
Explaining the Collapse: A Review of Four Approaches to the Breakdown of the Soviet Union

1. Introduction

This review focuses on various approaches to explain the dramatic, and for many the unexpected, collapse of the Soviet Union. As Malia (1992) puts it: "Nothing about communism ever astonished the world so much as the manner of

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its exit from history: In a feat without precedent, a great state, and one of the world's two superpowers, abolished itself from the face of the earth, repudiating its name, its sacred symbols, and all its basic institutions." (p. 57).

The natural fascination and academic curiosity stirred by the breakdown of the Soviet Union has provided a fertile ground for speculations and explanations with regard to the question of how this could happen. The purpose here is to review and contrast four different approaches to the collapse: the essentialist, the new institutional, the societal, and the multicausal approach.¹ I seek to discuss and establish a) the merits and demerits of the explanations presented, and b) significant differences and similarities in their focus. Apart

from a comparison between the approaches, it is a joint objective to outline relevant differences within the approaches. Finally, in a wider perspective, this review will provide an opportunity to address such broad questions as the choice of research design, and the relationship between Soviet & post-Soviet studies and comparative politics in general.

The reasons why these four approaches have been selected are three-fold. First, they express four of the most dominant explanations of the collapse. Second, they are distinct and sufficiently different from each other. Third, they are representative of important dividing lines within comparative politics, Soviet studies, and methodology, generally speaking: state vs. society, origin within Soviet studies vs. imported into Soviet studies, and monocausal vs. multicausal. Two works have been selected within each approach, with the explicit objective of having two pieces that fulfil the requirements of the approach, but which at the same time illustrate the possible divergence within the approach in question.

For the sake of clarity, it should be stated at the outset that the term approach will only be used to denote the four perspectives mentioned above, while the term explanation will be used for the eight different arguments presented.

The plan of the review is as follows. In the section following this introduction, the four different approaches are presented and outlined. In the third section, I analyze their differences and similarities, and strengths and weaknesses, with regard to the underlying causes of the Soviet Union's crisis susceptibility. In the fourth section, the breakdown in itself is addressed. Here the different approaches are compared in terms of their ability to explain the breakdown and its timing as a logical and theoretically coherent consequence of the earlier depicted reasons for the crisis susceptibility. Finally, I end the paper with a number of concluding comments, placing our observations in a wider perspective.

2. Introducing the Arguments²

The Essentialist Approach

In an attempt to summarize the general argument of the essentialist approach with regard to the Soviet breakdown, Dallin (1992, p. 279f), not an essentialist himself, outlines three main claims. First, the essentialists argue that the nature and genetic code of the system in a sense doomed it from the very start, beginning with the illegitimate seizure of power in 1917. Second, they claim that the system was unchangeable throughout its history. Third, they argue that the system was essentially unreformable, and hence every effort to reform or modify it would fail, since such a system must be completely replaced. In sum, the core of the essentialist approach is a focus on what the Soviet Union was, i.e. its essence, rather than the behavior of the system and particular aspects of it. This emphasis and the often normatively coloured argument, has led some observers to denote this approach "neo-totalitarian" (e.g., Dallin, 1992, p. 280).

The first essentialist argument to be discussed here is presented by Malia (1992). Though largely irrelevant to our future analysis, it should be mentioned that Malia, as in other recent writings of his (e.g., "Z", 1990), takes the Soviet collapse as indicative of the failure of mainstream Sovietology and the appropriateness of the totalitarian perspective (e.g., Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1966). Malia builds his argument around the totalitarian character of the system, which gives the system its nature and logic. This, in turn, is a nature implying an "intrinsic irreformability": "The structure is so tight, and everything is so interconnected, that any attempt at liberalization inevitably skids off into dissolution." (Malia, 1992, p. 60). Less abstractly, Malia argues that the poor performance of the system induced continuous efforts at reforming the system, the last one occurring from 1985 onwards. These efforts undermined the pillars of the system, however, and when Eastern Europe collapsed, this also brought about the final collapse of the Soviet Union.

