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This essay examines the images of state and empire that stand behind conceptions of ethnic politics in the former USSR, establishing them as attitudinal and behavioral variables that are crucial for our understanding of the politics of ethnicity in this part of the world. It roots notions of state and empire in subjective perceptions of legitimacy and identity, arguing that within the Soviet context political images of state and empire were intertwined closely with cultural identities and formed the main battleground on which national conflicts were fought. Indeed, as the essay demonstrates, the whole thrust of Soviet history was such as to foster confusion between state and empire building, leading to a series of overlapping identities that proved highly plastic and unstable—a critical element in explaining the Soviet Union's demise.

In the Soviet case empire-consciousness was not inversely related to efforts at state-building. On the contrary, the Soviet population became the most conscious of the imperial character of the Soviet state precisely at that moment when efforts at legitimacy-seeking by the Soviet regime reached their zenith. Moreover, among a significant number of groups notions of state and empire underwent extremely rapid change. This is demonstrated empirically in the essay using several types of evidence: 1) data on protest demands at thousands of protest demonstrations in the 1987 through 1989 period, and in particular the changing role of secessionist mobilization in overall patterns of protest mobilization in the country; 2) shifts in patterns of public opinion and voting behavior; and 3) statements by critical actors.

Gorbachev's efforts at state-building are then critically re-examined, uncovering the faulty assumptions that lay behind them that most observers have missed, as well as the political dynamic that led to the breakup of the USSR. Finally, the imperial legacy in post-Soviet politics is analyzed, including the reasons why images of empire have not diminished in spite of the demise of the USSR. The essay's reconceptualization of notions of state and empire helps to explain why the demise of the USSR was poorly predicted by experts and was not accompanied by the extreme violence expected by many.
DENISCE OF AN EMPIRE-STATE: IDENTITY, LEGITIMACY, AND
THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SOVIET POLITICS

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There has been no more spectacular an unraveling of the modern
state than that which occurred in the Soviet Union in 1991. A
superpower with global commitments and a seventy-four year record of
survival—a polity that had endured two devastating wars, several
famines involving millions of deaths, the mass annihilation of its
citizens by its own rulers, and a social revolution that brought it
into the industrial world—imploded under the weight of its ethnic
problems. The break-up of the USSR indeed presents scholars with many
paradoxes that challenge our understandings of ethnic politics.

One such paradox was the long refusal of many observers even to
contemplate the possibility, let alone the probability, that the USSR
might fall apart. Had Western experts been polled in 1986—five years
earlier, the overwhelming opinion would have been that the dissolution
of the USSR was highly unlikely, if not impossible. Even in 1991,
many prominent experts refused to recognize the imminent demise of the
USSR. Only months before the events of August 1991, Jerry Hough wrote
that "the assumption that the Soviet Union is now revolutionary—and
that it may even be disintegrating as a country—contradicts all that
we know about revolution and national integration" and was "based on
the least comparative perspective. 1 Experts on ethnicity fared no better. David Laitin, in an article written on the eve of the coup, decried "the unjustifiable assumption" that the USSR was on a course towards dissolution; after the August coup, a postscript was added in which Laitin confessed that recent events had made "the image of a rotting empire, discredited in . . . [the] essay, seem intuitively correct." 2 Such statements on the eve of the demise of the USSR suggest that many experts were seriously misreading the comparative evidence. They suggest something more as well: the power of the modern state to mesmerize even those who make their careers studying it into believing in its timelessness and immutability.

Another paradox posed by the dissolution of the USSR was the relative lack of violence it involved. The Soviet Union died with a whimper rather than a bang. Among experts there was traditionally a tendency to believe that the break-up of the USSR, if it were to occur, would be an extremely violent, if not cataclysmic event. Indeed, Secretary of State James Baker, on the eve of the break-up, warned that the USSR could well turn into a "Yugoslavia . . . with nuclear weapons." 3 In reality, when the USSR Congress of People's Deputies formally voted in December 1991 to dissolve the Soviet Union, hardly any deputies bothered to attend. As was noted by Rossiiskaia gazeta, the newspaper of the Russian parliament, at the time, "The former union is no more. And much more important, no one needs it." 4 Even earlier, the August 1991 coup and the events that followed it were striking in the rather minimal violence they involved. The
violence that followed the break-up of the USSR was primarily between rival successor groups in the republics rather than between proponents and opponents of preserving the union. Of course, there is a very real possibility that massive violence could occur over the conflicting territorial claims of successor states. But the actual process of the creation of new states out of an old one was much less painful than most experts predicted.

Behind these paradoxes lie a number of questionable assumptions about the nature of ethnic identity and the character of Soviet politics that strike at the heart of the subject of this essay. The standard argument put forth by those who thought that the Soviet Union was unlikely to break up was that the dissolution of the USSR would have constituted a secession, not much different than the break-up of Nigeria, India, Yugoslavia, or Canada. As many have observed, cases of successful secession have been rare in the modern era, their outcome depending in large part on the reactions of the international community. Indeed, if we discount the case of Yugoslavia, which is still running its course, until the dissolution of the USSR, the only unambiguous case of a successful secession since the end of World War II was Bangladesh—a fact often pointed to by those who believed that the dissolution of the USSR was unlikely.

These arguments ignored two key points. First, before World War II there had been many cases of successful state separatism. It is often forgotten that immediately preceding their independent
statehood, Poland had been part of Prussia and Russia from 1793 until 1917, Norway had been part of Sweden from 1814 to 1905, and Iceland was part of Denmark from the late fourteenth century until 1944. The lack of successful secessions in the post-war period was more telling of the character of international politics than of the inherent stability of the postwar state. Precisely as a result of the Cold War, there was a clear attempt to reify the state system and to freeze its boundaries. In part this was due to a general desire for stability on the part of the Western world in its struggle to contain communism; in part, it was the result of the desire of newly-installed post-colonial leaders to denationalize their states, lest the politics of communalism overwhelm them. From the 1960s on, the reification of the state system was also a matter of conscious policy by both superpowers, who feared that they might be drawn into direct confrontation as a result of regional and separatist conflicts.

