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Walter C. Clemens *
* Boston University.

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Who or What Killed the Soviet Union?  
How Three Davids Undermined Goliath

WALTER C. CLEMENS

The sources of Soviet collapse intertwined, but Baltic independence movements were as weighty as any factors in subverting the USSR. As the imperial core faltered, nationalists in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania gained strength, and links frayed between the authorities at the centre and political actors on the periphery. Activists in each Baltic republic used Gorbachev’s platform of perestroika, glasnost’ and legality to assert their nation’s sovereignty in specific domains, such as resources and the environment, but soon escalated to demand sovereignty overall – independence. When the Kremlin complained and threatened repressive action, Balts stood fast. Depending on legal and moral force, including non-violent resistance, they showed the centre to be irresolute. Fostering separatism in other republics, including a Russia led by Boris Yeltsin, Balts triggered multiple challenges to empire. Gorbachev’s counter, a planned 'Union of Sovereign States', ignited the August 1991 putsch that effectively ended the USSR. Following the abortive coup, Russia and the world recognized Baltic independence.

The proper basis of our security is in good administration rather than in fear... The right way to deal with free people is this – not to inflict tremendous punishment on them after they have revolted, but to take tremendous care of them before this point is reached, to prevent them even contemplating the idea of revolt...

Diodotus versus Cleon, in Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Book Three

What led to the breakdown and break-up of the Soviet system? Both external and domestic factors must be considered. Looking at the dissolution of other empires, historians have noted the influence of economic decline; rot at the metropolitan core; setbacks in war; weakness on the periphery; environmental disaster; or a rival ideology ascending. Alone or together, such factors have often led to a failure of imperial will and capacity.¹

The Communist rulers of the USSR faced most of these problems in the 1980s.² The weight of each factor is difficult to assess because they intertwined and abetted one another. Had Soviet living standards improved,

Walter C. Clemens, Boston University

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the Kremlin might have been more confident and its subjects more contented. Had fresher minds and spirits gained power before 1985, the Soviet regime might have kept its empire longer by deft carrots or sticks.

When and how the Soviet empire would collapse were not predetermined. But the Soviet body politic was quite ill — the sick man of Eurasia. Starting in the 1970s, infant mortality rose and life expectancy declined. Top Kremlin leaders concluded that rejuvenation of their economy and technology required steady inputs of Western assistance. Like the Habsburgs, however, the Soviets neglected internal reform and stepped up expansion. Farms around Moscow were being depopulated and the Aral Sea shrinking, but Soviet power reached out to Angola, Ethiopia and Afghanistan. Here was classic ‘imperial overreach’.

Still, few observers expected the rapid and relatively non-violent collapse of the Soviet system in 1989–91. Some analysts speculated that Moscow’s east European allies or its border republics might try to defect, but which would go first — and how? One expert hypothesized that, if any union republic could break from Moscow’s grip, it would be Ukraine — large, industrially developed, favoured with abundant resources, buttressed by cultural and kinship ties to the West. Still, he reasoned, Ukraine would not rebel because it could not. Its ties of economic interdependence with other Soviet republics ran too deep to sever; Soviet spies and agents were omnipresent, making it difficult to organize against Moscow. To be sure, Ukraine and other borderlands had split from Soviet Russia in 1918, but only after foreign powers tore them from Russia’s grasp. No such external agent loomed in the late 1980s. Indeed, as late as 1 August 1991, President Bush urged Ukrainians to remain in the Gorbachev fold.

In the 1980s it was difficult to imagine that the smallest union republics could catalyse the Soviet empire’s dissolution. Thus Dr Astrid Tuminez contends that nationalism in the Soviet borderlands played only a marginal, ‘facilitating’ role in the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Russian nationalism, she says, was just another tool by which President Yeltsin sought revenge against his personal foe, President Gorbachev. Tuminez argues that the Gorbachev regime failed in three ways to maintain control over the empire’s periphery. First, it failed to maintain consensus among core élites on the Soviet imperial mission; secondly, it did not sustain the compact formed in Stalin’s times between core and local élites that had long buttressed imperial controls; finally, it did not use sufficient force when both consensus and compact ebbed.

To be sure, the Kremlin’s hold was faltering. But Tuminez neglects other key parts of the imperial equation. A more balanced view would look simultaneously at three variables shaping the fate of empires: the ‘centre’ — for the USSR, the highest organs of the Communist Party and Soviet
Government; units on the periphery – the union republics and, beyond them, client regimes in eastern Europe and elsewhere; and third, the links between the centre and the periphery. A focus on any single variable may distort one’s vision of the whole.  

Taking account of these three variables, the broad picture is that the Baltic republics on the north-western tip of the empire became stronger while the centre’s authority weakened; in this process, the ties that once bound – the imperial ‘compact’ – frayed. By word, deed and example Balts subverted the core and buttressed independence movements elsewhere on the periphery and in the core of the core – Russia itself. Yes, Yeltsin used nationalism – in Russia and elsewhere, but nationalists also used him. 

Without the Baltic drive for independence the USSR would not have disintegrated when it did. Imperial overreach and internal decay might well have killed the Soviet system a decade or two later. But Baltic actions exacerbated all the challenges facing the Soviet system and those who sought to save it. 

Consider a counterfactual scenario: what if the Balts had not challenged the centre but instead tried to implement the economic and other reforms sponsored by Gorbachev? If the Balts laboured for change within the system, they would not have been striving for independence, blazing the path of what Gorbachev later lamented as a ‘parade of sovereignties’. If perestroika worked in the Baltic, that success would have raised hopes that Gorbachev’s policies could make the system more viable. 

What kinds of hypotheses might have suggested a major role for the Balts in the downfall of the USSR? Before the late 1980s no entity so small as the Balts had ever managed by its peaceful protests to undermine a large empire. Most national self-determination movements had to fight their way to independence – from the United Provinces against Spain to Eritrea against Ethiopia. Still, many international relations scholars recognized that material power does not assure influence; that small states such as South Korea can manipulate and defy their larger patrons; that poorly armed national independence movements can exhaust superpowers; in short, that intangible assets can best tangible ones. Furthermore, many historians had long seen nationalism as the most potent intangible power in the modern world – far outweighing class consciousness or cosmopolitanism. Such axioms raised the possibility that the Baltic Davids could undo Goliath. 

