to reject the cruelty of Stalinism, while continuing to believe that the Communist Party should retain a monopoly of power and that all would be well if only there were a return to Leninist norms. For many, a more fundamental stage was eventually reached, at which, as Kornai puts it, ‘former believers understood that the real system that had developed in the Soviet Union and the other Communist countries embodied not only Stalin’s but Lenin’s and even some of Marx’s basic ideas’.14

This did not usually lead reformers within the ruling parties to mount direct attacks on Lenin. Rather, in a war of quotations, they used whatever in Lenin’s voluminous writings suited their purpose. In the Soviet Union, in particular, Lenin remained a source of legitimation of political views at least until the end of the 1980s. Even Alexander Yakovlev, who in post-Soviet Russia came to regard Lenin with abhorrence, was citing him respectfully as late as 1989.15 Gorbachev retained an esteem for Lenin not only up to the end of his time in power but also beyond it. However, he broke with Leninism on one fundamental principle after another.16 He abandoned democratic centralism in favour of what in 1987 he called ‘socialist pluralism’. By early 1990 he had endorsed ‘political pluralism’. He accepted the need for checks and balances and emphasized the importance of the rule of law. His political beliefs evolved to the point at which they were virtually indistinguishable from those of the social democrats of Western Europe. Even while he remained General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Gorbachev told his aides he felt close to social democracy. The major programmatic documents of the CPSU in 1990 and 1991 reflected this political evolution. Above all, Gorbachev broke with Lenin by recognizing that means in politics are no less important than ends, and that utopian goals, which are always likely to be illusory, will be all the more of a chimera if pursued by violent and undemocratic means.

Transformational Leadership and Institutional Power

What made possible largely peaceful change away from Communism in the Soviet Union was a similar evolution in the views of a small minority of party officials and a larger minority of party intellectuals while they were already in positions of responsibility. No one who thought as Gorbachev did in 1988, not to speak of 1990–91, could have become general secretary in 1985 unless he had been an actor of Oscar-winning talents who kept all his real opinions to himself. Gorbachev was already, when he became party leader, much more of a reformer than his Politburo colleagues realized,
but it was, precisely, reform of the system, not transformative change, he had in mind at that point. The further development of his thinking was of exceptional importance because he already occupied the post of supreme institutional power within the Soviet system and became thereby the single most influential person in the Communist world.

Lech Wałesa in 1980–81 was a rare case of a leader from outside the Communist party having a major impact on the policy of a ruling party, forcing a series of retreats – up to the point at which the party-state authorities returned to the offensive and imposed martial law. Even within the ruling party it was uncommon for supreme authority to belong to anyone other than the party leader, whether he was called general secretary, first secretary or chairman. But in his later years such authority did accrue to Deng Xiaoping in China, even after he had given up his major party offices. Nevertheless, he had attained that status as a result of his long and respected service to the party. Boris Yeltsin also was a hugely influential leader between 1989 and 1991, at a time when he held no high party office, other than nominal membership of the Central Committee up to the point at which he resigned from the CPSU in July 1990. However, by that time the system had been transformed to such an extent that election to state offices – first, the all-Union legislature, then the Russian legislature, and finally the Russian presidency – provided an alternative and, by this time, superior source of authority and legitimacy to that offered by the party.

Had there not, however, been an evolution in the views of a number of people a rung or two lower in the party hierarchy, even such a reform-minded leader of the CPSU as Gorbachev would have been hamstrung. But there were such people. Yakovlev had been brought back into the party apparatus by Gorbachev, who subsequently promoted him with exceptional rapidity. Shevardnadze had been a relatively enlightened first secretary of the Communist Party in Georgia and was to become Gorbachev’s surprise choice to succeed Gromyko as foreign minister. Deputy heads of Central Committee departments, Chernyaev (from the International Department) and Shakhnazarov (from the Socialist Countries Department), were to become especially important aides to Gorbachev. They, and other enlightened officials who were brought into Gorbachev’s circle of advisers, were highly supportive of his innovative foreign policy and reform of the political system. They also themselves made important contributions to what was called the ‘New Political Thinking’, especially on foreign policy. These were people whose contacts with the intelligentsia within their own country and experience of the outside world had led to gradual, but fundamental, change in their way of looking at the world. (Shevardnadze was the exception. He
had extensive contact with the Georgian intelligentsia, but practically none with ‘abroad’ until after he became foreign minister.) Like Gorbachev, these various officials had in their youth taken most of the official doctrine in Stalin’s USSR for granted. By the second half of the 1980s, their political evolution had brought them close to social democracy.

Which Came First – Crisis or Reform?

