



Astrid S. Tuminez, “Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union,”
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There are three great questions about the Gorbachev era, each of which will remain a source of endless scholarly controversy: Why did perestroika, or Gorbachev’s program to “restructure” Soviet socialism, begin? Why did perestroika fail? And why did the Soviet Union split apart into fifteen successor states? While not unrelated, these questions are distinct, and a persuasive answer to one does not lead inexorably to a persuasive answer to another.

In her article, “Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union,” Astrid Tuminez avoids conflating these problems and focuses on the third question - why did the Soviet Union splinter? In effect, she takes the launching of perestroika and the difficulties that the Gorbachev reforms experienced in other arenas - notably, economic and foreign policy - as givens. Her core argument - with which I agree, albeit for somewhat different reasons - is that the primary cause of the Soviet dissolution was not nationalist mobilization from below, with the “qualified exception” of “Russian elite separatist nationalism, which had a fatal effect on the Soviet state” (82). Instead, she emphasizes: (1) Gorbachev’s failure to negotiate a new “compact between center and periphery”; (2) a lack of elite consensus at the center over the desirability of preserving the union; and (3) the unwillingness of Gorbachev to use force to suppress separatists (83). Of these, she places greatest explanatory weight on the third factor. As she puts it: “Ultimately, Gorbachev’s unwillingness to use large-scale coercive violence was the most critical factor in the collapse of the imperial control... The Soviet Union did not have to disintegrate in 1991... The Soviet empire could have lasted for many more years, perhaps even decades, had there been a different leader or set of leaders determined to maintain imperial control, even at great military, social, and human cost” (134-135).

To support her argument, Tuminez makes a number of subsidiary claims. She notes, for example, that it has been very rare for internationally recognized states to accept secession or dissolution without resorting to force, and that where force has been used it is usually successful in preserving a state’s territorial integrity. And even when states fail to prevent secession or dissolution, they have been able to “quell armed ethnic separatism” for “long periods of time” (116). She also argues that the interethnic violence that broke out during perestroika, while a challenge to Gorbachev and the authority of the “center,” typically made it less likely that political elites in the union republics would press for independence because of the possibility that independence would be followed by the breakup of the successor states or by civil war.

Tuminez also examines, and rejects, various “dissolution from below” arguments. She argues, again in my view persuasively, that demographic trends/pressures carried little explanatory weight. And where demographic factors did matter, it was not in the way that many

had expected. Decreasing rates of population growth among Russians and other Slavs, along with high growth rates for the USSR's Muslim peoples (who were considered the most culturally distant from the majority Slavs and thus assumed to be anti-Soviet in orientation), did not mean that separatist sentiments would prove more significant among the latter. On the contrary, support for independence was strongest among the "low growth" titular peoples in the Baltic republics (Estonians, Lithuanians, and Latvians). Indeed, the USSR's Muslim peoples proved consistently more supportive of a preserved union than even the majority Slavs (121-124). As Tuminez points out, the unwillingness of most Russians and Ukrainians to defend the USSR's territorial integrity helps account for the union's relatively bloodless demise in 1991.

To the extent that demographics did have an impact, it was in contributing to fears among Baltic titulars that they would become a minority in their "homelands," a trend that resulted primarily from in-migration of non-titulars, not a "fertility war." Even so, it was first and foremost the "perceived illegitimacy of Soviet rule" among Baltic titulars that explains the potency of the anti-union nationalist mobilizations in the Baltic republics, not simply demographic pressure (124). Indeed, other titulars faced similar demographic pressures (the Kazakhs, for example, constituted only 43 percent of Kazakhstan's population in 1989) but nevertheless supported the preservation of the union. Nor was the threat of language loss particularly important - native language retention for titulars in the union republics was generally high, and Soviet nationality policy provided extensive protections for minority languages, particularly those of the fourteen non-Russian union republics. Finally, Tuminez notes that religion was only a "peripheral factor" (125). Not only were traditionally Muslim peoples less likely to support separatism, but dominant churches in the more assertive republics were not particularly supportive of nationalism, with the partial exceptions of the Catholic Church in Lithuania and the Uniate Catholic Church in Ukraine (125).

All of these core arguments I agree with - indeed, the general thrust of the Tuminez article is similar to the main argument in my recent book, *Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Let me turn now to several points of disagreement.