A second point ignored by those who minimized the possibility of a Soviet break-up was the analogy often made by these peoples themselves between the demise of the great European empires in the aftermath of the Second World War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Indeed, even the editor of this volume, in a recent essay that sought to apply theories of ethnicity to the Soviet case, argued that the imperial analogy in Soviet politics was most likely misplaced:

States perceived in international jurisprudence and dominant political discourse as colonial have been dismantled, but this imagery—however serviceable as cold war lexicon—is unlikely to govern the unfolding dialectic between the central institutions of the Soviet state and its non-Russian
Although there is an undeniable element of "exceptionalism" to the Soviet case, it belongs on balance in the contemporary universe of polities founded on the doctrinal postulates of the "nation-state," and is therefore susceptible of interpretation according to the same empirical inferences as other members of the contemporary body of states.

By contrast, in the perception of many Soviet peoples, rather than constituting a series of secessions, the break-up of the Soviet Union fell into the category of a decolonization. Indeed, the dissolution of the USSR was enveloped in a litany of empire-imagery on the part of non-Russians, Russians, and outside observers alike that cannot be dismissed entirely as mere political rhetoric.

Should we understand the collapse of the USSR in August 1991 as the collapse of an empire or the failure of a state—a decolonization or a secession? Behind this question lurks the larger issue of whether the break-up of the USSR represented a broader crisis of the modern state, or simply the end of "the last empire." The answer that this essay will suggest is that it should be understood as both. The Soviet Union always straddled the divide between state and empire. Symbolizing this symbiosis, the events that set in motion the final collapse of USSR began only two days before a treaty constituting a renewed and thoroughly revamped USSR was to be signed. Within the Soviet context, political images of state and empire were intertwined closely with cultural identities, forming the main battleground on which national conflicts were fought. Moreover, empire-imagery has not died with the Soviet Union, but continues to live on in the serious national conflicts that plague post-Soviet politics.
Notions such as state or empire have a subjective dimension that has been too often ignored and too easily dismissed by observers. If the history of Soviet multinational politics demonstrates anything, it is that what constitutes a "state" or an "empire" is to a large extent in the eye of the beholder and is closely connected with conceptions of legitimacy and ethnic identity. As David Laitin has written, "it is historically inaccurate to identify the incorporation of Estonia, the Ukraine, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazan, and Kazakhstan as examples of the construction of the 'last empire' and to juxtapose Russian imperial expansion categorically to French state building." 9 Violence was as much a part of the state-building process as it was part of empire-building. Given this subjective character of the terms, it is tempting to dismiss them entirely as reflecting simply the prejudices of those who use them, as Laitin indeed does, arguing that they obscure more than they reveal.10 However, it is precisely the subjective dimension that these expressions capture—the perceptions of those who use them—which is the most interesting aspect about them, particularly in view of what they reveal empirically about the subtleties of political and ethnic identities.

The Soviet Union, of course, was frequently referred to as an "empire," particularly as its demise grew imminent and increasingly visible. Relatively few who used the term bothered to define what they meant by it.11 The use of imperial imagery in scholarly works
to describe Soviet politics traces its origins to the study of totalitarianism rather than to the study of Soviet nationalities politics. Empire for most theorists of totalitarianism meant the GULAG and international conquest, both of which were conditioned by a utopian ideology, not by an imperial Russian legacy. The classic works on totalitarianism underplayed the threat of nationalism to the Soviet regime. As Friedrich and Brzezinski wrote, although nationalism provided the most serious basis for resisting totalitarianism, "after all is said and done, this sort of activity does not seriously threaten the stability of the totalitarian regime. It serves rather to maintain the self-respect of those participating because they share a common danger."12

At the same time, theorists of totalitarianism pointed to a special category of groups, known as "captive nations," explicitly attributing an imperial quality to Soviet rule. The term was used more frequently to refer to peoples of Eastern Europe than those of the Soviet Union; within Soviet borders, it was at times used to describe the Balts, whose annexation by the USSR was never recognized by Western governments. Of course, why the term--in its internal Soviet usage--should have been confined to the Balts when many other groups lying within Soviet borders had long laid claims to independent statehood, had prolonged histories of independence outside of a Russian-dominated political entity, were larger in territory and population, and were better endowed with natural resources than the Baltic republics was never made clear. Any argument for drawing the
line for claims to independent statehood at those groups annexed as a result of the Nazi-Soviet pact (and in particular, the Balts) was based entirely on the accidents of history during the three-year period of 1917 to 1920, which ended by providing the Balts with two decades of political independence and separate statehood for the Poles and Finns, but left the remaining peoples of the Tsarist empire stateless. In any "objective" sense Poles might be considered no less "captive" a nation than Bashkirs or Chechens. This was well understood by Walter Kolarz, whose works constituted a near-solitary voice of protest in the 1950s against what he viewed as the Russian imperial legacy in Soviet nationalities policies. While Kolarz saw a connection between Soviet imperialism and communist ideology, unlike most works on totalitarianism Kolarz viewed Marxism-Leninism more as an instrument of empire than its driving force, which was instead Russian nationalism. As he observed: "Communism has become the instrument enabling Russia to resist successfully that liquidation of colonialism carried out elsewhere in the world."14

Kolarz's argument tended to ignore those aspects of Soviet nationalities issues for which the fit between the Russian imperial legacy and communism was imperfect. Russian nationalists, for instance, have long argued (and not without justification) that even the Russians were left stateless by the events of 1917 to 1920, incorporated instead into an internationalist state that elevated them to the status of "elder brother," but which was in essence an "equal-opportunity repressor." A banner hung in August 1991 across the White
House by Russian demonstrators massed in the tens of thousands symbolized this widespread sense among many Russians that they too have been victims of empire; it read: "Down with the Empire of Red Fascism!" The difference between Kolarz's understanding of empire and the non-national version that appeared in most works on totalitarianism represented a basic tension that always ran across the breadth of Soviet politics: the extent to which Russian identities and interests had become synonymous with those of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in August 1991, it was evident that it was brought down as much by pressure from non-Russians for independence as by what Roman Szporluk has referred to as the "de-Sovietization of Russia." 15