In the long run, it was often argued before 1985, the Communist system could not survive without being reformed. That was doubtless true, and China is an example of a state which has introduced radical economic reform and has – thus far – preserved many of the essential features of a Communist polity. What perestroika demonstrated, however, was that Communism could not survive with radical reform of its political system. By the time political pluralism had been introduced, it was, quite simply, no longer meaningful to describe the state as Communist. The introduction of such reform produced fissures within the ruling party itself. What had been the most powerful institutions in the country – the Politburo and secretariat of the Central Committee – began to send mixed signals to the society, as their members visibly pulled in different directions. Once democratization had affected the ruling party, it could not be confined to it. There turned out to be a logical link between the two principal political characteristics of a Communist system. The party’s monopoly of power depended on the preservation of democratic centralism. In the absence of strict limitation on political debate and of tight central control over the flow of information, the Communist Party’s grip on the levers of power was seriously weakened. Even before other political parties were legalized, democratizing reform of the Soviet political system led to the speedy erosion of the CPSU’s ‘leading role’.

In the Soviet Union reform produced crisis more than crisis forced reform. The fate of the Soviet system and of the Soviet state did not hang in the balance in 1985. By 1989 the fate of both did. A majority within the party-state apparatus of the USSR fervently wanted to preserve both the system and the state, believing that the destiny of one was linked to that of the other. But by the end of the 1980s Gorbachev and the reformist wing of the party leadership had already introduced change that made the political system different in kind. From 1988 they consciously pursued systemic change, but they wanted speedy evolution rather than sudden collapse. As distinct from their intention of dismantling the Communist system, Gorbachev and most of his advisers were strongly opposed to the break-up of the
Soviet state. They recognized, however, the intimate relationship between means and ends, and they were not prepared to sacrifice the liberalized and democratizing political system on the altar of violent suppression of national separatism. The views of Gorbachev and like-minded supporters such as Yakovlev, Chernenko and Shakhnazarov had evolved, at varying speeds and under different constraints, from wishing to reform the system to seeking a ‘third way’ – a new model of ‘socialism with a human face’. Gorbachev in 1989 used approvingly that phrase from the Prague Spring which had so infuriated Brezhnev, since it seemed to cast aspersions on his face and that of the system he represented.

Yet Gorbachev (the evolution of whose views mattered so much because of his institutional power – as general secretary and, from March 1990, also as president) moved beyond that. By 1990–91, he no longer aspired to build something which had not yet been seen on earth, but a society which had produced a tangible enhancement of the quality of political life and which would, he hoped, produce comparable improvements in the standard of living. In other words, the model had become that of the European social democracies or the kind of social market economy which existed in West Germany. Gorbachev and his associates did not, of course, come remotely close to attaining such an economic goal. Whether it could eventually have been reached if there had been no August 1991 attempted coup, and if the break-up of the Soviet Union had been partial rather than so complete, remain unanswered, and unanswerable, questions. But perestroika had achieved a great deal. Along the way, fear of the state authorities was removed, liberty was introduced, competitive elections took place, and democratic accountability emerged in the USSR. It was not simply coincidental that these things happened shortly before the Soviet state itself ceased to exist. The task of holding together a democratized multinational state, in which each nation could point to a long list of grievances, was far harder than preserving the Union as a highly authoritarian state. Until the mid-1980s it had been taken for granted that every manifestation of nationalism would be stamped out ruthlessly. It was when that ceased to be the case that expectations were raised and Soviet statehood was called into question.

The Free Flow of Information

‘It’s a sociological law that the more information you give people, the more government policy becomes dependent on public opinion.’ Those were the words of Rafael Safarov, an Armenian political sociologist and a senior
researcher in the Institute of State and Law in Moscow, in a conversation I had with him in the mid-1970s. Perhaps sociological law was pitching it a bit high, but it was a good generalization. What is more, Safarov made essentially the same point, in somewhat more convoluted language, in a book, Public Opinion and State Administration, published in an edition of 6,000 copies in Moscow in 1975.\(^7\) Although the Helsinki agreement later in the same year declared that the participating states must ‘Make it their aim to facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds’,\(^8\) this certainly did not become an aim of any of the Communist states. It was only some three years into Gorbachev’s perestroika that a free flow of information became a political reality in the Soviet Union. Only then, indeed, did public opinion, as understood in Western countries, became a serious factor in the political equation. It transpired that a better-informed public did become much more critical of the party and state authorities. Even the reformist wing of the leadership, which had been in the vanguard of change in the first four years of perestroika, was often responding to public opinion more than it was leading it in the last two years or so of the Soviet state.