The work of Brzezinski (1989) has been chosen as the second essentialist argument. As in the

case of Malia, Brzezinski's argument is along the core notions and characteristics of the essentialist approach. According to him, the origin of a need for reform stems from the system itself. In a system which was essentially politicized from the top down, but where real politics only took place at the top, the system itself was protected from the challenge of change. This nature of the system was the legacy of Lenin and Stalin, which in turn led to the legacy of Brezhnev, stagnation. The reform efforts of Andropov and Gorbachev were the natural consequences of stagnation and the changing reality. Gorbachev and his reforms were, however, caught in an historical paradox that eventually caused too much disruption: "To restore the global prestige of communism, the Soviet Union ha[d] to repudiate most of its own communist past, both in terms of doctrine and practise." (p. 50).

The Neo-Institutional Approach

Our second approach to the breakdown of the Soviet Union emanates from what has been called the new institutionalist schools in political science, economics, and sociology. While sharing the pre-occupation with institutions, these schools differ in many respects.³ The writings of Roeder (1993) and Solnick (1992) illustrate this heterogeneity, and can be placed respectively within the sub-fields of historical institutionalism and new institutional economics.

Roeder argues that the primary cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be found in the formal and informal institutions of the Soviet polity, specifically in what he calls "the constitution of Bolshevism". Simply stated, the institutional relationships, i.e. the constitution, created by the Bolsheviks after 1917 led to two parallel and conflicting developments. On the one hand, stable political institutions were created to favor development. On the other hand, these institutional relationships implied inertia and resistance to innovation and adaptation. This was a contradiction that was augmented over the years, and which finally led to the collapse of the system: "The one-party regime ultimately fell owing to its inability to respond to immense social changes that had taken place in Soviet society –

ironically, social changes that the Party itself had set in motion." (p. 3).

Solnick departs from the principal-agent problem as developed in the sub-field of new institutional economics, and applies this perspective to the Soviet bureaucracy. In the original formulation of this theory, the principal's ability to control the opportunist urge of the agent is influenced by the clarity of property rights and the presence of information asymmetries. In the Soviet system, the original problem of the principal-agent problem was exacerbated by uncertain property rights and pronounced information asymmetries, making the system particularly sensitive to change. Against this background, the Gorbachev reforms undermined the authority of the principals in the bureaucracy, bringing about opportunist behavior on behalf of the agents, which in turn led to an organization breakdown.

The Societal Approach

As opposed to the neo-institutional explanations, which focused on aspects of the state, societal explanations to the breakdown stress variables outside of the polity, e.g., class structures, social movements, generational replacement etc. While the state may still exist as an actor, the explanatory power lies primarily with societal forces, and their relationship to the state. The broad scope of the societal approach permits it to incorporate theories emphasizing different aspects of society, as is illustrated by the two writings selected from this approach, Hosking (1990) and Lewin (1989).

Hosking argues that the main reason behind the need to initiate reforms in the 1980s can be found in the impact of the totalitarian system on Soviet society. According to Hosking, the totalitarian system produced a nation traumatized by its own past, destroyed the old society and created a new one, and caused a deep divide between the public and the private persona. Both despite and because of the repression, Russian society kept traditions of political participation and mutual solidarity. After the death of Stalin, these traditions began to surface and from then and onwards we have witnessed the strengthening of alternative public opinion and the re-emer-

gence of civil society. According to Hosking, the Gorbachev reforms were in a sense an attempt to bring the old state up to date with a more developed and autonomous society. At the same time, however, their immediate cause was a crisis in the economy, so apparent to the leadership.

While discussing basically the same development, Lewin takes a somewhat different approach to the relationship between the state and society. Lewin's fundamental notion is that in order to explain the reforms of the 1980s, it is necessary to understand the changes which Soviet society underwent in the post world war period. Soviet society developed from a rural peasant society into an urbanized, educated, industrialized, professionalized and complex society, where socio-economically heterogeneous generations coexist. At the same time, however, this modern society was strait-jacketed into a state still left in the 1930s, a state which could neither satisfy the economic nor the participatory demands of modern society. As the range and magnitude of this mismatch increased, so did the reforms that were required to close the gap. By the 1980s, what was needed was a complete recreation of the political system, a formidable task which could only succeed if performed with strong political will and in collaboration with the different social classes.

The Multicausal Approach

Whereas the other approaches were characterized by a focus on one particular variable in each case, the explanations of the Soviet breakdown presented by Dallin (1992) and Deudney & Ikenberry (1991) are multicausal in nature. Hence, these explanations share methodological aspects, rather than a common independent variable.

