

NATIONALISM AND THE BREAK-UP OF THE SOVIET UNION

(In a lecture delivered on the 6th September 1991)

by

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In preparing this text for publication I have made some revisions of the lecture originally delivered on September 5th, 1991, partly to take into account subsequent developments. I have also added the quotation at the head of the text as well as a concluding section. I am grateful to Ein Lall for provoking me to make these additions by her strongly expressed disagreements.

-- R.S.

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'Let him who wishes weep bitter tears because history moves ahead so perplexingly...But tears are of no avail. It is necessary, according to Spinoza's advice, not to laugh, not to weep, but to understand.'

-- LEON TROTSKY

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On the day the coup in Moscow took place a colleague asked me what I thought would happen. I said the coup had no chance of success because the republics that had struggled for the last four years to achieve either independence or autonomy wouldn't accept a reversion to a hardline regime. I added that this attempt to put the clock back would only accelerate the territorial disintegration of the Soviet Union.

This was at a time when, on the first day of the coup, unreformed Stalinists in Colombo and Calcutta were celebrating what they fondly imagined was the second coming of the Lord. These hopes were based on the fact that Mr. Gorbachev was patently unpopular, since perestroika had taken the gags off the Soviet people's mouths, but had failed to fill their stomachs. The plotters in Moscow must have counted on this too. But the timing of the coup was determined by the signing of the new Union Treaty that was due the following day.

Obviously the conservative central bureaucracy saw this treaty as the writing on the wall. Even the partial dismantling of the centralised structure of the state that the treaty envisaged must have seemed to them a mortal threat to their power and

privileges. These were the motives behind that "monstrous act of Russian idiocy" (as one of Boris Yeltsin's aides was to call it later) -- a last desperate gamble by the party and security apparatus to reverse the direction of change. What it achieved in fact was the collapse of Soviet Communism and the break-up of the former Union as twelve republics, during and after the coup, declared independence.

In the five years since perestroika began, there have been two social forces that have propelled the processes of political change. One was the Soviet people's desire to be finally rid of the straitjacket of political, economic and intellectual regimentation. The other was the re-assertion of ethnic and national identities in a country with an enormous multiplicity of nationalities, languages and cultures where an artificial unity had been imposed from above by the centralised Soviet state.

The first development had long been expected by Trotskyists and other non-Stalinist Marxists, though they made the error of supposing that democratisation could be contained within the framework of the socialist order. The second development was unimaginable by them because, in common with all Marxists, they believed in the supremacy of class and grievously underestimated the potential strength of nationalism.

I should like to quote here what I wrote in a paper in 1990 reassessing the work of Isaac Deutscher, who was the outstanding interpreter of Soviet history in his time:

'Deutscher down to the end of his life saw the future of the Soviet Union in terms of democratisation and the struggle against bureaucratism, privilege and the police state, and this forecast, as far as it went, has been vindicated. But it would hardly have entered his head that within a quarter-century of his death the Soviet Union would also experience strident nationalism with their contradictory potentialities -- liberating as well as retrogressive. It may be said that Deutscher was too much of a classical Marxist, sharing 'the clear bright faith in human reason' that Trotsky once affirmed, to have expected that seventy years after the October Revolution, scenes like those in Colombo, July 1983 would be enacted in the streets of

Baku and other Soviet cities. The womb of history turns out to be more fertile in possibilities than the most acute of theorists can foresee.'

It will be noted that in that paragraph I spoke of the 'contradictory potentialities' of nationalism -- 'liberating as well as retrogressive'. This two faced character of nationalism has been much in evidence in the Soviet history of the last five years. Not only the ethnic riots and pogroms in various Soviet republics but also the growth of fascist tendencies like the Pamyat movement with its Great Russian chauvinism and its anti-semitism exemplify the dangerous and destructive sides of nationalism.

But we must not forget that it was both Russian nationalism and the nationalism of the minority peoples that more than any other forces stood in the way of the coup plotters who wanted to reimpose the old order on the Soviet Union. It was the resistance rallied in Moscow and Leningrad by Boris Yeltsin as the personification of Russian nationalism and the secessionist moves in the outer republics that brought the Emergency Committee tumbling down like Humpty-Dumpty.

In the Soviet Union in the last few weeks, as much as in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, it is nationalism that has been the most powerful detonator of the bureaucratic Communist state. I should like to cite here the insight of Rudolf Bahro, the former East German dissident. In his book, 'The Alternative in Eastern Europe', published in 1984, he said:

'Nationalism has an objectively necessary role to play in the destruction of the holy alliance of party apparatuses, in as much as it shows that these have not settled the national question in any productive way.'