First, I have never believed that it is useful to characterize the Soviet Union as an "empire." The Soviet Union was highly autocratic and profoundly illiberal. It was also multiethnic and multinational (by virtually any definition of "nation"). Assuming one does not define "federalism" as necessarily entailing democracy or a genuine rule of law, the USSR was a federation in which different units of the federal hierarchy had well-understood and institutionalized rights and obligations (institutionalized formally through Soviet law and informally through political practice, as is always the case in self-described federations). Whether it was an "empire," however, is much less clear, particularly if the intent is to characterize the relationship not between the USSR and its "dependencies" abroad but between a "center" (or "core") and a "periphery" within the USSR.

I have three principal objections here. First, there is the general problem of defining "empire" in a useful way. While this is not the place for an extended conceptual analysis, I will simply cite Tuminez's definition, which, like every definition of "empire" that I have ever encountered that includes the USSR as a referent, strikes me as far too indiscriminant. Tuminez

states: “An empire is an organized political community consisting of multiple national-territorial units, with one unit (the ‘center’) that exercises control over the effective sovereignty of two or more subordinate units” (86). If so, then virtually every state in the world today is an empire - certainly every federal state qualifies. Indeed, I do not believe it is possible to come up with a definition of “empire” that is applicable to the Soviet Union but not to India, Nigeria, Brazil, Canada, or indeed the United States.

Second, it is not clear to me just where, or what, the imperial “center” or “core” was in the Soviet case. Tuminez asserts: “(T)he USSR had a controlling center and a controlled periphery. The center was Moscow, and the central rulers were (primarily, though not exclusively) the Russian and russified elites who wielded power in key Soviet institutions. The periphery was the rest of the country, especially the republics outside Russia” (88). The implication, then, is that she understands the notion of “center” spatially, as a geographic entity (Moscow), not as a “center of power” in organizational terms (the Politburo, the Central Committee, the nomenklatura). Nevertheless, just what this geographic entity was is not entirely clear, since on the one hand she implies that the RSFSR was part of the “periphery” but also had a special status that placed it close to the “center.” Aside from the ambiguity regarding the RSFSR, it is also worthy of note that this is not how the term “center” was frequently used in late Soviet political discourse. I recall being in Moscow in 1990 and having Muscovites rail against the “center” with the same intensity as anti-Soviet demonstrators in the Baltic republics. Clearly they were not angry at Moscow in a territorial sense - by then their champion, after all, was Yeltsin, who had just been elected chairman of the RSFSR Congress of Peoples’ Deputies. What they meant by the “center” was the CPSU leadership and/or the Communist regime in general, not some geographical entity. In some instances, certainly, the term was used to refer to Moscow in a geographic, anti-imperialist sense. But it was used at least as often, I believe, if not more so, to refer to the central leadership in a purely organizational sense.

Third, characterizing a state as an empire implies not only a privileged geographical entity but also a privileged people - which in the Soviet case invariably means the Russians. Indeed, Tuminez is very clear in arguing that the Russians were a privileged people and that this status is important to her understanding of the USSR as an “empire.” In terms of formal institutions and legitimizing myths, however, there was no clear privileging of Russians in the Soviet system - indeed, as Russian nationalists would later point out, the RSFSR was marginally disadvantaged institutionally, and Russian culture was in many respects threatened by “Sovietization” no less than other cultures. The principal way in which Russian culture was privileged, in my opinion, was not elite composition (as is often argued, including by Tuminez) but language - Russian was the language of state business and the CPSU, and it was designated the language of “internationality communication.” But in this the USSR was no different than most states that are highly fragmented linguistically - there has to be some “privileged” language to use for state business, and it is difficult to see what choice the Soviets had other than to use Russian for these purposes. Moreover, although Soviet nationality policy changed over time, there were always very significant institutional protections for virtually all languages spoken in the Soviet Union. In short, the status of the Russian people in the Soviet state is a complex and subtle question, and I do not think it is helpful to simplify it rhetorically by characterizing the USSR as an “empire.” Nor do I think the characterization is germane to Tuminez’s arguments about the Soviet dissolution.