According to Dallin, six interrelated and unintended developments formed the necessary preconditions for the breakdown: First, a gradual loosening of the Stalinist systems of controls; second, the spread of corruption; third, the erosion of ideology; fourth, a remarkable process of social change; fifth, causes in the international environment, such as a heightening fear of nuclear war and a heavy defense burden; sixth and

finally, the decline of the Soviet economy. Dallin argues that none of these explanations can be considered more powerful than the other, but that it is their interaction which is critical. Still, the eventual breakdown cannot be explained unless Gorbachev is brought in as a catalyst in this fragile environment. Neither Gorbachev's reforms nor the underlying environment created by the six preconditions are in themselves sufficient explanations, but together they led to the collapse.

Deudney & Ikenberry approach the matter of the Soviet crisis by advancing a composite explanation, incorporating both international and national factors. Unlike Dallin, they claim that there is one variable which had the most decisive effect, the Soviet economic failure. Adopting the perspective of industrial modernization theory, Deudney & Ikenberry specifically emphasize an inherent contradiction in the economic system: "The old command order is impeding industrial modernization while, at the same time, industrial modernization is undercutting the old command order." (p. 243). Exacerbated by natural resource constraints and international military competition, this economic stagnation led to a crisis characterized by declining domestic political legitimacy, declining ideological appeal, and constraints on foreign policy resources.

3. Explaining the Crisis Susceptibility

Having introduced the approaches, the stage is set for a comparison of their arguments in terms of how and how well they explain the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The analysis is divided into two parts. First, I analyze the ability of the arguments to account for why the Soviet Union was particularly susceptible to a crisis, i.e. the long-run processes leading up to the final breakdown. Second, in the next section I discuss the arguments' explanatory power with regard to the emergence of Gorbachev and the collapse.

I will leave aside the evaluation of the explanations until the second part of this section, and begin by discussing the relevant differences and similarities between the approaches. On the one hand, their separate foci and independent vari-

ables may lead one to assume that there will be significant differences between the approaches. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to expect certain similarities, since they all seek to explain the same phenomenon and dependent variable. In short, how different are the explanations offered by these approaches with regard to the crisis susceptibility of the Soviet Union?

Surprisingly similar, I believe. While indeed there are certain exceptions to the generalizations presented here, there is a rather unexpected unity around a core argument. The most apparent unanimity is displayed with regard to whether the sources of the crisis susceptibility are domestic or international. With the exception of the multicausal explanations, which can "afford" to include international factors, all other arguments turn to *domestic factors* for their explanations. Malia and Brzezinski stress the nature of the system, Roeder and Solnick, the state institutions, and Hosking and Lewin, Soviet society.

Furthermore, what might be perceived as quite different emphases within the domestic sphere – the nature of the system, the state, and society – are in fact not that divergent when looked at more closely. All explanations, including the multicausal, depend on *the system* in one way or another in order to be able to make their arguments. By the system, I mean the political and economic structures created by the party and the state. In addition, with the interesting exception of Solnick, who stresses the fragility of the bureaucratic structure, all other explanations claim that it is *the rigidity* of the system which is crucial.

A number of interesting variations can be found within this shared emphasis on the rigidity of the system. First of all, there are differences with regard to whether the rigidity is the independent variable, or a variable with which the real independent variable interacts. In the case of the essentialist explanations and Roeder's argument, different aspects of state rigidity – intrinsic irreformability, totalitarian control, complete politicization – constitute the heart of the argument. In the case of the societal explanations and Deudney & Ikenberry's industrial modernization thesis, however, it is the interaction of a rigid system with changes within society and the

economy which constitute the main reasons behind the crisis susceptibility.

A second area where variation can be found with regard to the rigidity of the system, is whether it is the polity or the economy which is inflexible. While the polity and the economy certainly were particularly difficult to separate from each other in the Soviet Union, we may still discern differences in emphasis between the explanations. Deudney & Ikenberry present the only argument which solely focuses on the rigidity of the economic command structures. The essentialist approaches of Malia and Brzezinski encompass both the economy and the polity in their accounts of the inflexibility inherent in the system. Finally, there is a marked unanimity among Roeder and the societal arguments of Hosking and Lewin on the polity's unresponsiveness to changes in society.