The idea propounded by Kolarz that communism served simply as a vehicle for the reimposition of Russian dominance formed the basis for most subsequent discussions of the imperial legacy in Soviet nationalities politics. Beginning in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, as it became clear that a nationalities crisis was looming on the Soviet horizon, Western authors increasingly referred to the imperial dimension of Soviet multinational politics. Richard Pipes asserted that nationality problems in the USSR were similar "to those experienced by the classic empires of the West" and suggested that Soviet nationalities policies were analogous to those pursued by the French in their colonial territories. 16 Colin Gray wrote of "the continuing failure to appreciate that the USSR is a true empire... A student of the dynamics of imperialism... need look no further
than to the contemporary Soviet Union to find a classic example."¹⁷
Hélène Carrère d’Encausse referred to the Soviet Union after the
Second World War as "a new imperial system" and argued that the same
forces of nationalism that had led to the break-up of the Russian
Empire in the early twentieth century were at work in contemporary
Soviet politics.¹⁸ And Guy Imart asserted that the concept of
empire was an apt description of the USSR "not in any journalistic or
superficial sense but in the technical meaning of the word."¹⁹ Yet,
throughout these discussions none of these authors bothered to define
this most slippery of concepts.

It is the argument of this essay that at the base of all
conceptions of empire and state are subjective notions of legitimacy
and identity. Take, for instance, Michael Doyle’s widely accepted and
quite generic definition of empire as "sovereignty controlled either
formally or informally by a foreign state."²⁰ The key word within
this formulation is "foreign," for it implies two very important
points: 1) a sense of separate ethnic identity among those whose
"sovereignty" is being controlled; and 2) a sense that the continued
control of that "sovereignty"—at least according to modern notions of
national self-determination—is illegitimate (i.e., lacking support
within society). This does not mean that perceptions of illegitimacy
and "foreign" occupation might not be fostered by specific political
practices. However, any attempt to define empire in "objective"
terms—as a system of stratification, as a policy based on force, as a
system of exploitation—fails in the end to capture what is
undoubtedly the most important dimension of any imperial situation: perception. Unquestionably, these types of political practices tend to contribute to perceptions of empire. Still, history knows of many cases in which violence and exploitation have not necessarily resulted in the emergence of widespread resistance. The Soviet case demonstrates quite clearly that "empire-consciousness," if we may call it that, is not necessarily a direct function of the degree to which a group has experienced objectively exploitative or violent policies against it. Nor does it appear to be necessarily connected with a specific system of social or ethnic stratification; after all, the leader of the USSR at the time when its policies most favored Russian national interests was himself a Georgian, and the elite that surrounded him was similarly characterized by a high degree of representation among non-Russians.21

The problems involved in applying concepts such as "internal colonialism" to the USSR illustrate the difficulties involved in any "objective" notion of empire. A number of Western observers have suggested that the concept, as used by Hechter, was an apt description of Soviet policies in non-Russian regions.22 Hechter defined "internal colonialism" as a system of economic exploitation by which a core group maintained its dominance over the inhabitants of a periphery.

Commerce and trade among members of the periphery tend to be monopolized by members of the core. . . . The peripheral economy is forced into complementary development to the core, and thus becomes dependent on external markets. Generally, this economy rests on a single primary export,
either agricultural or mineral. The movement of peripheral labor is determined largely by forces exogenous to the periphery. Typically there is great migration and mobility of peripheral workers in response to price fluctuations of exported primary products. Economic dependence is reinforced through juridical, political, and military measures. . . . There is national discrimination on the basis of language, religion or other cultural forms.23

Indeed, in the last years of existence of the USSR, accusations of "internal colonialism" and economic exploitation gained wide currency in all of the republics and territories of the USSR. Nearly every republic and people, regardless of its level of development, claimed economic exploitation by the center. A closer examination reveals the impossibility of sorting out the bases for these claims, particularly in view of: 1) the market irrationality of the pricing mechanism under central planning, making any comparison of "values" tendentious;24 2) the large migrations of Russians and Ukrainians into many non-Russian areas at the same time that native labor forces were relative sedentary, in contrast to the Hechter model; 3) the higher standards of living of the Baltic and portions of the West compared with Russia; 4) the conscious "affirmative action" policies pursued by the Soviet regime throughout the country; and 5) the claims by Russian nationalists that Russia also witnessed a net drain of resources away from it during the Soviet period.25 As Ralph Premdas has noted, "In the internal colonialism explanation [of secession], claims of oppression and exploitation tend to be argued and accentuated by a heavy dose of spurious and fabricated data. What is more important than objective facts, however, is the belief among an ethnic group that it is oppressed."26 Indeed, in the Soviet case
groups which were the most economically developed were actually those that pressed the hardest for the break-up of the Soviet Union, while least developed groups were practically the last to support their own independence.27

II

The above discussion implies that empires and states are set apart not primarily by exploitation, nor even by the use of force, but essentially by whether politics and policies are accepted as "ours" or are rejected as "theirs." Certain policies and behaviors might increase the likelihood of such perceptions. But the fit between practice and perception is always imperfect, being mediated by a series of variables that affect the strengths and weakness of political and cultural identities. It also implies that the transcendence of empire is simultaneously a state-building process involving a fundamental realignment of polity, identity, and legitimacy.