Another point of disagreement, and perhaps a more important one when it comes to explaining the breakup, relates to the course of action that the Soviet leadership should have taken to deal with the deepening “nationality crisis.” Tuminez argues that Gorbachev should have attempted early on to negotiate a new “compact” with union republic elites, and that this new arrangement should have entailed a significant devolution of power as well as greater republican representation in central organs. In fact, Gorbachev and his allies became increasingly preoccupied with “the nationality question” after the Armenian-Azerbaijani violence of early 1988, to the point where by late 1990 it was the dominant issue on the political agenda, and it is difficult to see any Soviet leader, reformist or otherwise, anticipating the full extent of the nationality problem much sooner. Moreover, Gorbachev’s strategy from late 1989 on was almost exactly what Tuminez recommends - to arrive at a new division of power between the federal government and the union republics through the negotiation of a new union treaty. I argue in my book that this strategy proved disastrous to the USSR as an integral state, both because it gave elites in even the most anti-union republics veto power over a successful outcome and because it encouraged all union republic elites, even those who supported the union, to engage in a competitive game of one-upmanship in demanding more and more autonomy and “sovereignty” from the center.

The only course of action (short of using a good deal of force, which probably meant massive force by early 1991) that could have saved the union, I argue, was for federal authorities to settle quickly on a reasonable division of federal powers (as indeed they did, more or less, in early 1990) and then, most importantly, provide the most assertive union republics with a meaningful exit option through a practicable law on secession. My guess, and I suspect that Tuminez agrees, is that were such a reasonable exit option available, only the Baltic states would have availed themselves of the opportunity to secede, at least for the foreseeable future. But even if others had followed suit, those republics where there was significant popular support for independence constituted only a small portion of the total population and territory of the USSR. Contrary to what Tuminez implies, however, the law on secession adopted in April 1990 was designed, without question, not to enable secession but to make it impossible in practice, and it was understood as such by all parties at the time. Politically, then, it was entirely counterproductive, serving only to emphasize the hypocrisy of Gorbachev’s leadership.

I also believe, although this is difficult to demonstrate conclusively, that adopting a reasonable law on secession would have been politically possible for Gorbachev in early 1990. After all, he was able to convince his colleagues, despite great opposition from conservatives, and despite the fact that Gorbachev himself had great doubts about its wisdom, to accept the removal of Article 6 from the Soviet constitution, which guaranteed the CPSU its monopoly of power. And unlike Article 6, the right of the union republics to secede had been unequivocally endorsed by Lenin, so there was a “useable past” to legitimate the move.

I have two other significant points of disagreement with the Tuminez paper, which I will mention only briefly. First, I believe Tuminez underestimates the difficulty of managing and containing the interethnic violence that broke out during perestroika, particularly the Armenian-Azerbaijani violence over Karabakh. To say that Moscow should have solved the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh’s status at an early date is all very well and good, but the question is how.

Tuminez says that the best solution was probably direct administration by Moscow. In fact, as she also points out, that solution was tried (117-119). The arrangement failed, however, to satisfy either the Armenians or (particularly) the Azerbaijanis. By then, many Azerbaijanis had fled Nagorno-Karabakh, which meant that preserving the status quo appeared to favor the Armenians. Repatriation of Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, was unacceptable to the Karabakh Armenians and would have risked renewed violence.

Second, I believe that Tuminez underestimates the considerable political constraints on using force against nationalists in the union republics. Tuminez argues that it was not interethnic violence per se but “the failure of Soviet leaders to act early or competently enough - and above all their failure to use force decisively and in a sustained manner,” that proved crucial (121). The reason, she implies, was Gorbachev’s soft heart - she quotes the reporter John Lloyd that Gorbachev had “a blessedly pacific turn of mind” (135). I agree that Gorbachev was personally very much opposed to the use of force. However, there were other factors at work, and we will probably never know which was more decisive, personal disposition or rational political calculation. Gorbachev believed that a great historical struggle was underway to restructure and humanize Soviet socialism. Using force internally to repress political mobilization would have threatened that project in multiple ways. Above all, it would have justified the objections of his numerous conservative critics, who believed his great enterprise was not just politically risky but hopelessly naïve. What would the point be of “activating the human factor” or promoting “socialist democracy” if the result was popular mobilization that then required the use of massive coercion to repress it? And what, one might add, would the reaction of the West, or the people of Eastern Europe, have been?

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