The Historical Fact: Balts Played a Decisive Role 

Let us call up four expert witnesses. The key role played by the Baltic independence movements in undermining the Soviet system is attested in
the memoirs of Gorbachev and of his major rival for a time, Yegor Ligachev and in various statements by Eduard Shevardnadze, Soviet Foreign Minister from 1985 to 1990. This proposition is implicit also the recollections of the American Ambassador to Moscow from 1987 to 1991, Jack F. Matlock.

Of these commentators, Ligachev put the case most plainly. Granting a need for economic reform – perestroika, Ligachev concluded that nationalist separatism presented the number one threat to perestroika. Ultimately, he wrote, nationalist separatism could and did undermine the entire Soviet state. Ligachev found nationalism in Lithuania especially challenging, because it led the Communist Party there to split from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), leaving only a rump faction faithful to Moscow. Gorbachev and his aide Aleksandr Yakovlev, says Ligachev, were blind to the dangers of separatism. Gorbachev was blinded by his concern to rebut and rebuff ‘conservatives’ (such as Ligachev) who favoured a more cautious approach to change.13

Rebutting critics at home and abroad, Gorbachev claims to have long been sensitive to national and ethnic conflicts because he grew up and worked for many decades in the ethnically volatile north Caucasus. Gorbachev asserts that the proponents of perestroika knew from the outset that their reforms could not succeed unless they took into account the interests of the many nations and nationalities living in the USSR. But the reformists did not fathom the scale of the rapidly emerging national problems and stuck to traditional methods – even after the first manifestations of unrest by Kazakhs in 1986 and by Crimean Tatars in 1987. Then, in 1988, Nagorno Karabakh struck like a tocsin.14

Still, ‘the most vulnerable element [zveno, literally ‘link’] in the Union’, according to Gorbachev, was the Baltic region [Pribaltika] – the ‘vanguard’ of nationalism. ‘Omens of nationalist ferment appeared in the Baltic in 1987’ and persisted. As of 1987, Gorbachev recalled, there were no demands for secession except in the Baltic, where ‘extremist’ groups were active in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Many reasons for Baltic unrest are detailed in Gorbachev’s memoirs, beginning with the events of 1939–40. But he also argues that the Balts got from the Union more than they gave.15

Another authoritative view is that of Gorbachev’s choice for Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. In 1989 Shevardnadze told the American Secretary of State James Baker that nationality issues were among the ‘most sensitive and difficult problems’ faced by the Soviet government. Centralized rule over the border republics may have been necessary to build a strong country, but became harmful by the 1960s. Soviet leaders had made a big mistake in thinking that the nationality problem had been solved. In 1989, Shevardnadze said, Moscow was looking for a new approach. When Baker reaffirmed Washington’s non-recognition of Soviet annexation of the
Baltics, Shevardnadze became defensive but asserted that the Kremlin would not use force against the Balts. He noted, however, that if the Balts tried to quit the USSR, the peoples of the Transcaucasus might do the same. For the Balts as for the states of eastern Europe, breaking economic links with Moscow would mean ‘suicide’.

In December 1989 Shevardnadze used even stronger language. He told Baker that the nationalities problem was the Soviet government’s ‘greatest problem’.

Matlock’s Autopsy on an Empire does not pick out any single element as paramount in the demise of the USSR. On many pages, however, he details the great weight exerted by developments in the Baltic. He relates that Shevardnadze told him several times that the Soviet Union’s nationality problems were more difficult to solve than its economic weaknesses. One such exchange took place on 7 March 1990, less than an hour before leaders of the Lithuanian independence movement Sajudis were scheduled to visit Matlock. Shevardnadze begged Matlock to try to forestall any Lithuanian declaration of independence until after the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies could establish a presidential system that would strengthen Gorbachev’s hand. Otherwise, Shevardnadze warned, a civil war might commence and the Soviet military establish a dictatorship in Lithuania and perhaps even in Moscow.

When Matlock met the Sajudis leaders later that morning, he listened and offered little advice. But on 11 March the Lithuanian Supreme Council voted unanimously (with six abstentions) formally to restore the country’s independence. Four days later Gorbachev became USSR President, but neither he nor other Soviet officials took steps then to repress Lithuania. As Matlock tells the story of 1990–91, the impetuous Balts – sometimes bolstered by US diplomacy – helped to immobilize the Kremlin’s will to crush nationalist dissent by armed might. The importance attached by the Gorbachev regime to the Baltic was reflected in Politburo instructions to Shevardnadze for his meetings with high US officials in April and May 1990. Shevardnadze’s talking points gave priority to Baltic issues over Germany and arms control. When Matlock urged Gorbachev to curtail military action against Lithuania in January 1991 Gorbachev asked the Ambassador to help President Bush understand that ‘we are on the brink of a civil war’. In March 1991, as in August 1990, the CPSU Central Committee publicly condemned what it saw as US aid programmes and radio broadcasts intended to subvert Soviet rule in the Baltics. How much deliberate hyperbole inflated Soviet statements is difficult to assess.

Matlock returned to Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1992 and asked more than a dozen Russian political leaders who or what killed the Soviet system. Some respondents said that the system was genetically doomed; others
blamed economic and social malaise. But several respondents identified the centre’s ‘half-hearted’ use of force against Lithuania in January 1991 as a point of no return. Some liberals thought that Gorbachev had done too much, permitting or authorizing excessive violence; hardliners believed that he had done too little. Liberals condemned Gorbachev for the loss of life in Vilnius; hardliners latter blamed him for (belatedly) condemning the use of force. Several of Matlock’s respondents pointed to other manifestations of nationalism: Russia’s declaration of sovereignty and the formation of a separate Russian Communist Party in the summer of 1990; the republics’ taking control of tax collections in January 1991; and Ukraine’s move toward complete independence late in the year.12

How the Three Davids Asserted Themselves and Weakened the Centre

Expert witnesses attribute a decisive role to the Baltic Davids. Are they correct? Let us examine the evidence: Tables 1 and 2 summarize the main points.