I shall return to this question later in this lecture. But before coming to grips with the problems of nationalism in Soviet society, it is necessary to offer a characterisation of the Soviet state. In doing so, I shall try to confront some of the myths about Soviet socialism that stand in the way of a clear understanding of present developments in the minds of many people.

Socialists up to now in their thinking about the Soviet Union have adopted an entirely different practice from what they have followed in the study of capitalist societies. What does one do if one wants to understand what capitalism is? One doesn't go in the first instance to the ideologues -- to Locke or Bentham or Mill; one looks at the concrete social relations of capitalist society and tries to derive from them a theory about what capitalism is and how it works.

But in the case of the Soviet Union and other socialist societies most socialists have approached them through the spectacles of the theories of Marx and Lenin. They have either insisted, against all the evidence, that Soviet society was the fulfillment of those theories, or denounced the Soviet regime for failing to live up to them. I submit that either of these proceedings is as much a waste of time as it would be to measure American society by the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence or French society by that of Rousseau and the proclamation of the Rights of Man.

What we have to realise in the first place is that the October Revolution was in flat contradiction to the expectations of Marx and of Lenin before 1917. Both of them had believed that socialist revolution would take place in the advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe where the contradictions of capitalism would, according to their theory, mature sooner than elsewhere.

A socialist revolution in a predominantly peasant country was a historical absurdity which Lenin wouldn't have entertained before 1917. What made Lenin change his mind in that year was that he believed that Western Europe, with the fabric of its society subjected to the strains of the First World War, was ready for proletarian revolution. He wanted to create a Russian revolutionary state which would be a springboard for the European revolution in whose imminence he firmly believed.

The collapse of the old Tsarist regime in February 1917 gave him the opportunity to embark on his project. The February Revolution that overthrews Tsarism was a spontaneous uprising with no party in command. October, in contrast, was a party operation directed by an urban vanguard mainly in two capital cities. In carrying out this operation Lenin had his eyes firmly fixed not on an isolated socialist transformation of Russian society but on the grandiose vision of an European

revolution. The Soviet people were to pay dearly in the next seventy four years for Lenin's quixotic illusion.

The Russian revolution, like all other subsequent victorious revolutions led by Communist parties, took place in a society that had produced no strong bourgeoisie and had therefore undergone no bourgeois-democratic transformation of society. Its main imperative was, therefore, to carry out the tasks of primitive capital accumulation that would make possible an industrial revolution.

These were tasks parallel to those that had been fulfilled by the British, French and German bourgeoisie in the 18th and 19th centuries, but in Russia this capital accumulation had to be carried out by the state. This was the main dynamic of Soviet society, and the class which has been bearers and executors of this mission is the bureaucracy -- both political and economic.

The Soviet Union as it has existed up to now has been a society in which the ruling class has based its power not on private ownership of the means of production but on the control of state property. Just as in a capitalist society the surplus created by the producers is partly ploughed back into investment and partly distributed as profits or dividends among the proprietors, so in Soviet society the surplus has been divided between capital investment by the State and the personal incomes and other benefits and economic privileges enjoyed by the bureaucracy.

By comparison with the affluence of the bourgeoisie of Western countries the life-style of the Soviet bureaucracy may seem modest, but in relation to the mass of the people in their own society living at bare subsistence level, they have been in a highly privileged position, with a whole network of special services to cater exclusively to their needs.

This is what 'actually existing socialism' (to use Rudolf Bahro's phrase) has meant, as distinguished from the utopian wishes and the millennarian dreams. Or perhaps I should say 'the socialism that actually existed', because I feel pretty sure that we are witnessing the end of that era.

There have been several analyses of Soviet society and of Communist states in general which have been based on the perspective that these represented a new form of class society with a bureaucratic ruling class instead of a property-owning one. But I think we must modify these analyses to accommodate the fact that the Communist state seems now to be only a transitional phase in the life of societies that have failed in the past to carry through a bourgeois-democratic revolution.

Already the Union Treaty which should have been signed on August 20 provided for each republic to determine its own 'forms of property ownership and methods of economic management'. With the disappearance of the Communist Party and the breaking of hardline resistance to this direction of economic change, one can expect that there will be a speedier transition to a market economy and private ownership.

What is likely is that over the next few years in at least the greater part of the Soviet Union (or of the several states that may emerge from its break-up) there will be privatisation of the land and of most industrial enterprises (some of them, no doubt, in association with or established by foreign capital), though industries linked to defence and capital goods production as well as welfare services will probably remain in State hands.