Of course, even polities that are widely perceived as illegitimate are usually not entirely bereaved of some support. It is well known that European imperial control over its empires, in Robinson's words, "was as much a function of its victims' collaboration or non-collaboration--of their indigenous politics, as it was of European expansion."28 As John Armstrong documented so
well, all empires search for support for their rule within colonial society, creating elaborate myths intended in part to gain adherents who identify with the occupying power and help to maintain it.\textsuperscript{29} Weber tells us that it is the search for legitimacy that forms the basis of the modern state. In this small base of support within peripheral society, however minuscule it may be, even empires contain within them the potential seeds of statehood. As the title of one article that appeared in 1990 in a widely-read Soviet journal observed: "The Empire--That's People."\textsuperscript{30}

Underlying any sense of legitimacy (and for that matter, statehood) is a sense of identity, of peoplehood. This point was well-understood by successive Soviet rulers, who over the years constantly but (in the end) unsuccessfully strove to bolster their rule with legitimacy by creating a specifically "Soviet" identity--a Sovetskii narod, or Soviet people. It was not Marxism that created the concept of a "Soviet people"; after all, Marxism preached the transcendence of nations, not their creation. Rather, the basis for nation-building in Soviet politics must be found in the Union Treaty of December 1922 and Stalin's program of "socialism in one country," put forth shortly afterwards. "Socialism in one country" was an expression of the Bolsheviks' determination to build the country without waiting for the foreign revolutions on which they had originally counted. In this sense, it signified the final victory of the concept of the nation-state over what had previously been an internationalist revolution that had denied the utility of states.
This victory had been prepared by the gradual erosion of Lenin’s orthodox Marxist position on nationalities affairs in the years following the revolution in the face of the persistent state-seeking behavior of the peoples of the Tsarist empire. State forms crept into Marxism-Leninism precisely as a means for preventing various non-Russian nationalities from constructing their own separate states. Thus, the Bolshevik state from the beginning contained within it a coopting or preempting function. Before the union treaty, a number of republics set up by the communists enjoyed separate statehood and were bound together by means of international treaty, even if they were tightly controlled by Moscow through the Communist Party, much like what continued to be the case in Mongolia and what was the eventual solution pursued in Eastern Europe after World War II. The great concession of federalism to which Lenin acceded against Stalin’s advice was essentially viewed as a means for preventing state separatism.

State-building thus was practiced for imperial ends. But state-building within the Soviet context took on a dynamic of its own. As Gerhard Simon observed, “Although in many respects this sovereignty [afforded by federalism] was no more than a legal fiction, the temptation to actually implement it politically has always existed, and many politicians . . . succumbed to this temptation and attempted to implement sovereignty.” Similarly, Gail Lapidus noted that "the very existence of a federal system gave substance to the claims of republic elites that they represented more than mere administrative
Soviet authorities never viewed their own actions as imperial, but rather as state-building—i.e., creating that sense of shared identity and legitimacy necessary for underpinning a legitimate state. This could be done either by seeking legitimate polities around existing cultural entities or by fostering the emergence of an entirely new identity. In confirmation of Walker Connor's observations on the subject, state-building within the Soviet context had both nation-building and nation-destroying implications. Stalin's culture-destroying policies of the 1930s and 1940s were the obverse of the flourishing of national communisms that took place in the 1920s. Both flowed equally from the logic of state-building—the first accepting society as it was and seeking to build legitimacy within it, the second seeking to transform identities in society in conformance with the prevailing state system.

Both could also be understood within the context of imperial policies. One could interpret the concessions granted to nationalities in the 1920s as merely a means for defusing separatist nationalism and keeping them in a Russian-dominated state. National-communist elites were tolerated in order to mediate domination from Moscow. The thorny question of "whose state?" plagued the Soviet Union from the time of its founding. The answer given was always ambiguous and varied considerably over time. Even at the height of glorification of things Russian in the late 1940s, the Russians were
portrayed merely as "elder brothers," not conquerors. Yet, the widespread perception that the Soviet state was fundamentally a Russian state was ever-present.

Coerced legitimacy is an oxymoron, since coercion destroys the free will that stands at the basis of any genuine consent. Yet, it was precisely the phenomenon of coerced legitimacy which was the central paradox of the Soviet empire-state. Roman Szporluk has convincingly argued that the imperial legacy in Soviet politics should not be understood simply as the geographic congruity between the Russian empire and the Soviet Union; after all, it is possible to imagine that such an entity might not be imperial--i.e., that it might enjoy a wide-ranging legitimacy. It was the dream of creating a state from an empire that separated Soviet-type imperialism from that practiced by traditional empires. The Soviet regime did much more than simply occupy territories; rather, it was driven to engage in policies aimed at creating a social base for itself and, when one did not exist, to demonstrate the supposed existence of support through coerced legitimacy.

As Szporluk noted, the imperial legacy in Soviet politics essentially manifested itself in the relationship between regime and society--that is, in the creation of a political society based on forced consent and the absence of what is commonly referred to as a civil society. Civil society, when it did emerge, consisted of several layers of societies--of both a Soviet society and a series of
national societies—that were in competition with one another for the loyalties of the population. On the one hand, on the eve of the Soviet break-up, Valerii Tishkov could write of what he called "the fatal weakness of the Soviet state"—that is, "the absence of the requisite sense among the citizenry that they belong to a unitary civil society." On the other hand, an eighteen-year-old Russian college student, Irina Zhuravleva, could tell an American reporter after the break-up:

We don't even know who we are anymore. They tell me I'm a "Russian" now. What does that mean? Does it mean that my parents, who live in Uzbekistan, are foreigners? . . . I think of myself as Soviet. I know nothing about Russia. In school, our history lessons began with the revolution and 1917. I am all for the changes in this country but I am completely confused. What does it mean—"Russian." An essential feature of the Soviet empire-state was precisely this confusion over identities.