Although it is difficult to overestimate the significance of the institutional changes that were agreed at the Nineteenth Party Conference in 1988 – especially competitive elections for a working legislature – the earlier introduction of glasnost, not only as a concept but as a developing reality, should never be underestimated. Glasnost and institutional innovation worked in tandem. Contested elections and publication in the mass media of the results of opinion polls on sensitive political issues became concrete ways in which popular opinion could exert influence.\(^9\) By the late 1980s, glasnost had become almost identical to freedom of speech, and the flow of information had reached unprecedented levels for the Soviet Union. The jamming of foreign broadcasts had stopped, but the Soviet domestic mass media had changed so much that even highly critical Soviet citizens turned first to their own newspapers, and especially to the most radical of the home-grown and officially published weeklies and journals. It is not surprising that conservative Communists complained at virtually every meeting of the Politburo about the press being out of control. A free flow of information and a Communist system were mutually incompatible. Highly authoritarian regimes need state censorship and give rise to self-censorship. During perestroika, the first withered away before being formally replaced by an enlightened press law, and the latter was abandoned in the new atmosphere of tolerance. Freedom of speech and of publication became the most important manifestations of the new pluralism, and a bulwark against a return to the past.
The International Context

Finally, the collapse of Communism must be seen in international context. Since the Soviet Union was the hegemonic power in Eastern Europe, the transformation of both its political system and its foreign policy is explanation enough of the collapse of Communism in all the regimes which had either at their foundation or later been placed in power by Soviet force of arms. Changes within the international Communist movement had already made an impact on the thinking of members of Communist parties, going back to the Soviet–Yugoslav split. The changes in China after the death of Mao Zedong were even more important. Whereas ruling Communist parties, not least the CPSU, found themselves in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s defending themselves against accusations of ‘revisionism’ emanating from China, by the middle of the 1980s economic reform had proceeded further in China than in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, with only Hungary coming close to Chinese economic reform (while surpassing China in terms of political relaxation).

The improvement in East–West relations was even more important than the continuing diversity (but decline in antagonism) within the international Communist movement. One cannot say that Communism ended in Europe as a result of the end of the Cold War, for the dismantling of a Communist system in the Soviet Union and a qualitative enhancement of Soviet relations with both the United States and Western Europe went hand in hand. However, Cold War tensions invariably worked to the advantage of hard-liners within the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Western powers (including the one which mattered most, the United States) had been prepared to see East Europe as a region in which the Soviet Union had considerable influence. When, however, Stalin imposed Soviet-type systems on these states, that was the single most important cause of the development of the Cold War. The hostility was intensified at various times by the actions of both sides, including the Soviet military interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Afghanistan in 1979. The 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia made a greater impact in Western Europe than in the United States, although in Europe, as well as the USA, it was quite soon followed by improved relations with Brezhnev’s Soviet Union – the détente of the early 1970s.

A central paradox, however, is that the Cold War, which was seen on the Western side as a struggle to keep Communism at bay and to restrain the Soviet Union, also helped to sustain the Soviet system. It is true that the
arms race was proportionately a much heavier burden on the Soviet than on the American economy, although it was not negligible even in the latter case. But, as Alec Nove put it: ‘The centralized economy, Party control, censorship, and the KGB were justified in the eyes of the leaders, and of many of the led, by the need to combat enemies, internal and external.’ On the one hand, excessive military expenditure overstrained and distorted the Soviet economy. On the other, it was the Cold War which helped the party leadership to maintain control, and even loyalty, and to accord the military-industrial complex and the security forces their major roles within the system. Throughout the post-war period, the icier the Cold War became, the stronger was the position of hard-liners inside the Soviet Union. One corollary of Gorbachev’s efforts to end the Cold War, in which he found a much readier partner in Ronald Reagan than many on either side of the Atlantic had expected, was a weakening of the Ministry of Defence and the KGB as institutional interests within the Soviet system, and a rapid decline in the influence of conservative Communist opponents of domestic reform.

Before perestroika, the most that could be achieved in US–Soviet relations was an agreement on the rules of the game and enough prudent interaction to avoid getting on a slippery slope to nuclear war. Lessons were learned from the extreme danger in which the world was placed by the Cuban missile crisis. But only with the coming to power of Gorbachev, his appointment of a new foreign policy team, and his willingness to look afresh at the fundamental issues of East–West relations did a qualitative change in the relationship become possible. Ronald Reagan, George Shultz and Margaret Thatcher were among those who declared that the Cold War was over by the end of 1988. If the visit of President Reagan to Moscow in the summer of 1988 signalled the psychological end of the Cold War, Gorbachev’s speech to the United Nations in December of the same year brought it to an end ideologically. It was, however, the acquisition of national independence, together with the rejection of Communist systems, in Eastern Europe in the course of 1989 which put the seal on the Cold War’s ending. Gerasimov, the adroit press spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, produced the best sound-bite (and speaking in English rather than his native Russian). At the end of the harmonious summit meeting between Gorbachev and President George H.W. Bush in Malta in December 1989, he said: ‘We buried the Cold War at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.’ Earlier that year, confirming that the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ was dead, Gerasimov quipped that it had been replaced by the ‘Sinatra doctrine’ – letting the East Europeans do it their way.