The state bureaucracy will amalgamate with a new bourgeoisie, or rather the latter will be recruited in a large measure from the ranks of the old bureaucratic ruling class. This is already happening in the former Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, where often the new proprietor of the private enterprise is the same man who administered it under State socialism. This is a natural development because the bureaucracy are the people who have the managerial and technical skills to seed the growth of new bourgeois property forms.

Ironical as it may seem therefore, when the epitaph is written on the seventy years of Communist Party rule in the Soviet Union, it will have to be said that its historic function was to create the infrastructure for future bourgeois development. To anybody who thinks this estimate fantastic, I submit that this is not the first occasion when the historical process has made out of the actions of participants in it something other than what they intended.

The 17th century English Puritans who thought they were creating the rule of the saints are seen now to have cleared the roadblocks impeding capitalist development; Robespierre who wanted to enthrone reason in society paved the way for a Napoleonic empire. 'History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions....'

Let us consider the record of the Soviet bureaucracy since the industrial take-off of the late 1920s. By a combination of ideological fervour propagated by the state on the one hand and regimentation, coercion and repression on the other, it achieved what appeared to be a miraculous tempo of industrial progress in the first two decades of construction -- miraculous particularly if one forgot the human cost it entailed.

However, by the time of the death of Stalin (who was the chief architect of the Soviet industrial revolution) the system was already revealing its latent contradictions. The political structure with its ruthless suppression of dissent, its imposed intellectual uniformity and its primitive leader-cult that had been created for a society only recently emerged from medievalism were hopelessly inadequate to cope with the conditions of a modern, urbanised and educated one.

This was the problem with which Khrushchev strove to grapple in his half-hearted and shortlived endeavour at de-Stalinisation. With the reversal of that effort Soviet society settled again in the political deep-freeze of the Brezhnev years as far as the structure and ideology visible on the official surface were concerned.

But below the top of the iceberg the forces making for change were still working in the consciousness of a new young and educated Soviet generation. Meanwhile there was another contradiction emerging that was to undermine the established order.

The centralised command economic system that had carried through the primary industrialisation of the Soviet Union and had raised it to the status of a military superpower (it was never more than that) showed its inherent bureaucratic inflexibility and lack of dynamism once the Soviet Union had to move beyond the

bounds of a largely autarchic economy and to contend with advanced capitalisms in the world market.

It now seems almost incredible that in 1960 Khrushchev set Soviet society the task of catching up with and outstripping the United States in twenty years. Actually, by the beginning of the 'eighties the Soviet economy was reaching stagnation, and the gap between its levels of technology and productivity and those of the advanced capitalist countries had widened in those two decades. It was this combination of creakingly antiquated political and economic apparatuses that Gorbachev inherited and that he strove to recondition in the last five years.

I shall try to draw up a balance sheet of the Gorbachev years later in this lecture, but I must first complete my historical conspectus by looking at Soviet nationalities problems since the Revolution. This will bring me to the heart of my subject; it will also involve questioning the assumption so common among adherents of Leninism that the conflicts between central state and minority nationalities were the result entirely of Stalin's errors and crimes.

At a time when statues and monuments of Lenin are being ravaged by Soviet citizens, when his name has been erased from the city where he took power and his face off the masthead of 'Pravda', when the monstrosity of his mummified body may soon disappear under ground, the least we can do is to look searchingly and critically at his intellectual and theoretical legacy. One of the fields in which this is most necessary is that of Leninist policy on the question of nationalities.

The Russian Tsarist empire was the archaic imperialism of a bureaucratic feudal state which, like that other 'prison of the peoples', the Austro-Hungarian empire, should have disintegrated at the end of the First World War. That it didn't do so was due to the fact that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were able to renovate it in another form.

Lenin is renowned as the man who wrote into the Marxist political programme the slogan of 'self-determination of nations'. I shall soon be looking at the contradictions between his theory and his practice in this respect, but I must first state that his understanding of nationalism was very limited and superficial.

In his polemics against Rosa Luxemburg on the eve of the First World War, Lenin's interpretation of nationalism was crudely reductive and economistic: nationalism was the product of the need of the rising bourgeoisie for a unified national market, and even the role of language in relation to nationalism was reduced by him to the necessity for a common language of commerce.

Lenin had no awareness of or sympathy for the cultural dimensions of nationalism: when the Austrian Marxist, Otto Bauer, put forward the demand for cultural autonomy for the subject peoples of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Lenin strongly opposed it, saying that this was counter to the internationalism of the proletariat.