Confusion over identities was reinforced by the entire thrust of political development after Stalin's death. Much of the post-Stalin period, including developments in nationalities policies, can be understood as an attempt to create a genuine legitimacy in place of the "enforced" or "false" legitimacy of the Stalinist period. De-Stalinization rested on the premise that some alternative means for integrating Soviet society besides force had to be found, some more voluntary means based on consensus. Some Western authors came to refer to these developments as an attempt to create a totalitarianism without terror. Yet, without terror, the Soviet system was forced to embark upon a greater degree of legitimacy-seeking within society.
Leadership was no longer a one-person game, but rather a collective process in which leaders had to build their support within the political elite more widely. This very rudimentary form of legitimacy-seeking gave non-Russian elites new opportunities to influence policies and led to the emergence of policy debates in most spheres of activity, including nationalities questions. So evident was the trend towards "authority-building" in Soviet politics that a number of Western experts concluded that Soviet leadership successions were no longer political crises, but rather needed revitalizations of the system.\textsuperscript{38}

As legitimacy-seeking diffused more broadly throughout the party elite and the bureaucracy, some observers began to speak of the emergence of an incipient pluralism in Soviet society. Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s the dominant imagery used by scholars to the describe the Soviet Union was that of state rather than empire. It was widely argued that Soviet institutions had achieved a degree of broad-based legitimacy within the Soviet population, irrespective of the national context within which Leninism appeared, and that persuasive methods of rule had replaced state-sponsored intimidation.\textsuperscript{39} This perception was not entirely false. Separatist dissidents were relatively few and located on the extreme fringes of society. Most opposition figures did not even conceive of the possible break-up of the USSR, even were it to democratize.\textsuperscript{40} Western Sovietologists portrayed cultural pluralism in the USSR as a form of incipient political pluralism that resembled and indeed overlapped with the interplay of self-interested
bureaucracies. There was even a sense among many observers of a kind of ethnic representative character to Soviet bureaucratic politics. As Gregory Gleason observed, "[i]n the republics the administrative organizations of government and party became to a large extent the 'captives' of the national ethos of their namesake populations."42

One could argue that such perceptions were illusory and behind the veneer of the years of stagnation stood an empire readying to explode. Yet, these perceptions were widespread enough, both among experts and within the Soviet population, to place the idea of the possible break-up of the USSR along national lines out of the range of conceivable futures for the country in most prognoses. One of the great paradoxes of the break-up of the Soviet Union was that empire-consciousness was not inversely related to efforts at state-building. On the contrary, the Soviet population became the most conscious of the imperial character of the Soviet state precisely at that moment when efforts at legitimacy-seeking by the Soviet regime reached their zenith.

III

The conceptions of empire and state propounded in this essay are at root attitudinal and behavioral, and therefore, like all attitudes and behaviors, subject to uneven distribution in society. If the key
criterion by which to judge the imperial quality of a polity is how
its population regards it, then there is no reason why one should
expect a consensus to exist over this issue within any given
population—or for that matter, ethnic group. From the point of view
of one sector of a population or ethnic group, a polity might appear
as an empire, while in another it might appear as a state. The
longstanding division between Western Ukrainians and Eastern
Ukrainians over relations with Russia illustrates that even within
existing ethnicities empire-consciousness is unevenly distributed,
essentially sociologically determined by cultural, political, and
historical factors.

Moreover, if conceptions of state and empire are closely tied
with cultural and political identities, then like identities they are
subject to constant evolution and change. Indeed, if the
decolonization process within European empires is any guide, ethnic
identities and attitudes towards colonial authorities underwent a very
rapid change and politicization on the eve of decolonization. As
Robinson described the process:

when the colonial rulers had run out of indigenous collaborators
they either chose to leave or were compelled to go. Their
national opponents . . . sooner or later succeeded in detaching
the indigenous political elements from the colonial regime until
they eventually formed a united front of collaboration against
it. 43

Recognition of the imperial quality of European empires by subject
populations was always imperfect and varying.
An examination of the temporal development of secessionist protest in the USSR is instructive of how a mass empire-consciousness evolved in the USSR. It did not come about immediately, but rather followed upon the heels of a short but intensive period of protest over "within-system" issues, suggesting in the Soviet case the existence of a relatively brief liminal period in which identities were in a state of flux. Essentially, one can distinguish three stages in the development of secessionist protest; these are described in Figure 1, which, on the basis of an analysis of 2,158 non-violent protest demonstrations, portrays the rise of protest mobilization in favor of secession during the 1987 to 1989 period, measured in millions of protest person-days. During Stage I, extending through January 1988, secessionist demands often figured prominently in protest activity, but protest did not assume a mass character. During these months, secessionist nationalists, still on the fringes of the political system, attempted to use the issue of empire in order to mobilize populations in support of secession, but without much success. During Stage II, covering the very brief period from February 1988 through September 1988, protest mobilization assumed a mass character, but secessionist demands were not those that were mobilizing populations. In this period, protest centered around "within-system" issues that conceivably might have been resolved through the normal policy channels of the state. It is not clear, however, whether the resolution of such "within-system" issues would have prevented the subsequent development of secessionist nationalism. Stage III, beginning around September 1988 and extending through the
FIGURE 1. SECESSIONIST PROTEST IN THE USSR, 1987-1989

FIGURE 1A. TOTAL PROTEST MOBILIZATION AND PROTEST MOBILIZATION OVER SECESSIONIST ISSUES

FIGURE 1B. PERCENT OF TOTAL PROTEST MOBILIZATION DEVOTED TO SECESSIONIST ISSUES

Based on an analysis of 2,188 non-violent protest demonstrations in the USSR from January 1987 through December 1989.
end of the period examined here, was a time in which protest mobilization was massive and secessionist issues were highly visible among protest demands. In fact, during Stage III the rise and fall of overall levels of protest in the country were increasingly driven by the surges and ebbs in secessionist protest.

These temporal patterns suggest extremely rapid change in prevailing notions of state and empire within the consciousnesses of the Soviet population over the course of 1988 and 1989. By the end of 1989 secessionist nationalism had made its appearance in almost every non-Russian republic, though in some republics it never reached mass proportions. Demonstration effects and widening political opportunity structures would appear to be most logical explanations for the spread of secessionist protest. Indeed, statistical analysis of Soviet protest patterns more generally reveals that opportunity structure, resource-mobilization, and ethnic assimilation played key roles in conditioning differential protest responses by Soviet ethnic groups. All these explanations in turn suggest that political identities changed relatively quickly and easily in 1988 and 1989. Empire-consciousness and state-consciousness within the Soviet context were plastic and unstable.