**TABLE 1**
HOW THE CENTRE LOST THE PERIPHERY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions by the Centre</th>
<th>Inactions of the Centre</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Exploit the periphery for generations</td>
<td>1. Fail to generate a sense of mutual gain between rulers and the ruled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide legal-political structures for incipient nationality-based states in the union and other republics</td>
<td>2. Fail to create a <em>homo soveticus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Align Communist-style modernization against every traditional value (religion, local culture, etc.)</td>
<td>3. Fail to recognize the power of nationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Promise decentralization and other reforms, but then retreat or renege</td>
<td>4. Fail to sustain imperial will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tolerate deviant behavior until crisis conditions build and then fail to use decisive force</td>
<td>5. Fail to sustain a compact between the core and comprador</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Fail to assuage demands for self-determination, e.g., by turning over state-owned property to republics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Fail to revise the union treaty in a timely manner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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TABLE 2
ACTIONS BY THE BALTIC INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS

1. Challenge the Centre on safe issues (preserving historical monuments, protecting the environment) and gradually escalate to demand independence

2. Adopt regime slogans such as perestroika, glasnost', legality

3. Co-opt or pressure local Communists to join the nationalist cause

4. Mobilize moral strengths while avoiding violence with non-native settlers, with Soviet Army, with Moscow

5. Exploit leeway offered by the Soviet Constitution

6. Multiply strengths by aligning with Yeltsin and anti-Soviet nationalisms in other republics, including Russia

7. Mobilize foreign backers

Some of the points listed are already well documented in the literature. Here we try flesh out those that are less familiar and suggest how they reinforced one another. The chronology of key events is outlined in Appendix I.

Balts Exploited the Centre’s Espousal of Perestroika

The Gorbachev regime after 1986 permitted and even encouraged some self-organization of society from below. Elements of civil society had developed in the USSR since the mid and late 1950s. Their emergence was a cause as well as an effect of Gorbachev’s reforms. These institutions often had a nationalist character as they endeavoured to protect the local history, culture and environment. In the Baltic as in Russia and other republics, nationalism and democratic self-assertion through mass organizations and demonstrations reinforced one another. Their synergy cut away at the foundations of imperial rule.

In 1988 popular fronts were established in each Baltic republic – the first in Estonia, founded by a former state planner Edgar Savisaar and by several other intellectuals, Communist and non-Communist. Initially the fronts avoided any direct challenge to the metropole. The popular fronts claimed to support perestroika, glasnost’ and legality – watchwords of the Gorbachev regime, but the fronts soon became vehicles for nationalism. They tapped suppressed ethnic and civic identity and accumulated anger toward perceived repression past and present.

Seeking to encourage but channel Baltic energies, Gorbachev unloosed powers he could not control. His regime welcomed the popular fronts as
partners in economic reconstructing. He hoped for Baltic innovations to test and apply the principles of perestroika. If any peoples in the USSR could devise constructive economic policies, the Balts would be the most likely candidates, for they were the most westernized, most affluent and most widely educated; and also the least sovietized. Just as several tsars gave some leash to Finland, Gorbachev loosened reins for the Balts. His hopes were reasonable, but the Balts pushed further and faster than he wanted. Less than two years separated the founding of Estonia’s Popular Front in April 1988 and Lithuania’s declaration of independence in March 1990.

From the empire’s perspective, the fronts embodied the wolves of nationalism in sheep’s clothing. Balts worked within the system to exit from it. Both Gorbachev and the new, informal organizations in the Baltic unleashed rising expectations that could not be satisfied by temporizing. The new wine could not be contained by old bottles. Thus in October 1988 the Lithuanian movement Sajudis demanded sovereignty within the Soviet federation; by April 1989 it asserted that ‘a sovereign country cannot be part of another country’. Ligachev aptly summarized Baltic trends: one could graph how unofficial movements there turned to ‘radical nationalism’; how they moved from realistic accounting [khozrashchet], a necessary ingredient of economic reform, to secession.

**Balts Exploited the Centre’s Espousal of Glasnost**

In late 1987 authorities in Moscow instructed Baltic newspapers to apply the principles of glasnost’ to nationality issues. Accordingly, the Communist-controlled press in Estonia promptly began a series of frank reports on differences between Russians and Estonians and discussions on what to do about them. Open discussion of ethnic conflicts in the Baltic was probably essential if a solution were to be found. But the regime had stalled for too long. Following the decades of repression, candour cut deep and left wounds hard to heal.

Some Baltic publications, especially those in the local languages, took advantage of glasnost’ to go far beyond what its sponsors had expected. Ligachev’s memoir complained that the Baltic press exploited its new freedoms: ‘The role of the media in the destabilization of the Baltics was very clear, as in the popular front press Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia became battering rams, shaking the pillars of socialism and the Union state.’ Ligachev charged that Baltic ‘radicals’ used glasnost’ and democracy to ‘incite social tensions, disorient the public consciousness and destabilize the state.’ Ligachev acknowledged that old-style dictation could no longer be used to control the press, but complained that Soviet authorities did nothing to stop the radical media from ‘running amok with their attacks’ on the system.
Ligachev contended that separatist entrepreneurs played on past ‘distortions’ of national cultures and languages to foment trouble. ‘National awareness always leads the way, acceding to civic concepts only as the working class acquires political experience.’ The problem, as Ligachev saw it in 1988, was how to encourage political activism without allowing it to turn into a nationalistic, anti-Soviet movement.\textsuperscript{31}

**Balts Exploited the Soviet Constitutional Framework**

When Balts demanded self-determination, they did so at first within the framework of *perestroika*. Later, as they insisted on outright independence, they presented this as a right established in the Soviet Constitution.