In fact, Lenin's entire approach to nationalism was instrumentalist: he didn't really endorse the strivings of the subject peoples of the Russian empire for independent existence, but he was quite willing to enlist them as an ally and tool of socialist revolution by putting forward the slogan of self-determination.

There was always a potential contradiction between his support of oppressed nations or nationalities and his socialist project, not only because he regarded the former only as a means towards the latter, but also because he was essentially a great centraliser, in matters of state as much as of party. He shared with Marx and Engels the belief that, other things being equal, the larger state was more progressive than the smaller.

The contradictions between Leninist nationalities policy and Leninist socialism would come to the forefront only after the revolution. However, the most serious obstacle in the way of any genuinely liberating policy towards the minority nationalities was Lenin's dedication to the role of the vanguard party as the only instrument of historical progress.

This theoretical position was consummated in practice in and after 1921 by the establishment of the political monopoly of the Bolshevik party through the banning of all other parties. It is a common fact of experience that in multi-ethnic and multi-national states minority groups express and protect their interests through the creation of ethnic and regional parties. There was no place for this in the Leninist one-party state.

Indeed from the standpoint of internationalist Leninism such a development would have seemed abhorrent, since particularist nationalisms were assumed to be a disappearing phenomenon which socialism would relegate to the dustheap of history. In reality, and against Lenin's subjective intentions, the Leninist state effected a very different outcome.

Given the fact that the revolution and the revolutionary party had been centred in the Russian heartland, which continued to be its main base of power, given the inequality in levels of economic development and education between Russia and the outlying republics, given too the deep-seated tradition of Great Russian dominance, it was inevitable that the one-party state would become the instrument for the reproduction of unequal relations between the Russian centre and the periphery.

Lenin, the cosmopolitan and internationalist, had, unlike his home-bred successor, no trace of Great Russian chauvinism, and he may be acquitted of any intention to preserve Russian hegemony over other nationalities. But he cannot be exculpated of the charge of adopting and pursuing a policy of political monopolism on behalf of his party which in effect made impossible any real pluralism or equality in the relations between majority and minority nationalities.

It is out of the question within the space of this lecture for me to pursue with any degree of comprehensiveness the fortunes of the doctrine of self-determination during the Lenin years. I shall therefore concentrate on the single case of Georgia, because it is the most patent example of the conflict between national self-determination and the interests of the revolution as the Bolsheviks saw them.

After the October Revolution Georgia had claimed independence, and except for brief periods of occupation by the Germans and then by the British during the Civil War, had set up a government headed by Georgian Mensheviks which had been recognised by Moscow.

However, during the efforts of the Bolsheviks to bring the rest of the Transcaucasus under their control, the independence of Georgia became inconvenient. Stalin and Ordjonikidze, who as native Georgians were in command

of operations in the region, sent the Red Army into Georgia in 1921 to occupy the country. To justify this action, the fiction of a popular proletarian insurrection in Georgia under Bolshevik leadership was invented.

The blatant contradiction between the invasion of Georgia and the doctrine of self-determination was glossed over by the claim that the right of self-determination should be exercised not by the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation but by its proletariat: in practice, this meant the party, who were the self-appointed spokesmen of the proletariat.

It is evident from the historical record that Lenin was troubled by the invasion but he didn't condemn it or call it off; he confined himself to counselling Ordjonikidze to respect the sentiments of the Georgian people and to deal with them in a restrained manner.

The invasion of Georgia had a sequel in 1922 in internal differences within the party leadership. In the interval Ordjonikidze had behaved like a provincial satrap and had dealt highhandedly with local Bolsheviks. The issue came to a head around the same time that a commission headed by Stalin was sitting to define the structure of constitutional relations between the Russian Federation and the republics.

Stalin proposed that the government of the Russian Federation should become the government of the whole group of republics; the Federation would incorporate the others as 'Autonomous Republics'. This issue, together with Stalin and Ordjonikidze's autocratic behaviour in Georgia, became the occasion for Lenin's struggle during his final illness to curb Stalin's dictatorial tendencies.

The letter he dictated from his sickbed to the Twelfth Party Congress made a vehement attack on Great Russian chauvinism, mentioning Stalin and Ordjonikidze by name, and urged that the future Union should be built on a footing of complete equality among all republics.

In the Soviet Union during the years of perestroika much has been made of this document as a proof of Lenin's concern for the rights of minority nationalities and

of the good fortune of his intervention to thwart Stalin's nefarious purposes towards them. But though Lenin had his way on the constitutional issue, what equality did it establish between the republics beyond a formal and legal one?