Evidence from public opinion polls and voting behavior points to much the same conclusion: the mercurial character of political identities in the glasnost period and the rather short distance that had to be traversed for state-consciousness to be transformed into
empire-consciousness. For instance, a survey conducted in August and September 1989 of inhabitants of the Ukraine by the USSR Academy of Sciences' All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion indicated that only 20.6 percent favored full political self-determination for the republic, up to and including separation from the USSR. By contrast, by December 1991, 90.3 percent of these same inhabitants of Ukraine voted in favor of Ukraine's August 24th declaration of independence. Even the heavily Russified Donetsk and Odessa provinces showed 83.9 and 85.3 percent majorities respectively, while 54.1 percent of the voters of Crimea province, populated by a majority Russian population, voted in favor of Ukrainian independence. The transformation in consciousness that this signalled was well described by Bohdan Nahaylo:

What appears to have happened is that swiftly and almost imperceptibly, before the revolution that has now taken place through the ballot box, a revolution occurred in the minds of Ukraine's inhabitants. Somehow, during a remarkably short period, the idea of Ukrainian independence, for so long depicted in the Soviet press as the hopeless cause of diehard nationalists in Western Ukraine, took hold throughout the republic.

Public opinion polls similarly document extremely rapid changes in attitudes of Russians towards the need to defend Soviet territorial integrity. In early 1990 56 percent of the population of Leningrad believed that it was necessary to use the army to put down the revolt against Soviet power then raging in Azerbaidzhan. By contrast, a year later 77 percent of Leningraders were against the use of the army to keep the Baltic republics in the USSR. The key to understanding
why the dissolution of the USSR did not involve a violent struggle was that the USSR died without defenders willing to risk their lives to save it. Essentially, this was the result of a relatively swift transformation in consciousness that took place among Russians in 1990 and 1991. This transformation eventually reached the point where even the Director of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, on the eve of the break-up of the Soviet Union, was referring instinctively to the very government he was advising as an "empire."  

IV

Gorbachev's tremendous miscalculations concerning the impact of glasnost' on ethnic identity were similarly indicative of the enormous confusion over identities that the Soviet empire-state generated, even in the minds of those who ruled it. Gorbachev viewed glasnost' as a strategy for recapturing a dwindling and elusive legitimacy. He clearly did not comprehend the degree to which glasnost' and democratization would eventually become a vehicle for the expression of secessionist sentiments. The tragedy of Gorbachev was not really that he failed to grasp that legitimacy assumed a common identity, as some analysts seemed to have suggested; rather, it was that he was so hypnotized by the rhetoric of the Soviet regime that he truly believed in the widespread acceptance of a Soviet identity. Gorbachev's understanding of glasnost' was probably close to Gail Lapidus'
interpretation of it as "an expression of confidence in the legitimacy of the Soviet system and its leadership, and a recognition that the pretense of infallibility is no longer necessary to command popular allegiance and support." Gorbachev clung to this illusion to the very end and was essentially dragged down by his absolute refusal to part with it. His political career ended not defending the Soviet empire, but rather defending a non-existent Soviet state.

Ironically, in order to resuscitate the Soviet state, Gorbachev was driven increasingly to recognize its imperial core. Beginning in 1989, when he began to turn his attention to directing nationalities discontent into institutional channels after four years of passive and ineffective leadership on the issue, his state-building strategy was based on the idea of "renewing" the Soviet federation according to the formula "a strong center and strong republics." It soon became apparent that "renewal" would require renegotiating the Union Treaty of 1922. This in itself constituted an explicit recognition of the involuntary origins of the USSR, one which only accelerated demands for the break-up of the country. As power continued to diffuse to the republics, and independence movements gained in strength, Gorbachev dropped the "strong center and strong republics" formula in favor of the idea of an extremely decentralized federalism. By that time, a number of republics had evolved to the position of favoring a confederal arrangement. Some republics refused to accept even that, insisting on nothing less than full independence.
The logic used to support claims to independence was reflective of the hybrid character of the Soviet polity. The Soviet constitution guaranteed republics the right to secede, and that guarantee could have been used to support a departure from the union. Significantly enough, among the six republics that openly sought full independence before August 1991, only Armenia based its argument on its constitutionally guaranteed right to secession. The other five republics that sought full independence based their right to leave not on the Soviet constitution, whose authority they refused to recognize; after all, recognition of the authority of the Soviet constitution would have been an acknowledgment that they were members of a state rather than an empire. Rather, the argument was based on the idea that their incorporation into the USSR amounted to a foreign "occupation." Much as Gorbachev sought to "renew" the Soviet federation, independence-minded republics sought to "renew" their independence. This was, of course, rejected by Gorbachev, and the posturing that took place over the second half of 1990 and early 1991, at times violent in character, essentially revolved around the issue of whose "renewal" would gain ascendancy.

The Novo-Ogarevo agreement of April 1991 temporarily settled the dispute. Since only nine republics agreed to participate in it, it implicitly legitimized the partial dissolution of the USSR, at the same time as explicitly endorsing a radical decentralization of powers to those republics that remained. For precisely these reasons, the Novo-Ogarevo agreement was despised by conservatives and became, along
with the draft of the new union treaty that resulted from the Novo-
Ogarevo process, the chief cause of the aborted seizure of power by
the State Emergency Committee in August.53 Throughout the
negotiations over the new union treaty, Gorbachev continued to insist
upon a federal formula. Indeed, the final draft of the treaty,
published on the eve of the coup, described the Soviet government as a
"federal" entity, even though the actual content of the treaty was
blatantly confederal in character, with republics retaining the right
to suspend all-union laws on their territories. Actually, the
political institutions that were envisioned in the final version of
the treaty were precisely those that were created in the aftermath of
the coup, when the central government had completely collapsed.54
In this sense, Soviet federalism died before the coup took place.
Gorbachev was slow to recognize this fact, and it was only on the
heels of the declarations of independence by one republic after
another at the end of August that he embraced a confederal formula—
one with which he was not entirely comfortable.