Balts profited from lack of clarity in Russian minds about the distinctions between ‘sovereignty’, ‘independence’, ‘union of states’, and ‘confederation’.\textsuperscript{32} In 1988 Balts began to demand ‘sovereignty’ in specific domains, for example, control of resources, but gradually broadened their demands to ‘sovereignty’ in general. Even when they demanded ‘independence’, however, this did not necessarily signify ‘secession’ to Kremlin minds. Thus Gorbachev’s memoir states that Baltic demands for the restoration of their national anthems and flags of 1918 and achieving ‘real independence [*samostoiatel’nosti*] of the republics’ conformed with the Baltic constitutions, the USSR Constitution and the ideas of the XIX Party Conference – ‘without any demand for withdrawal from the [Soviet] Union.’\textsuperscript{33} When Estonia’s Supreme Soviet declared that its laws could override those of the USSR, however, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet declared the Estonian moves to be unconstitutional and invalid. Still, Gorbachev softened the decree by including a phrase calling for the development of mechanisms whereby the union republics could expand and protect their ‘sovereign rights in the USSR’. When Estonian resistance stiffened in 1989, Gorbachev lamented that Moscow had failed to make clear that it so far had talked only about the first stage of political reform. By August 1989 the Gorbachev team prepared a draft CPSU platform on nationalities that called for a transformation of the ‘Soviet Federation’ to provide meaningful ‘national autonomy’. The theses also broke ground by raising the possibility of a new Union Treaty.\textsuperscript{34} Gorbachev’s support for a revised, more liberal treaty proved to be a major catalyst of the coup that virtually unseated him in August 1991.

Baltic independence did not materialize until rival hardline and reformist imperialists in Moscow gave one another a fatal blow. Recognition of Baltic independence by Russia, by other countries and then by the USSR State Council came only in the weeks after the August 1991 coup. Antipathy among the rivals in Moscow had been fuelled by the
challenge of nationalism on the periphery, especially in the Baltic. The hardliners feared that the reformists would soon enact a new compact that turned the erstwhile Soviet Union into a weak confederation of 'sovereign states'. The putschists struck just days before Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia were expected to sign a new Union Treaty. Three of the plotters may also have been motivated by Gorbachev's private pledge to Yeltsin that he would replace them after the treaty was signed.35

Balts Mobilized Moral Power and Eschewed Violence

Balts were persistent – dogged in their pursuit of independence, even when the odds did not look good. Balts became free in part because they acted as though they were free. Their independence movement was called a 'Singing Revolution', in part because it eschewed violence, but also because each Baltic republic produced huge music festivals that manifested and mobilized national consciousness. 'The sounds of hundreds of thousands of voices symbolize national harmony in every sense, like Rousseau's "General Will" set to music.'36

As the Singing Revolution built momentum, the numbers of demonstrators increased dramatically. In 1987 some three to five thousand Latvians commemorated the deportations of their countrymen by Soviet invaders in 1941. In 1988, however, this event was memorialized by about one hundred thousand people. A quarter of a million people took part in Estonia's September 1988 music festival.37 Several Latvian demonstrations in 1989 and 1990 involved a quarter to a half a million.38

Beginning in 1987, demonstrators in all three Baltic republics began to mark the anniversary of the 1939 Nazi–Soviet pact that set the stage for their annexation. The largest single demonstration took place on 23 August 1989 (the fiftieth anniversary of the Hitler–Stalin accord), when one to two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians – one-sixth to one-third of the total Baltic population – formed a 370-mile human chain from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius.

Having noted the successes of Solidarity in Poland, Balts followed a path of non-violence.39 There were few street fights between Balts and Russian-speaking settlers. The only deaths in the movement toward Baltic independence were inflicted by Soviet troops upon passive resisters in the streets of Vilnius and Riga and at Baltic border posts. Total deaths, mainly in 1991, numbered several dozens. Though casualties were few compared with ethnic violence elsewhere, Balts used each incident to embarrass the Gorbachev regime, welcoming foreign television crews to record all. One of the Balts' strongest moral-legal cards was their demand for publication of the secret protocols of the Hitler–Stalin pact. After years of denial and
delay, the centre acquiesced and organized a commission to study the matter. This concluded that Stalin and Hitler had in fact partitioned eastern Europe. The USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in December 1989 declared the secret protocols invalid from their inception, thus undercutting Soviet legitimacy in the Baltic.

Baltic Communists – from Faithful Lackeys to ‘National Democrats’

Baltic Communist leaders tried to dampen local nationalism. Even when Gorbachev launched perestroika, they tended to support the status quo. Gorbachev’s memoir castigates the ‘Communist Party’ for remaining aloof and treating every manifestation of nationalism with caution or hostility. Gorbachev seems to be blaming the republican Party apparatus rather than the central organs, where he had more influence. He writes that Balts began to see their popular fronts as alternatives to the Communist Party. The fronts confronted the questions that were troubling society and ‘quickly became stronger in influence than the Party organizations’.

Soon, however, many Baltic Communists began to shed their ties with the centre and jump on the nationalist bandwagon. As Ligachev saw it, many Communist leaders in the Baltic republics changed their stripes and became “national democrats”, pinning national colours to their lapels to hold on to power and privileges.’ Thus Algirdas Brazauskus chaired the withdrawal of the Lithuanian Communist Party from the CPSU and became a ‘classic liquidator’.

Indecision at the Centre versus Baltic Intransigence

Balts emasculated Soviet power by refusing to bow to threats of military or economic coercion. When Balts held firm, the centre usually pulled back, did nothing, or offered an olive branch.

In February 1988 Gorbachev announced a future plenum of the Communist leadership to consider ‘the national question’, but he presented no answer. Since the Soviet leaders claimed to have ‘solved’ the ‘national question’ long ago, none of them had an immediate answer for what they had presumed to be a non-problem.