The trend towards centralisation was inherent in the one-party state that Lenin himself had erected. His successor brought to the task of consummating it not only ruthlessness and single-mindedness but also an identification with Great Russian nationalism that was to grow more open with the years. Like Napoleon and Hitler, Stalin seems to have compensated for the misfortune of having been born outside the homeland of the majority nation by emphasising his oneness with it, even though we are told that he spoke the Russian language to the end of his days with a thick Georgian accent.

But it wasn't just Stalin's insecurity about his ethnic identity that led to the accentuation of Great Russian dominances in the Stalinist era. I have already indicated that this was a natural consequence of the centralised state; and that centralisation was to be made total during the years of massive economic construction through the imposition of monolithic unity on the party and the suppression of free debate even within its own ranks. In this process the party leaderships in the republics became merely nominees of the centre docilely carrying out its orders.

There had been a practice from the early years of the revolution of appointing trusted party men from Moscow to head provincial republics; for instance, the first head of the Bolshevik government in the Ukraine, after the territory had been pacified by the Red Army, was Rakovsky, a Rumanian by birth. In the days when the party was proud of its proletarian internationalism, this may have seemed unexceptionable. But in time it facilitated the subordination of the local leaderships to the centre; and even when these leaderships were drawn from the provincial political elites, they became, with the lack of inner party democracy, mere agents of the central government and not representatives of their own peoples.

Together with the subordination of the governments of the republics to the party centre in Moscow, Stalin infused State ideology with a strong element of Great Russian nationalism. This tendency became most overt during the Second World

War, when the mobilisation of national resistance to the German invaders was promoted sometimes through Russian nationalist and sometimes through pan-Slavist appeals.

When the German armies were at the approaches to Moscow in 1941, Stalin at the end of his October Revolution anniversary speech made a startling invocation of the warriors and heroes of imperial Russia: 'Let the manly images of our great ancestors -- Aleksandr Nevsky, Dmitri Donskoy, Kuzma Minin, Dmitri Pozharsky, Aleksandr Suvorov and Mikhail Kutuzov -- inspire you in this war.' When he added, 'May the victorious banner of the great Lenin guide you,' it seemed as if Lenin himself had been assimilated to the Great Russian pantheon.

Also in the middle of the war, the Internationale was displaced as the Soviet national anthem by one which began, 'An indissoluble union of free republics Great Russia has rallied for ever.' It still remains the national anthem though many Soviet people now feel embarrassed by the words and only play the music; and of course 'indissoluble union' has acquired a new irony after August 1991.

Already before the War during Stalin's great purges there had been large-scale elimination of those elements in the republics who might be suspected of showing the slightest recalcitrance to central rule; 'bourgeois nationalist deviations' were a frequent charge against those accused during the purges.

During the War Stalin carried out mass deportations of several nationalities: the Crimean Tatars, the Volga Germans, the Chechens, the Meshketian Turks and others were forcibly evicted from their homes and transplanted in Central Asia, on the ground that some elements among these peoples had collaborated with the German invaders. Subsequent Soviet governments have acknowledged the injustice of these acts but the peoples concerned have not been returned to their original homelands to this day.

While the steel-frame of the monolithic central party and its grip over the republics was maintained in the half-century from Stalin to Chernenko, there was room within this structure for fluctuations in certain matters of nationalities policy that did not affect the essential character of centralised power.

For instance, on Russification as against use of the local language in the administration of the republics, there were variations from time to time and from place to place, and so also in the matter of the encouragement of minority cultures in education and the arts. At all times, in fact -- even under Stalin -- there was a cosmetic display of the exotic cultures and folklore of minority nationalities, and gullible fellow-travellers from abroad could often be persuaded by watching Cossack dances or listening to Uzbek folk songs that the Soviet Union was a multicultural paradise.

These illusions, as well as the corresponding political claim that in the Soviet Union the national question had been definitely solved, were blasted by the eruption of a multiplicity of nationalisms and ethnic identities once the lid of coerced conformity was removed by Gorbachev.

What was striking in the years of perestroika was the emergence not only of valid and democratic claims by minority nationalities for autonomy against the centre but also the recrudescence of tribal animosities of one ethnic group against another, expressing themselves sometimes in the most barbarous forms. Azeris killing Armenians, Uzbeks killing Kirghiz, Uzbeks killing Meshketian Turks, Georgians killing Abkhazis, Ukrainians killing Jews, these and other manifestations of ethnic hatreds proved that seventy years of socialism had done nothing to change mass consciousness.

What the laboratory experiment of these decades in the Soviet Union demonstrates is that one simply cannot root out ethnic differences by a political uniformity and a state ideology imposed from above.