A third and last variation in terms of the conception of system rigidity concerns the origin of this rigidity. Basically, the diverging line is between those who consider the rigidity to have been there from the very beginning, and those who view the rigidity as an accumulated or recent aspect of the system. In the first group we find the writings of Malia and Roeder, who argue that "the Bolshevik constitution" (Roeder, ch. 3) and "the basic model of the Soviet total society" (Malia, p. 61) were in place already in the early years after the revolution. Rather than claiming that the seed of the system's stagnation was inherent from the very beginning, Brzezinski, Hosking, Lewin, and Deudney & Ikenberry, all stress the rigidity of the system as handed down by Stalin.

Having discussed the differences and similarities of these arguments, I will now elaborate briefly on the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations. How well do they account for the underlying processes of the breakdown? Do they make sense and are they credible? Before I discuss the particularities of each individual approach, we must recognize that, as a group, the arguments presented here, with the exception of Solnick, all have their main emphasis on the processes leading up to the breakdown. Though this may seem an obvious part of these arguments and thus should not be considered a

strength, I would argue that is a merit relatively speaking. First, when comparing these arguments to the growing literature on transitions, the explanations outlined here do far better. As Przeworski (1991, p. 3) admits, the transition literature has a tendency to only spot the precipitating conditions, rather than the underlying causes. Second, as will be evident when discussing the emergence of Gorbachev and the actual breakdown in the next section, the arguments presented here have their qualitative emphasis on the underlying processes, rather than the breakdown itself.

Despite this general strength in explaining the underlying causes, there are, however, still important differences in logic and credibility. While perhaps one would be led to believe that these differences would be most pronounced between one approach and another, it seems as though the main dividing line runs within rather than between the approaches.

Starting with the essentialist explanations of Malia and Brzezinski, there are certain differences with regard to how well they elaborate on why the essence of the system formed the basis of its collapse. Coloured by his normative disposition, Malia seems to take the power of his explanation for granted: "It is in the logic of such a total system that it should end in total collapse. (—) There is no middle way between the integral preservation of such a system and its collapse." (p. 60). For Malia, the essence of the system doomed it from the very beginning, and he cannot provide us with any further discussions of the processes which caused its irreformability. Brzezinski, on the other hand, presents a more credible logic when elaborating on what actually constituted the essence of the system—the accumulated legacies of Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev—and why this put the Soviet Union in a particularly problematic position coming into the 1980s. But, in the end, the essentialist approach relies far too much on a normative, rather than actual and specified logic for why the Soviet Union was doomed to collapse.

In the case of the neo-institutional explanations of Roeder and Solnick, a fair comparison is difficult due to the ahistorical character and theoretical emphasis of Solnick's explanation. Still,

Solnick presents a convincing argument for why the Soviet Union was particularly susceptible to problems in the relationship between principals and agents. Turning to Roeder, we find a well-formulated single-cause argument with an elegant internal logic. Unfortunately, however, certain doubts arise as to whether Roeder has not sacrificed certain empirical reality in order to make the logic run smoothly. Most challenging to the credibility of the argument is the claim of a Bolshevik constitution and an unbroken and causal constitutional line from 1917 until the late 1980s.

The societal approach displays perhaps the largest divergence in terms of logic and credibility. In addition to the fact that he presents an argument clouded in irrelevant illustrations and without a clear line of reasoning, Hosking's core argument also suffers from a number of inherent contradictions. First, how was it that civil society was both destroyed by the totalitarian system (p. 9), and strengthened by mutual solidarity under pressure (p. 18)? Second, and related, how can Hosking build his argument around an ever-present civil society, and at the same time be a devoted supporter of the totalitarian model (p. 7)? Lewin, on the contrary, is consistent and credible when disregarding the totalitarian model and pushing for the explanatory power of the relationship between the state and a modernizing society.