Instead of stopping the Baltic radicals, says Ligachev, the Gorbachev team appeased them. Thus Gorbachev’s close adviser Aleksandr Yakovlev chaired the commission that studied the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact and persuaded the second Congress of People’s Deputies to condemn the treaty. With good cause, in Ligachev’s view, one deputy shouted to Yakovlev: ‘You are giving a green light to the dissolution of the Soviet Union!’

Ligachev sought to tighten discipline in the Baltic, but Gorbachev
ignored his warnings and kept Ligachev's letters from the Central Committee. Not until the December 1990 plenum of the Communist Party did Gorbachev call a spade a spade. Referring to Baltic claims to national 'greatness', Gorbachev told the plenum that 'today' the country faced no greater danger than 'the extremist nationalism that stirs up interethnic discord'. Ligachev lamented that Gorbachev had ignored this danger for so long.

When the Lithuanian Communist Party split into a nationalist and a pro-Moscow faction, some Kremlin leaders urged reconciliation. A draft resolution of the CPSU Central Committee plenum in February 1990 urged people in Lithuania to 'smooth things over'. This kind of 'benign approach', Ligachev said, 'inevitably leads to disaster'. He managed to have the draft rewritten so as to support the pro-Moscow faction. Still, the dominant faction led by Brazauskas continued its nationalist orientation.

Backed by Moscow and sometimes by Soviet armed forces stationed in the Baltic, some Slavic-speakers in the Baltic formed 'International Fronts' to resist Baltic independence. By 1989 native speakers of Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian or Polish made up nearly half of the population of Latvia; nearly two-fifths that of Estonia; and one-fifth of that of Lithuania. The situation varied by time and place, but the movement for Baltic independence gained some support from Slavic-speakers. Thus more than half of non-Latvians voted for Latvia's independence in March 1991. Some Slavic-speakers had lived in the Baltic for generations; most since the 1940s. Many believed, like Americans, that they had the right to live anywhere in their country and speak the dominant language. But also many believed that they would become more prosperous in an independent republic not attached to the USSR. Following Baltic independence, however, many non-Balts complained that they were treated unfairly by the new governments of Estonia and Latvia.

Soviet Dependency and Western Diplomacy

One reason why the centre failed to use decisive force against dissident nationalists was that Moscow wanted détente and trade with the West. The United States did little to foment separatism in the USSR, but any Soviet repression of human rights risked the cutting off of the infusions of Western credits and technology that Kremlin leaders hoped would energize perestroika. Thus in January 1991 Ambassador Matlock, on instructions from Washington, warned Gorbachev that armed intervention to crush Lithuania would sever the movement toward détente and trade in East–West relations. Had Kazakhstan or Georgia – with less call on American consciousness than the Baltic republics – been the first Soviet republic to
assert its sovereignty, Washington would probably have spoken less vigorously.

We should note, however, that Gorbachev’s reluctance to use a mailed fist against the Balts continued a secular trend toward delay and restraint. Thus in 1953 the Kremlin immediately crushed the East German revolt; in 1956 Moscow deliberated for weeks before taking military action against Hungarians; in 1968 Moscow temporized for eight months before intervening in Czechoslovakia; the Kremlin agonized for more than a year before invading Afghanistan in 1979; in the 1980s the Kremlin did not use force against Solidarity but depended upon Polish troops to restrain Polish dissidents. From 1986 to 1991 Soviet regular, interior or special forces were deployed briefly against Kazakhs, Georgians, Azeris (who suffered the most deaths) and Balts. But the big picture was that the Gorbachev regime pulled Soviet forces from Afghanistan and let east Europe go without a fight. By the late 1980s Balts could infer that their steady but calm demands for sovereignty ran little risk of provoking a forceful Soviet response – especially if compared with the dangers that dissidents faced in earlier decades.

The trend toward restraint probably evidenced the ebb of imperial will and the Kremlin’s perception of mounting Soviet dependency on the West. Seeking to justify the use of force in Azerbaijan in 1990, Gorbachev’s memoir asserts that force must sometimes be used, but only as a last resort in emergency situations. Later, however, countering charges that he ‘lost’ eastern Europe, Gorbachev avers: ‘The losses are imaginary, the gains are significant – most important, the realization that Russia oppresses no one and does not hold by force its friends and allies. We have often quoted Marx: “No people can be free that oppresses other peoples.” Giving freedom to those who were counted in the ‘Soviet camp’ ... we followed that maxim. Their freedom and our own – this is the main defence of my policies.’ Gorbachev speaks here mainly about eastern Europe, but extends his defence to Ukraine and other former Soviet republics as well.

The Baltic Example

The Baltic independence movement influenced other republics, even Russia. Encouraged by the election victories of popular front candidates in the Baltic in 1989, Gorbachev notes, Georgians established a popular front in June, Uzbeks in May, and Ukrainians in September. Similar stirrings took place in Moldova and Armenia. ‘Balts, as the most experienced and organized, supplied their ideological materials and tried to establish co-ordination.... The activities of the popular fronts escalated and separatist tendencies began to prevail more and more frequently.’
Latvians, in turn, helped others. Some dissident materials in Kazakhstan were printed in Latvia.54

As Ligachev saw it, Lithuania's situation in April 1989 'suggested a scenario of action for nationalist forces in other republics.' Lithuania's Sajudis set out the path that Georgia's nationalists followed. Writing about the April 1989 Soviet military action against demonstrators in Tbilisi, in which nineteen Georgian civilians died, Ligachev said that the Georgians inflamed nationalist passions and incited attacks on the Soviet army, softening Georgian blows against the central authorities until later.55

Balts, says Gorbachev, succeeded in persuading Yeltsin's followers to clone Russia on the Baltic model. When Russians too demanded sovereignty and withdrawal from the Union, this undermined any prospect for saving the 'Union'. Boris Yeltsin was elected Russian President in May 1990; in the summer and fall of 1990 the Russian legislature (followed by the Ukrainian) asserted that its laws took precedence over Soviet ones; in October the USSR Supreme Soviet declared such assertions invalid but took no other action. Gorbachev states that the 'sovereignization' of Russia scuttled the search for a new formula for relations with the Baltic republic in a reformed Union. It caused a 'chain reaction' in all the union republics and later in autonomous republics. 'A "parade of sovereignties" had begun.'56

Explaining the Impossible: How Could These Davids Challenge Goliath?