From what we now know about the decision-making process behind
the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, it appears to
have been an improvised, last-ditch effort to preserve some type of
community over the territory of the former USSR in the face of the
failure of Ukraine to agree to participate in a renegotiated union
treaty based on loose confederal principles. The idea of a
commonwealth of independent states was not new; it had been briefly
mentioned at least a year earlier by Kirgiz President Askar Akaev as a
possible solution to center-periphery relations,\textsuperscript{55} and was the formula supported by the Moldovan government as well. Nevertheless, this solution was by and large ignored until October 1991, when at the Novo-Ogarevo negotiations debate began to focus over the meaning of the word \textit{soiuz}, which in Russian can signify both "union" (implying a state) and "alliance" (implying an international agreement or organization). At that time, the latter connotation was rejected by the participating Presidents of the republics. However, Ukraine’s continued refusal to agree to any kind of state formation process eventually brought the commonwealth idea back onto the negotiating table. As Russian First Vice-Premier Gennadii Burbulis later noted, "the possibility of signing the latest version of the Union Treaty, including its signing by Ukraine, was discussed" at the Minsk meeting of the Presidents of the three Slavic republics in early December 1991. But as a result of Ukrainian intransigence, "only one option was left--the formation of a Commonwealth."\textsuperscript{56} The formation of the commonwealth as an international organization of sovereign states not only signalled the transcendence of the Soviet imperial legacy; it represented the destruction of the Soviet state-building legacy as well.

\textbf{V}

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is the imperial legacy that was widely perceived to stand behind the Soviet polity also
extinct? Does the breakup of the USSR mean that we have witnessed the passing of "the last empire"?

The answer, which is clearly no, flows directly from the logic of the arguments presented in this essay, as well as from empirical confirmation. If states and empires are separated largely by a matter of whether politics is accepted as "ours" or "theirs," then the number of situations that might engender empire-consciousness is limited only by the imagination. In early 1992 a group of Polish Seim deputies accused Lithuania of "colonizing" the Vil'nius region, an area of traditional Polish settlement. The Russian-speaking community in left-bank Moldavia has already declared the creation of its own state in fear of the possibility of what it calls "Romanian occupation." Similarly, Russian communities in four provinces of southern Ukraine have called for combining the provinces into a state to be known as Novorossia, or New Russia, in fear of Ukrainian domination. A demonstration in the city of Tomsk in 1989 took place under the slogan: "Free Siberia, the largest colony in the world!" In July 1990 the founding conference of the Union for a Siberian Association called for "liquidating the colonial policy of the center towards the region" and for the creation of a Siberian parliament. A political movement has been founded in favor of the creation of Urals state with much the same rationale. The leadership of Irkutsk province, objecting to the dominance of the center over affairs of the region, has called for vesting all provinces of Russia with state sovereignty. The administrative head of Kaliningrad province
advocates turning that territory into a fourth Baltic state. A meeting held in Alma-Ata in December 1991 called for the creation of a pan-Turkic state that would defend Turkic-speaking peoples against "expansion on the part of Russia." A leader of the Volga Tatar nationalist movement observed: "The big empire has collapsed; the Russian federation will be more difficult, but I think it is inescapable that this empire will also collapse." In January 1992 the parliament of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus proclaimed that the Northern Caucasian republics "could not be part of any empire and must strive for full state sovereignty." The Chechens, of course, have already declared their independence from Russia. In other words, the deconstruction of the former USSR remains an ongoing and potentially endless process, even after the USSR formally ceased to exist.

As much as it is true that the central trend of twentieth century history has been the consolidation of the modern state as a political form, empires continue to live with us. Indeed, one might be tempted to argue that change in the modern state system requires the continued existence of empires, for how else, other than on the basis of a lack of fit between polity, identity, and legitimacy, can we justify redrawing state boundaries. So deeply has the state ingrained itself into the modern world that we cannot conceive of any other way of altering its contours than by reimagining states as empires.

But there is another reason why "the last empire" is unlikely to
be the last. The mistrust upon which the dissolution of empires is based does not end with imperial dissolution. It lives on into the post-imperial period. When imperialism dies, neo-imperialism still lives. The Moldavian Popular Front's parliamentary group, for instance, has charged that the Moldovan government's pledge to share payment of the USSR's external debt obligations amounted to "reattaching our republic's economy to that of the empire, . . . consigning us and our descendants to an unprecedented financial servitude." The deputies declared that there was no moral or legal justification for "forcing occupied peoples striving for independence to pay the debts of their conquerors."67 Similar statements have come from Vil'nius and Kiev.

With the new Russian state declaring itself the successor state to the Soviet Union, would it not also take on the role of successor empire? In an address to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies after the coup, Yel'tsin asserted that "the Russian state, having chosen democracy and freedom, will never be an empire, nor an older or younger brother; it will be an equal among equals."68 Of course, the reason for locating the headquarters of the commonwealth in Minsk was due to mistrust of the possible imperial intentions of Moscow. As Stanislav Shushkevich, President of Belarus, is said to have noted, "as long as Moscow is the capital, suspicions that the old center is being reconstituted in new garments will be inevitable."69 The creation of a commonwealth was supposed to bury the notion of a center once and for all. As Leonid Kravchuk observed in the aftermath of the
Minsk meetings: "We have done everything that we could so that there would never again be a center in our lives and that a center would never again be in charge of our states."70