Finally, let us consider the multicausal explanations of Dallin and Deudney & Ikenberry. Certainly, the act of putting forward a large number of explanations has advantages in terms of accuracy and credibility, when compared to the monocausal explanations. At the same time, however, there are important weaknesses in both Dallin's and Deudney & Ikenberry's pieces. In the case of Dallin, it would be to the advantage of his argument if it contained an attempt at elaborating on the interaction of the six independent variables. That, on the other hand, is the strength of Deudney & Ikenberry, relatively speaking. While they do suggest both a model for how the variables interact and a hierarchy among them, we may, however, question the credibility of these relationships. More specifically, they advance an economic argument completely de-

void of any reference to the Soviet polity. In light of the pervasive character of the state and the party in the Soviet Union, the absence of these factors challenge the credibility of this multi-causal explanation.

To sum up how, and how well the different approaches explain the crisis susceptibility of the Soviet Union, there are three main conclusions to be drawn from the preceding analysis.

First, despite their ostensible differences, the four approaches share a core argument. They all argue that the causes behind the crisis susceptibility are domestic, rather than international. Furthermore, the rigidity of the system is emphasized as a crucial component in most of the explanations. Second, it should be recognized that, as a group, the explanations discussed here do quite well in accounting for the underlying processes leading to the Soviet crisis susceptibility. This is an impression that will be strengthened when we turn to the more difficult task of explaining the actual breakdown in the next section. Third, differences in the credibility and logic of the argument are more pronounced within, rather than between, the different approaches. This indicates that all four approaches contribute important pieces to the overall picture, and that the explanatory power of the individual explanations is dependent on the structure of the argument, rather than on its choice of independent variable.

4. Explaining Why the Breakdown Occurred When it Did

Having discussed the underlying processes leading up to the breakdown, our focus in this section will be on the breakdown itself. In the preceding analysis I established that the four approaches discussed here all could provide us with quite elaborate explanations of the underlying processes of the Soviet crisis susceptibility. At the same time, however, there were noticeable differences in the logic and credibility of the arguments, differences which in fact were more pronounced within rather than between the four approaches.

Turning to the breakdown itself, we enter an area which indeed poses more of a challenge to the different approaches, than the task of accounting for the historical processes leading up to it. A discussion of the ability of the different approaches to explain why it happened when it happened constitutes an opportunity to subject these explanations to a hard test. In order to accept the claim of an approach with regard to the power of its independent variable, we must also ask it to provide us with an explanation of how the historical process in question de facto translates into a crisis situation and a breakdown. Essentially, can the different explanations presented here account for the time of the breakdown without relying on new, exogenous variables? That is, are the explanations theoretically coherent in the sense that the time of the collapse follows logically from the causes depicted as leading to it? I will proceed by analyzing one approach at a time.⁴

Starting with the essentialist explanations of Malia and Brzezinski, they both share distinct similarities in their weaknesses and strengths with regard to how well they can explain why the Soviet Union collapsed when it did. According to both Malia and Brzezinski, the Gorbachev reforms were reactions against the stagnation caused by the rigidity of the system. In both accounts, the reforms also caused an unprecedented disruption in this fully interconnected and total system, a disruption which threatened its essence and eventually brought about its collapse.

The relative strengths of both Malia and Brzezinski lie in the logic with which the character of the system translates into the impossibility of reforming it without unsettling the entire system. In what we may view as a "petrified equilibrium" argument, they argue that once the rigid system is disrupted, the complete interconnectedness of the parts will cause its disintegration. For Malia, Gorbachev's reforms undermined the key pillars of the system: its purpose, plan, police, and party (p. 64). For Brzezinski, the presence of a revisionist in the Kremlin (Gorbachev) had to lead to political disintegration and doctrinal eclipse (p. 64). Hence, in both cases there is a coherent logic where the rigid system causes

stagnation, which calls for reforms, which in turn bring about a collapse due to the irreformable character of the system.

However, as in the case of the underlying causes of the crisis susceptibility, the normatively coloured emphasis on the totalitarian essence of the system and its inevitable collapse, raise questions regarding the actual underpinnings of this logic. Furthermore, we can observe a number of more specific, potential weaknesses in these arguments as well. First, we may raise the question whether the emergence of Gorbachev and the launching of reforms were not in fact *against* the logic of the system. Let us pose the question this way: Is it in the logic of a totalitarian and utterly politicized system that a leader with the intention to reform is allowed to emerge and pursue his radical reforms? Secondly, it should be mentioned that Malia has to introduce an exogenous variable, the breakdown in Eastern Europe, in order to account for the final collapse (p. 64f). Against the background of Malia's earlier claims regarding system collapse and inevitability, this reliance on an exogenous variable is quite surprising.