However, the revival of nationalism in the Soviet Union was not simply the explosion of primordial loyalties which had long been denied expression. Particularly in the republics of the Asian periphery, there was an important sense in which the emergence of nationalism was a product of Soviet development itself.

Recent scholars writing on nationalism in general such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson have focussed attention on modern nationalism as a distinctively new phenomenon, when contrasted with older collective identities.

They have emphasised the role of printing and other forms of communication as well as mass education in standardising languages and in creating a sense of shared identity among the 'imagined communities' who are nations.

In several of the Soviet republics where in 1917 people were still living as tribals or nomads, the processes which are broadly described as 'modernisation' came only after the revolution. In fact, in some of the Asian languages of the Soviet Union the adoption of written scripts was a post-revolutionary development, as was mass literacy.

The rise of a new intelligentsia and administrative stratum in the peripheral republics produced the class that could be the creators and transmitters of nationalism. Thus not Benedict Anderson's 'print capitalism' but a print socialism was a formative element in the growth of national identities in some of the republics.

In the last part of this lecture I shall sum up the record of the Gorbachev era in respect of nationalities policy and attempt some assessment of the possibilities of the future.

If one takes Mr. Gorbachev's three watchwords, glasnost, demokratizatsiya and perestroika, one has to recognise that the first two have made great advances during his regime.

In keeping with glasnost the Soviet media have attained extraordinary openness and freedom in the last five years.

The fact that one of the first actions of the Emergency Committee on August 19 was to impose press censorship and to suspend the publication of certain papers is evidence that they knew journalists in general could not be trusted to collaborate with the coup. Today, of course, there is hope that even Pravda (which has reappeared as an independent paper) will at last live up to its title.

Demokratizatsiya or democratisation has also made progress under Mr. Gorbachev: open public meetings, free demonstrations and agitations have been a feature of

the recent Soviet scene that had no precedent for five decades. Free elections have been held in several republics, including the Russian Federation, though at the centre the elections to the Congress of People's Deputies took place on a constitution which still reserved one-third of the seats for the Communist Party and its affiliated organisations.

But considering the fact that the Soviet Union had not had any democratic elections since those in 1918 for the Constituent Assembly (which was dissolved by the Bolsheviks when they failed to gain a majority), the advance in democratisation has been substantial.

However, if one considers the third of Mr. Gorbachev's watchwords, *perestroika* in its most precise sense - restructuring -- then, I think, one has to recognise that this was exactly what was lacking.

In the fields of both economic and nationalities policy Mr. Gorbachev could shake the existing structures but could not put anything concrete in their place. I don't propose to discuss the economic failures here, except to say that the decline of the economy contributed towards exacerbating the tensions and conflicts on nationalities questions. When the centre had little to offer by way of material benefits, it was inevitable that centrifugal tendencies would be accentuated.

It is true that Mr. Gorbachev cannot singly be blamed for the failures in either economic or nationalities policies; the hard core of the party apparatus was resistant to change in both of these fields. Where Mr. Gorbachev can legitimately be criticised is that in his anxiety to remain in power so that he could push through the reform process, he relied on a perpetual balancing act between conservatives and reformers which severely restricted his freedom of movement.

For at least four years liberal-minded intellectuals had been advising him that the Union could be saved neither in its previous form nor even as a reformed federal structure but only as a loose confederation. Yet Mr. Gorbachev couldn't opt for such a structure because he feared a backlash from the conservatives.

Again, on the Baltic states he was by 1989 constrained to publish the secret protocols to the Stalin-Hitler agreement by which these states had been brutally and cynically annexed; yet he kept insisting on the validity of their accession to the USSR and sustaining it by shows of force. Today, in the aftermath of the coup, he has had not only to advocate a loose confederate structure as the last hope for the Union but also to recognise the absolute right of the Baltic states to secede.

The Union Treaty was Mr. Gorbachev's final attempt before the coup to attempt a new relationship between centre and republics. It recognised the status of all republics as sovereign states, and embodied a new name for the Union, which was to become the Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics.

The dropping of the word 'socialist' from the Union's title was significant particularly in the light of the clauses which gave the republics full control of land and natural resources in their territories and free choice of forms of property ownership and methods of economic management, thus opening the way to private property.

The other powers of the republics were to include determining their national state and administrative complexion and their system of bodies of power. Each republic was to have the right of direct diplomatic representation in dealing with foreign states. Each signatory to the treaty was to be pledged to democracy based on popular representation, the popular vote and the rule of law and to the establishment of a civil society.