The cards were stacked against the Balts in many ways. Not only were the Balts tiny relative to Soviet power, but many of their assets had been depleted by half a century of Soviet rule. Many of the most creative Balts disappeared in the 1940s - executed, deported to Siberia, or granted asylum in the West; many died fighting the Red Army or the Wehrmacht. Foreign occupations did much to break the national spirit. Nations with just one, two or three million members speaking a unique tongue had reason to fear extinction by sovietization and Russification.

The Baltic economies became as dependent on Moscow as many others, including Ukraine. Estonia and Latvia had a higher percentage of non-native settlers than most republics. Their military traditions were never strong. Their strategic location made Baltic real estate valuable to Moscow - not an asset to be lightly surrendered.

Relative to other Soviet peoples, Balts were well off. Their infant mortality rates, for example, were the lowest in the USSR. One might have expected the poorest - not the richest - to take risks for independence.

But many factors gave the Balts leverage that other peoples under Soviet
rule lacked. These factors may be traced on many levels: the state system; domestic factors of state and society; and the personal qualities of key individuals.57

The State System

The Balts had a stronger claim to independence than other Soviet peoples. Starting in 1919–20, Balts benefited from the Wilsonian premise that every people had the right to independent statehood. They also gained from the legal doctrine that every state is equal and sovereign. No other Soviet peoples, except the Russians, had exercised an independent statehood for more than a few years in the twentieth century. The three Baltic republics, by contrast, were independent from 1920 (recognized by the League of Nations after 1922) until their forcible annexation by the USSR in 1940.

Balts exploited the Helsinki Process, initiated in 1975, permitting international scrutiny of human rights observance in each signatory country. Emboldened, Baltic activists protested against Soviet militarization of their region. Many dissidents were imprisoned, but others took their places. Under the Helsinki banner, Balts made common cause with other dissidents in the USSR, for example, with Andrei Sakharov and his colleagues. Later, many Baltic delegates joined with Russian and other liberals to form an ‘Interregional Group’ in the USSR Congress of Peoples Deputies elected in 1989, a grouping that included 400 of 2,250 deputies.58

Baltic dissidents won only modest encouragement in the 1980s from Western governments; but Balts still benefited from Washington’s refusal since 1940 to recognize Soviet annexation of the republics, a position followed by most Western governments. The United States had upheld its ‘Stimson Doctrine’ even during the wartime alliance against Hitler and later in times of détente. Indeed, Matlock reminded an assembly in Latvia in 1986 that Washington had never recognized Baltic absorption into the USSR. Each pre-1940 Baltic state continued to have a legation in Washington.

Geography helped the Balts. Had they been further from the West, the prospects of Western support would have been lower. Especially since the 1940s many Balts had settled in Sweden, Finland, Canada and the United States. Had there been fewer Baltic émigrés in the West, Western politicians might have paid less notice to Baltic affairs. Balts, moreover, shared the same Western Christian traditions as most West Europeans and North Americans. Imagine, for contrast, that Tajiks had mounted a drive to secede from the USSR. Tajikistan was physically remote from the West; rooted in non-Western culture; had few voters or even refugees in the West; had few citizens who spoke Western languages.
When Soviet troops killed 13 Lithuanians in January 1991, Western governments threatened to cut economic and other programmes with the USSR. But when Chechens asserted their independence from Russia, they won little support in the West. Even when Russia used barbarous tactics against Chechen separatists, Western leaders said little and did less. President Clinton compared Chechnya with South Carolina in 1861.

Society and State

The illegitimacy of Soviet rule in the Baltic was underscored by the reality that Balts were the most westernized peoples in the USSR – Lutheran and Catholic rather than Orthodox, Muslim or Buddhist. Balts regarded themselves as western and were seen as such by many Russians as well. Westernization implied a greater commitment to individualism, free thinking, industry and thrift than in Russia or many other parts of the USSR.

Balts were the richest and among the best educated of Soviet citizens. But they compared themselves not with Russians but with Finns, who had similar living standards in the 1930s but whose material conditions had reached world-class heights by the 1980s. Because many Soviets knew that Balts were ‘more advanced’, they expected them to be different. Gorbachev hoped they would form the avant-garde of perestroika. Because Balts were richer, however, their independent ways provided a dissident example attractive to Georgians, Ukrainians and even to Russians. Had Tajiks sought independence, their appeal would have been more limited.

Individuals

Despite deportations and repression, gifted political leaders arose to spearhead Baltic independence. They included Communists or ex-Communists such as Edgar Savisaar, founder of Estonia’s Popular Front; Lennart Meri, a non-Communist cultural figure who became Foreign Minister and then President; and anti-Communists such as Tunne Kelam, a founder of the Estonian National Independence Party and later a speaker of the parliament. Lithuania benefited both from anti-Communists such as Professor Vytautas Landsbergis and the Communist or ex-Communist Brazauskas, who aligned with the nationalists. Despite many differences, these individuals managed to co-operate against Soviet and Russian imperialism.

The Upshot

Weakness at the centre permitted and encouraged self-assertion on the
periphery. Had the USSR been an economic dynamo; had the Soviet leadership governed with enlightened grace or, alternatively, with an iron hand; had there been no Western support for Baltic self-determination – had such conditions existed Balts might well have remained quiescent. But none of these factors was present in the 1980s. Hence, resolute Davids could and did show that Goliath towered on feet of clay. Their role was as important as any in subverting the Soviet Union – a role without precedent in the downfall of empires.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Studies Association Annual Meeting in Toronto, March 1997.


2. The USSR was losing its Afghan campaign and the Cold War; environmental catastrophes stretched from the Aral Sea to the Arctic Ocean; many top leaders were corrupt, inept or senile, not just in Moscow but in regional capitals such as Tashkent; in the USSR and worldwide Marxism-Leninism was retreating before political and economic views derived from Locke and Adam Smith. The decline in Soviet imperial will is detailed in the text that follows.