Yet, no sooner had the center been buried than its specter was stalking its familiar territory once again. Only days after proclaiming that the USSR no longer existed, the government of Boris Yel'tsin moved to establish the state emblem of the new Russian state: the two-headed eagle, the symbol of the Tsarist empire, with the proviso, in Gennadii Burbulis' words, that "the eagle not look very evil."71 The Russian government's takeover of all former Soviet ministries and foreign embassies was seen by many of the former republics as a kind of "imperialism by stealth." And conflicts over ownership of the Black Sea fleet and control of the Crimea have led to complaints in Ukraine over a resurgence of Russian imperialism and a growing nationalist revival within Russia. Russian Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi has called for Russia to define itself "as a power, and not as a beggar within the Commonwealth of Independent States." In his words: "Russians' historical conscience does not allow the mechanical association of the borders of Russia and of the Russian federation, thus denying what was a glorious page in Russian history."72 As one Russian commentator observed: "Ready pens have appeared suggesting that Russian leaders should embark upon a great power-imperialist course of 'coerced pressure' on the other (smaller) republics . . . and upon a coerced resolution of the national question inside Russia."73
This is not to say that a post-Soviet empire is in the making, nor even that the Eurasian state system will not survive in its current, post-Soviet configuration of fifteen plus zero (the union-republics without a center). But the key fact about empires is the need to keep killing them. While empires may die, their memory lives on after them, affecting the perceptions and behavior of those who knew them only too well.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Mark R. Beissinger, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin--Madison, is author of the book Scientific Management, Socialist Discipline, and Soviet Power (Harvard, 1988), as well as contributing co-editor of The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society (Westview, 1990). Research on protest mobilization in favor of secession was carried out in part under the auspices of a grant from the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, Contract #304-14. The author would like to thank Valerie Bunce for her comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
NOTES


10. Ibid., pp. 142-143.

11. As Laitin observed: "What makes the Soviet Union an 'empire' is not, however, addressed by any author." Ibid., p. 142.


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13. There were, of course, the more cynical and pragmatic arguments against the claims to statehood for peoples of the former Soviet Union that formed the basis for much of American policy in the area until the aborted coup of August 1991. These arguments were well paraphrased (but not supported) by Alexander Motyl: "[S]tability must be a key consideration, because the collapse of superpower can only have portentous consequences for the security of the world. Supporters of unconditional self-determination for the republics thus may justly be criticized for blithely invoking a principle that, if pursued to its logical conclusion, would wreak havoc on the international system of states in general and Eastern Europe in particular." Alexander J. Motyl, "Empire or Stability? The Case for Soviet Dissolution," World Policy Journal (Summer 1991), p. 300. The disintegration of the USSR took place in spite of the strong aversion of policy-makers around the globe to any revision of borders in the "community of states."


21. Several years ago, this author believed that empire could be defined objectively and looked towards the system of ethnic stratification in the USSR as its main indicator, or "legacy." Yet, upon closer examination that system of stratification turned out to be extremely complex, varying considerably over time and space. See Mark Beissinger and Lubomyr Hajda, "Nationalism and Reform in Soviet


24. It is impossible, for instance, to sort out who exploited whom when one considers the extremely low price that was charged for oil inside the USSR. Oil-producing regions, such as Tiumen', Bashkiria, and Azerbaidzhan, have argued that they were subsidizing the rest of the country, at the same time as the rest of the country complained about the low level of prices charged for goods produced in their areas. Both sides were correct.

25. Anatolii Khazanov has noted that "there exist two opinions in the USSR: 1) Central Asia is still an exploited colony; and 2) Central Asia takes more from the Union and is subsidized." See ACASIA: Newsletter of the Association for Central Asian Studies, vol. 5, no. 1 (December 1990), p. 2.


27. My own research on protest mobilization before and during glasnost' has shown a strong positive association between the levels of urbanization and education of a nationality and the degree of non-violent protest in which they engaged. See Mark R. Beissinger, "Protest Mobilization Among Soviet Nationalities," paper delivered to the plenary session of the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 1991, Cincinnati, Ohio.


34. See Szporluk, "The Imperial Legacy," in Hajda and Beissinger, eds., op. cit.


40. Amalrik and Solzhenitsyn were exceptions rather than the rule in terms of dissident views on nationalities issues.


43. Robinson, op. cit., p. 139.

44. For more on the methodology behind this analysis, see Mark R. Beissinger, "Non-Violent Public Protest in the USSR: December 1, 1986--December 31, 1989," report published by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, Washington, DC, 1990. Secessionist
protest was defined as protest in support of one of the following demands: against annexation of the territory to the USSR or Russia; for redefinition of citizenship along national lines; for creation of national military units; in favor of secession from the USSR; for the right of the republic to separate diplomatic representation abroad; for the withdrawal of the Soviet army from the republic; and for publication or renunciation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.


46. Game theorists would refer to such a situation as a "tipping game." Indeed, Timur Kuran has used such games to explain why certain major revolutions were unanticipated at the time of their occurrence, but with hindsight appeared inevitable. Kuran argues that this paradox is explained by "preference falsification" by members of society due to repression. "Their silence makes society appear stable, even though it would find itself in the throes of revolution if there were even a slight surge in the size of the opposition." Timur Kuran, "Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution," Public Choice, vol. 61 (1989), p. 60. I would argue that in the Soviet case "preference falsification" may explain the rapidity of change in some instances (such as the Balts) where "empire-consciousness" always existed but could not be openly expressed. But as the evidence indicates, within a large portion of the Soviet population a genuine identity change appears to have taken place in a relatively compact period of time. In such cases, what we are dealing with is not "preference falsification," but rather preference change due to inherently ambiguous and overlapping identities. I am indebted to Valerie Bunce for this reference.

47. Ogonek, no. 43 (October 1989), pp. 4-5.


52. For a review of the debates surrounding federal versus confederal formulations, see Lapidus, "Gorbachev and the 'National Question,'" op. cit., pp. 201-250.

54. For the draft of the treaty, see Izvestiia, August 15, 1991, pp. 1-2.


61. Golos naroda (Sverdlovsk), no. 6, 1990, pp. 4-6.