On the other hand, the Union's defence and state security, co-ordination of foreign policy moves and foreign economic activities of the republics, money emission, the Union budget, enactment of Union laws and maintaining the law enforcement bodies of the Union were to remain in the hands of the centre.

There was a third sphere in which there was to be joint responsibility between the centre and the republics, and this included determining the military policy, state security policy and foreign policy of the Union and policies regarding fuel and energy resources, transport, communications and environmental protection, and supervising observance of the constitution and law enforcement. Disputes between

the centre and the republics were to be resolved by negotiation, and where this failed, through arbitration by a constitutional court.

The language of the Union Treaty was that of a generous federalism which compared well with that of some other federal constitutions; yet one can understand why six republics decided not to sign the treaty. Apart from the fact that some of them -- the three Baltic states in particular -- had set their sights firmly on independence, they may well have been suspicious of this gift-horse, given the long tradition of dictatorship by the centre.

As is well known, federal structures are good only as they are implemented in a genuine spirit of devolution of power; constitutional terms like 'co-ordination' can mean whatever they are interpreted to mean, and if taken illiberally, can provide an excuse for continued maintenance of authority by the centre.

The six republics which opted to stay out may well have thought that a central government still in the hands of a Communist Party with its Leninist traditions could not be trusted to act in a liberal spirit in dealing with the republics. Further, the provision for adjudication by a constitutional court on disputes between republics and centre may have seemed unreliable in a country with no tradition of judicial independence where outright politicisation of the judiciary has been the norm.

The Union Treaty that was to have been signed on August 20th has been buried by the aborted coup. Last week's debate at the Congress of People's Deputies centred round the possibility of a much looser confederation than that envisaged by the Union Treaty as a basis for future relations between the republics. On September 5th the Congress in its final session agreed on the proposal for a new Union under which each republic would be able to define the degree of its association.

This means the end of the former Soviet Union. But has the salvage measure to preserve something of the Union from the wreckage come too late?

The situation today is that twelve of the fifteen republics have made declarations of independence, while the largest and most powerful republic -- the Russian Federation -- has gone a long way towards assuming the power and authority of the paralysed centre.

Of the twelve declarations of independence three -- those of the Baltic states -- have already been given effect. It is likely that the Moldavian Republic, whose territory was annexed by the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War, will also persist in its claim for independence. 64 per cent of the population of Moldavia are ethnic Rumanians, and it is possible that these people will seek independence only as a transitional step towards rejoining Rumania.

What of the other eight? The reality that must be recognised is that if any of them are in fact determined to secede, there is no longer any power in the Soviet Union that can restrain them. The Communist Party is out of action and discredited, the army and security apparatus are compromised and probably deeply divided among themselves, and President Gorbachev's prestige and authority have been badly shaken.

So the republics have the opportunity to make their own decisions. Is there any consideration that can induce them to stay in some form of association?

The answer is that there is one material consideration which will have weight at least for the present, and that is economic. The economies of the republics have been developed in close interdependence in respect of raw material supplies and trade, although these economic relations have been distorted and bureaucratised by being routed entirely through the central administration.

That system can, of course, no longer be perpetuated; but the republics do have a self-interest in maintaining bilateral ties with each other for the maintenance of economic activity. This consideration will apply even to the Baltic states, who have been so heavily dependent on the Soviet economy for supplies of raw materials and power and for markets for their own manufactures that they cannot immediately cut themselves loose economically even when they do so politically.

In time may be, the Baltic states could move into the German and Swedish economic orbits; and these possibilities may be followed also by Byelorussia and the Ukraine if they become independent. But the immediate prospect is that the sheer necessities of survival in an economic situation which is nothing short of catastrophic will compel the republics to enter into some form of economic association. This may involve no political centre beyond one which is set up by the republics themselves rather than one standing above them; the new regime in Moscow is thinking of such associations as the EC as a model of future relations between the republics.

However, the problems of the Soviet Union or of any agglomeration of states that succeeds it will not be resolved simply by opting for a voluntary economic relationship between the republics. Among the republics one will be immensely larger than the rest, richer in natural resources, more advanced in economic development and more plentiful in skills -- and that is Russia.

The circumstances of the post-coup situation have, as I have already stated, led to the government of the Russian Federation taking over many of the functions of the centre. Boris Yeltsin with his undoubtedly courageous stand against the plotters has emerged with his stature greatly enhanced; and in the wake of the failed coup President Gorbachev appointed Ivan Silayev, the Russian Federation's Prime Minister, as the new Prime Minister of the Union.