3. To argue, even in retrospect, that the collapse was foreordained may reflect ideological blinders and methodological primitivism. On this point, see Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), pp.25–7.


5. Trends were contradictory, but the Brezhnev regime seemed to prefer a course of detente and trade with the West. See Walter C. Clemens, *The USSR, and Global Inteodependence- Alternative Futures* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

6. In the 1970s Malcolm Mackintosh and other observers wrote of Moscow’s strong ‘imperial will’ and contrasted Soviet dynamism with America’s inward orientation after Vietnam. But the burdens of empire and defence upon Soviet economic development led other scholars to predict that the USSR would eventually lose the Cold War to the less burdened United States. This argument is implicit, for example, in A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Still, such analysis could not specify just when Goliath would falter. The Kremlin’s weak response to Solidarity and the Poles’ decision to proselytize in neighbouring countries provoked the present author in 1981 to ask: ‘Will the Soviet Empire Survive 1984?’, *Christian Science Monitor*, Opinion Page, 10 July 1981.


8. A classroom simulation at Boston University in the 1980s postulated Soviet military action against Ukrainian separatists. While Moscow was engaged in Ukraine, Balts asserted their independence. In the unfolding reality, however, these roles were reversed. Moscow focused on the Balts, giving some respite to dissident Ukrainians.

9. For the context, see Jack F. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador’s
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14. Gorbachev avers that special circumstances led him to replace a Kazakh with a Russian at the helm of the Communist Party in Kazakhstan in 1986, triggering ‘disorders’ in Kazakhstan. Traditional thinking and old methods prevailed. ‘Force was used’ to put down Kazakh demonstrators. Instead of trying to understand Kazakh grievances, Moscow officials blamed the demonstrations on ‘hangovers from the past and the influence of outside forces.’ Gorbachev’s passive style leaves unclear how much of these attitudes he shared. See Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Zhizn’ i reformy (2 vols.; Moscow: Novosti, 1995), Vol.1, pp.498-501 in Ch. 16, ‘Nationality Policy: a Difficult Search’; Ch. 15 in the one-volume English Memoirs (New York: Doubleday, 1995). Where possible, both the Russian and the English reference is cited, but the two-volume Russian text contains much material omitted in the English.
17. When Baker suggested a referendum, Shevardnadze allowed that it might be feasible in the Baltics, ‘where people are generally calm’, but could ignite a civil war in the Caucasus. Politics, p.203. Shevardnadze’s memoir focuses on east–west negotiations but details his dismay at the use of force against demonstrators in Tbilisi in April 1989 and Gorbachev’s refusal to let him speak to the Congress of People’s Deputies on this matter. See Eduard Shevardnadze, Moi vybor: v zashchitu demokratii i svobody (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), pp.320-7.
19. On 8 March 1990 Shevardnadze told Matlock that he would resign if he saw a dictatorship coming. ‘I’ll not be part of a government with blood on its hands.’ Autopsy, p.329.
22. Matlock concludes that it was individual humans and their decisions – not abstract forces – that sped the demise of the Soviet system. He believes that KGB chief Vladimir Kruchkov was the individual most responsible for wrecking the system, because he organized the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev. Autopsy, pp.665–7. Gorbachev blamed the West for insufficient support but, one expert concludes, it was Gorbachev who ‘lost’ Gorbachev. See Alfred Erich Senn, Gorbachev’s Failure in Lithuania (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), p.153.
24. A Comintern slogan from the 1930s, the term ‘popular front’ was used in Estonia and Latvia, but Lithuanians called their group a ‘movement’ – Sajudis. The inaugural congress of each
Baltic front was held in October 1988.


30. Ligachev, pp.100–1.

31. Ibid., p.172.

32. For much of 1991 Gorbachev recommended that a 'Union of Sovereign States' replace the USSR. An association of sovereign states, however, is not a 'union' but a confederation. Gorbachev's memoir complains that in September 1991 Yeltsin proposed neither a federation nor a confederation but an even looser grouping like the European Union. In November 1991 the USSR State Council debated whether to adopt a 'union state' (favoured by Gorbachev) or a 'union of states' (endorsed by Yeltsin). But the options became hopelessly muddled. Thus one option was 'a union with centralized state power -- either federative or confederative.' (Gorbachev, *Zhizn*', Vol.2, pp.588–93 and *Memoirs*, pp.655–66). In the early 1990s a 'Commonwealth of Independent States' was joined by most states that emerged from the USSR but was spurned by the Baltic republics. The Commonwealth could be a vehicle for union but remained quite loose as of 1997.


35. Matlock, p.578.


39. This point was confirmed by the Sajudis leader Vytautas Landsbergis in talks with the author in Chicago and Washington in May 1996. Not till the 1990s, he recalled, did Landsbergis comprehend the work of Martin Luther King or see the writings of Gene Sharp on non-violent sanctions. On non-violent action in the Baltic, see the author’s essay in Roger S. Powers and William B. Vogele (eds.), *Protest, Power and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolent Action* (New York: Garland, 1997).

40. Gorbachev oversimplifies here. Baltic Communists initially took part in the fronts. Estonians informed Gorbachev that theirs was the 'Popular Front of Estonia in Defence of Perestroika'. (See Narodnyi Kongress: Sbornik materialov kongress Narodnogo fronta Estonii 1-2 okt. 1988 g. [Tallinn: Periodika, 1989], p.221.) Many anti-Communists Estonians viewed the Popular Front with disdain and set up rival organizations, such as the Estonian National Independence Party.


42. Thus after Balts formed a human chain across the Baltic on 23 Aug. 1989, the CPSU Central Committee accused them of nationalist hysteria and threatened to crush them by force. When Baltic opposition leaders repudiated this accusation, the Kremlin was silent and then conciliatory. Karklins, p.94.