Turning to the neo-institutionalist explanations, we do not find the same degree of homogeneity with regard to strengths and weaknesses, as displayed by the essentialist arguments. There are, however, interesting similarities between the essentialist explanations and the arguments put forward by Roeder and Solnick. According to Roeder, Gorbachev's launching of reforms came when the intensifying contradiction between the processes of institutional inertia and social change was unbearable. In turn, these reforms met such resistance that the entire system collapsed. From this perspective, Roeder's explanation for why it happened when it happened is powerful and follows logically from his argument for why the Soviet Union was headed for a collapse.

There might, however, be a number of serious weaknesses in the logic of this explanation. First of all, as in the case of the essentialist explanations, it is questionable whether Roeder's theory provides us with a satisfactory explanation of where Gorbachev came from. Second, and crucial if we accept Roeder's introduction of Gor-

bachev as a catalyst: How come Gorbachev managed to introduce reforms, when earlier attempts had failed and the system had developed towards a higher and higher institutional resistance over the last thirty years?

Turning to Solnick, we find an argument with a compact theoretical logic. To some extent, the structure of Solnick's argument resembles that of the essentialist arguments, where the reforms constitute a departure from a kind of institutional equilibrium. In this case, however, we are dealing with a fragile equilibrium, rather than the rigid and petrified one of the essentialist arguments. With the introduction of economic and political reforms, the delicate and unstable balance between large information asymmetries and unclear property rights on the one hand, and unconventional methods of control (e.g. the plan) on the other, was disrupted. This, in turn, triggered opportunistic behavior on the part of the agents, which finally led to an organizational breakdown and disintegration.

The weaknesses in Solnick's general theoretical explanation of the organizational breakdown are few. Perhaps the most valid criticism would be an echo of earlier critique and point to the fact that his analysis is completely devoid of any discussion of Gorbachev and what led to the introduction of reforms. However, at the same time it should be noted that, unlike the other explanations, this is a theory where institutional reforms and balanced/unbalanced relationships are an integral part. Another possible, but missing elaboration would have been a discussion about why the information asymmetries became so problematic under Gorbachev's, but not Khrushchev's reforms.

A significant problem in Roeder's argument was the inability of his historical processes to account for why the Soviet Union collapsed when it did unless exogenous factors such as Gorbachev's emergence were incorporated. Shifting to the societal explanations, their process-oriented arguments indicate that we may find the same problem here. Since both Hosking's and Lewin's works were published before the final breakdown, the most interesting aspect is how their societal explanations translate into the

emergence of Gorbachev and the introduction of reforms.

Unfortunately, Hosking's explanation of the launching of reforms suffers from some of the same confusion and inconsistency that characterized his description of the processes leading up to the crisis situation. Despite the fact that the independent variable and focus of Hosking's analysis is the awakening and strengthening of civil society, he resorts to economic causes when attempting to explain the reasons behind the reforms. At the same time, however, it should be noted that civil society re-emerges as a factor when Hosking argues that "the genie is out of the bottle" (p. 154) and there is no turning back. Still, there are two central weaknesses in Hosking's explanation with regard to theoretical coherence. First of all, the underlying process of a continuous strengthening of civil society does not translate into an explanation of why there was a launching of reforms. Secondly, and consequently, the strengthening of civil society explains even less the timing of the reforms.

Where Hosking could not and did not even attempt to show how an emerging civil society led to reforms, Lewin presents a convincing and theoretically coherent argument. As the gap increased between the economic and participatory demands of modern Soviet society and what the rigid state could provide, the state gradually lost legitimacy. This was recognized in the last years of the Brezhnev era, when a new line of thinking based on frankness began to develop, a line which came to flourish under Gorbachev. Hence, Gorbachev's reforms were not, as Lewin puts it, "an overnight improvisation" (p. 114). Instead, the range and magnitude of the reforms were a result of the new reform-minded and educated generation within the leadership, a generation which reflected the changes in society. To sum up, Lewin presents an elegant argument where his underlying processes adequately explain the emergence of Gorbachev and the timing of reforms.