The Russian tricolour now flies over the Russian Parliament, and one must expect in the months and years to come a strong assertion of a reviving Russian nationalism -- politically, culturally and spiritually. The removal of Lenin's name and the restoration of the pre-revolutionary name of St. Petersburg to the old capital (as asked for by a majority of its citizens) is a symbolic expression of this revival. I wouldn't be inclined to regard such a development in entirely negative terms, for I would maintain that the Communist era had a destructive effect on the rich heritage of Russian culture and even on the Russian language. The Russian Christian tradition, whether Orthodox or dissident, has today a better chance of reviving than Communism.

But at the same time the potential imbalance between Russian power and those of the smaller republics carries with it the dangers of continuing Russian hegemony over the outlying republics which may manifest itself in new forms after the dissolution of the centralised Communist state. The second danger one can foresee in the future is that the removal of central authority may lead to the intensification of ethnic conflict either between neighbouring republics, as in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, or between majorities and minorities within republics.

At the time of writing, Georgia has protested that its declaration of independence has not been treated in the same way as that of the Baltic states. (They have a point because if the Baltic states were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, so was Georgia in 1921.) The President of Georgia, where a nationalist party holds power won in free elections, has announced that they are breaking off all official relations with Moscow.

Meanwhile in Azerbaijan, President Ayaz Mutalibov has also set a definite course for independence. The Azerbaijani situation is fraught with uncomfortable possibilities because it was one of the only two republics (the other being Kirghizia) which supported the coup regime during its brief existence. Further, Azerbaijan has been conducting a bitter struggle with neighbouring Armenia over the status of the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is an Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijani territory.

Mutalibov has now announced that he is no longer a member of the Communist Party (there is really no longer any Communist Party to belong to anyway) and has held a hasty Presidential election to confirm himself in power. The election has been boycotted by opposition parties. Mutalibov will undoubtedly seek to strengthen his position by fanning Azerbaijani nationalism, and this bodes ill for relations with Armenia and for the Armenian minority inside Azerbaijan who can no longer rely on the federal army to protect them. The Armenian case is a reminder that while the two forces that have broken up the Soviet Union are democratisation and nationalism, the two elements may not always go together; and we must expect in the future the emergence of right-wing nationalist regimes in some former republics of the Soviet Union.

I wish to conclude with some brief observations on Marxism and nationalism.

1848, which was the year of mass upsurge of nationalism in Europe, was also the year of the **Communist Manifesto**. In that document Marx and Engels proclaimed that the nation-state had already been outdated by the creation of the world market under capitalism, and that the working class had no country; they ended the Manifesto with the ringing cry, 'Workers of the world, unite!' When seventy years later, a party and a leader dedicated to Marxist internationalism took power in the former empire of the Tsars, it seemed that Marx's prophecy was being borne out. But soon Great Russian nationalism refracted itself through the Soviet state, and the Communist International which was to have been the organ of international revolution became only an agency for the furtherance of Russian national interests.

In Russia the dominance of nationalism was a sequel to the revolution; in subsequent revolutions -- the Chinese, the Cuban, the Vietnamese and others -- nationalism was a strong force from their very inception and a condition of their victory. Thus in the century and a half since the **Communist Manifesto** nationalism turns out to have had a greater survival value than Marx and Engels imagined, and with the fall of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe and now in the Soviet Union, it will clearly outlive the political movement that Marx and Engels fathered.

There is no reason to regard the prospect of re-emerging nationalisms in the territory of the former Soviet Union through roseate spectacles. The subject peoples who are experiencing national liberation for the first time will rejoice, but there is much hardship, conflict and perhaps violence that they will go through in the years to come. Probably also some of the sub-minorities in the newly liberated states will experience the heavy hand of the dominant national majorities in their territories.

For those who have lived a long time with the illusion of the Soviet Union as moving towards a terrestrial paradise, this will be a gloomy prospect. But we must today recognise that belief as a secular messianism which never had a basis in reality. To accept that human societies will probably always be imperfect, as human beings are imperfect, that utopia never comes, is not to abandon the

struggle against injustice, oppression and exploitation which is much older than Marxism.

The faith that it is possible to create a perfect society in which human beings will at last be freed from all their problems is in fact highly dangerous because it encourages the ruthlessness of a Stalin, a Pol Pot or a Wijeweera: what does it matter -- they must have thought -- if any number of people are sacrificed if future humanity are going to live happily ever after? We should rather engage in the effort to correct human ills in the sober recognition that the struggle is a never-ending one which needs to be renewed and sustained in every age. The intoxication is over; this is the morning after.