Finally, let us turn to the multicausal explanations and their capacity to explain in a theoretically coherent way why the Soviet Union collapsed when it did. Perhaps it is asking too much to demand theoretical coherence from multi-

causal explanations whose explicit goal is one of reaching accuracy through multiplicity. At the same time, however, Deudney & Ikenberry and Dallin are illustrations of two separate ways of approaching multicause-mapping.

Deudney & Ikenberry seek to keep a straight line through their argument, despite the inclusion of additional variables. According to them, the time of the crisis and the response with reforms is a result of the aggravation of the economic stagnation caused by natural resource constraints and international competitive pressures. This, in turn, results in declining political legitimacy, declining ideological appeal, and constraints on foreign policy resources. Furthermore, Deudney & Ikenberry explain the choice of turning to liberalization and modernized socialism as the most rational way to alleviate the economic contradiction underlying the stagnation. Hence, it is possible to trace a straight line from Deudney & Ikenberry's causes of the economic stagnation to the particular choice of reform efforts. At the same time, however, it certainly would have strengthened their argument had they added a political dimension and elaborated more extensively on why the economic stagnation led to reform efforts in the mid-1980s, when it had not done so earlier.

Dallin's explanation of the timing of the breakdown can be said to lack both the relative coherence of Deudney & Ikenberry's account, as well as their attempt at a specification of the interaction of the variables. Dallin's six underlying causes cannot in themselves explain the time of the collapse. Rather, his historical causes create a background environment marked by fragility, which would not necessarily have had to collapse, if it had not been for the emergence of a catalyst, the Gorbachev factor. In order to explain the timing of the breakdown, and even why it eventually happened, Dallin thus has to introduce Gorbachev as yet another cause. Hence, why it happened when it happened does not follow logically from the earlier depicted historical explanations.

To sum up the explanatory power and coherence of the different approaches with regard to the emergence of Gorbachev and the breakdown, there are five main conclusions.

First, to ask these approaches to explain the breakdown and its timing as a logical consequence of the earlier depicted underlying causes, is to subject them to a hard test. Hence, it is not surprising that their general result here is somewhat less impressive than their coverage of the underlying causes. Second, the explanations which depict the system as a kind of equilibrium, petrified or fragile, have more success in explaining the timing of the breakdown, relatively speaking. Third, the explanations emphasizing gradual processes generally have considerable difficulties in explaining why Gorbachev emerged and why the system collapsed when it did. With the noteworthy exception of Lewin, these explanations have to include additional, exogenous factors to explain the turning point where these processes tipped over into a collapse. Fourth, and related to the last two conclusions, the ability to explain the timing of the collapse is thus partly dependent on the nature of the approach. From the very beginning, the essentialist arguments thus have an advantage over the societal explanations. Still, as illustrated by Malia's somewhat simplistic argument and Lewin's convincing explanation, such advantages/disadvantages can both be partly lost and overcome. Fifth and finally, the emergence of Gorbachev is a general problem among these explanations. To account for, in a credible and theoretically coherent way, where he came from, why he came at that particular time, and why he managed to introduce reforms, constitutes a challenge to all of these explanations.

5. Concluding Comments

What, then, have we learned and gained from this review of the essentialist, new institutionalist, societal, and multicausal approaches to the breakdown of the Soviet Union? Since I have already given brief summaries along the way, the purpose here is to put our observations into the broader picture of research design, theoretical power, and the relationship between Soviet area studies and comparative politics in general.

The first observation we need to elaborate on concerns the difficulties of explaining the timing

of the emergence of Gorbachev and the final breakdown. In a larger perspective, this is an issue of historical junctures and ex post explanations. As was shown in last section, the capacity to explain the timing of the collapse in a theoretically coherent way is largely dependent on whether explanations focus on gradual processes within the system, or depart from an image of it as a rigid or fragile equilibrium. At the heart of the difficulties of the process-oriented explanations lies the problem of combining process with critical turning-points or junctures. Essentially, how does one explain why a gradual process does not just continue, but instead tips over with wide-ranging effects?

Two different solutions can be traced among the approaches discussed here. First, an historical juncture like the launching of reforms can be credibly explained as the point where the process in question reaches its climax and translates into change. Lewin provides the best example of this successful solution, when he shows how the Gorbachev generation was the first societal and leadership generation without any ties to the Tsarist, Leninist and Stalinist state system of agrarian despotism. The other, more common and theoretically less rigorous solution is to introduce an exogenous factor in order to explain why the process reached a juncture and did not just continue. This is the context in which we should view the use of "the Gorbachev factor" and other exogenous variables.

A second general observation concerns the way these explanations approach what is usually viewed as a trade-off between parsimony and accuracy. While the optimal explanation would be able to satisfy both criteria, it is often the case that one has to be emphasized over the other. Among the four approaches discussed here, the main dividing line runs between the monocausal approaches – the essentialist, neo-institutional, and societal – on the one hand, and the multicausal approach on the other. In the case of the monocausal explanations, there is a general emphasis on parsimony. In many, but not all cases, this has brought about rather powerful and logical arguments with a high level of theoretical coherence. At the same time, however, it should be noted that some of the criticisms I have launched

against these explanations concern their tendency to over-simplify.

As emphasized in the discussion of the crisis susceptibility of the Soviet Union, all four approaches contribute substantial explanatory pieces to the overall picture. Having admitted this, I have thus shown the potential justification of a multicausal approach. Accuracy at the expense of parsimony is the explicit objective of the multicausal explanations presented here. As illustrated by the following quotes, this is a priority set by a blend of a particular ontological perspective and a methodological consideration: "It is perhaps natural for us to seek simple explanations, single causes, and yes-or-no answers. More often than not, in real life, things are far more complex." (Dallin, p. 299), and "These events are clearly too multifaceted to be subject to simple explanation, or attributed to any single variable." (Deudney & Ikenberry, p. 244). Unfortunately, however, the rather undisciplined and non-elaborating character of the multicausal explanations makes it quite easy to challenge their accuracy. It is therefore not without justification to argue that the multicausal explanations have ended up in a loss-loss situation, reaching neither parsimony nor accuracy.

Finally, let us elaborate on the issue of generalizability. A common thread in Soviet and post-Soviet studies has been the issue of whether the Soviet Union and its successor states can be studied with the same theoretical tools as are employed in mainstream comparative politics. Essentially, is the Soviet and post-Soviet context a *sui generis* or not? Turning this central concern the other way around, we may ask to what extent theories and conclusions reached within the Soviet context are applicable in other contexts.

Generally speaking, two aspects of the explanations presented here strongly limit their generalizability. First, with the exception of Solnick, all explanations depart from an historical perspective on the Soviet Union, hence tying themselves to the specifics of the Soviet experience. Roeder's Bolshevik constitution is a relevant example here, where the generalizability of the institutionalist approach is hampered by the historical uniqueness of the case.

Second, as was observed in the section dealing with the crisis susceptibility of the Soviet Union, there is a common reliance on the characteristics of the system as a crucial factor. Thus, by depending on the factor that was perhaps most unique in the Soviet context – the political and economic structures created by the party and the state – the wider applicability of the explanations forwarded here becomes severely limited.

Summing up, the four approaches to the Soviet breakdown reviewed here have provided us with valuable insights into such relevant and widely disparate issues as the merits and demerits of alternative points of departure, poor and fruitful research design, and the possible uniqueness of the Soviet experience.

In the end, the very collapse of the Soviet Union may also lead to greater possibilities for further theoretical advances in post-Soviet studies as well as comparative politics in general. As the *sui generis* character of the Soviet Union gives way to a democratic polity in transition and consolidation, conditions arise which are more conducive to the application of contemporary comparative theories.

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Notes

1. For other attempts at explaining and depicting aspects of the breakdown, see, e.g., Breslauer (1990), Chirot (1991), Cohen (1985), Colton (1986), Cook (1993), Daniels (1988, 1993), Jowitt (1992), Lapidus (1987), Rutland (1993), and Suny (1993).
2. All further references to the authors introduced here will be to the eight works representing the four approaches as presented in this section, unless otherwise is specified.
3. For an overview, see, Hall & Taylor (1994).
4. It should be noted that not all the works discussed here were written after the actual breakdown, and that, as a consequence, there are certain problems involved in performing a strict comparison. In an attempt to facilitate a comparison between the different explanations, we will focus on the explanatory power with regard to Gorbachev's

emergence, rather than the eventual breakdown, when analyzing the works written before the breakdown.

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