43. Senn, pp.10–11.

44. Ligachev, pp.174–81.
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45. Ibid., pp.142-3.
46. Karklins, p.102.
47. For survey data and analysis, see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1996), pp.402-24.
50. Bloodshed after the Soviet breakup was also limited by comparison with the civil strife that following the demise of other empires.
54. Author’s interviews in Kazakhstan in 1990.
55. Ligachev, pp.141, 189; for a different perspective, see Shevardnadze, pp.320-7.
57. For documentation, see Clemens, Baltic Independence and works by Raun, Karklins and Senn cited here.
58. On prospects and problems in these developments, see Clemens, Baltic Independence, pp.132-8.
59. For the vital role in Lithuanian history played by Landsbergis’s maternal great-grandfather, his paternal grandfather and his own father, see Lieven, p.118.
60. Soon, however, Slovakia parted from the Czech lands without violence. Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia with little violence but similar moves by Croatia and Bosnia triggered armed struggle. Elsewhere, the old ways prevailed. Demands by Tamils, Kurds, East Timorese, Abkhazians, Tibetans and Uighurs for greater self-determination were met by force in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Indonesia, Georgia and China. Hong Kong could conceivably have played ‘Estonia’ to China, but Chinese authorities curtailed Hong Kong’s liberties in 1997 before retaking control of it.

APPENDIX
SELECTED CHRONOLOGY

1977
May: ‘18 naturalists’ in Estonia protest against Soviet oil-shale and phosphate mining

1979
23 Aug.: ‘Baltic Charter’ by Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian dissidents demands nullification of Nazi–Soviet pact protocols

1985
11 March: Gorbachev elected CPSU General Secretary

1986
23 May: Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze discusses ‘new thinking’ and Gorbachev on 31 July refers to perestroika of the political system
15–16 Sept.: Jurmala, Latvia: American officials restate US non-recognition policy
16–18 Dec.: Protest demonstrations in Kazakhstan
1987
Spring: Estonians protest against proposed phosphate mining
6 July: Crimean Tatars demonstrate in Red Square to return to Crimea from Central Asia
23 Aug.: Balts demonstrate on anniversary of Hitler-Stalin pact
10 Sept.: KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov charges that Western agents agitate the national minorities
26 Sept.: 4 Estonian intellectuals propose economic autonomy
1 Oct.: Belorussians commemorate Stalin-era executions at Kuropaty

1988
13 Feb.: Riots in Nagorno Karabakh
18 Feb.: Yeltsin removed from the Politburo
24 Feb.: 4,000 in Tallinn commemorate seventieth anniversary of Estonian independence
28 Feb.: Pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait, Azerbaijan
14 June: Balts commemorate 1941 deportations
23 July: Balts protest anniversary of 1940 annexations
30 Sept.–1 Oct.: Aleksandr Yakovlev takes charge of CPSU Central Committee International Department and Gorbachev becomes chairman of USSR presidium
Oct.: Inaugural congresses of the popular fronts of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Sajudis)
16 Nov.: Estonian Supreme Soviet declares sovereignty and assumes control of state property – actions called null and void by USSR Supreme Soviet on 26 Nov.

1989
18 Jan.–24 Feb.: Estonian Supreme Soviet declares Estonian the state language; Latvia follows suit; pre-1940 Estonian flag raised in Tallinn
18 March: Lithuanian Supreme Soviet declares sovereignty; Latvia follows suit on 28 July
26 March: Yeltsin and Baltic Popular Front members do well in elections to USSR Congress of People’s Deputies and later form Interregional Group with Yeltsin, Sakharov and other reformists
23 Aug.: 1–2 million Balts form human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius
26 Aug.: CPSU Central Committee issues stern warning to Balts
8–10 Sept.: Ukrainian ‘Rukh’ (similar to a Baltic popular front) holds constituent congress in Kyiv and displays flag of independent Ukraine
9 Nov.: Berlin Wall breached
12 Nov.: Estonian Supreme Soviet annuls 1940 incorporation in USSR
20 Dec.: Lithuanian Communist Party withdraws from the CPSU, an act rejected by CPSU Central Committee on 25–26 Dec.
24 Dec.: USSR Congress of People’s Deputies declares invalid from inception secret protocols of Nazi–Soviet pact but does not rescind annexation of the Baltic states

1990
11–13 Jan.: Gorbachev visits Vilnius but fails to persuade Lithuanian Communist Party to remain in CPSU
11 March: Lithuanian Supreme Council declares the restoration of Lithuania's independence and elects Landsbergis chief of state
14 March: Gorbachev elected USSR President by Congress of People's Deputies
18 April: Moscow cuts deliveries of oil to Lithuania following a Gorbachev ultimatum; resumes deliveries on 30 June after Lithuanian parliament votes a temporary suspension of its independence declarations
8 May: Republic of Estonia symbolism restored
29 May: Yeltsin elected chairman of RSFSR Supreme Soviet
18 June: RSFSR Supreme Soviet declares sovereignty and gives its laws precedence over those of the USSR
16 July: Ukraine declares sovereignty, followed by Belorussia on 27 July and by many other union republics in later months

1991
10 Jan.: Gorbachev orders Lithuania to restore the 'constitutional order' or suffer the consequences; on 13 Jan. KGB troops take television tower in Vilnius but do not attack the Supreme Council (parliament) building
14 Jan.: Russian leader Yeltsin in Tallinn signs mutual recognition of sovereignty with all three Baltic states; Yeltsin urges Russian soldiers in the USSR army not to fire on Baltic civilians
20 Jan.: Demonstrators in Moscow and Leningrad protest against repression in Lithuania
24 Jan.: Ambassador Matlock delivers letter from Bush to Gorbachev threatening to cut ties if violence continues in Lithuania; Gorbachev insists he is acting to avoid civil war
9 Feb.: More than 90 per cent of Lithuanian voters support independence
3 March: Referendums on independence in Estonia and Latvia: about 75 per cent of participants support independence
14–16 March: Secretary of State Baker meets Baltic leaders in Moscow
17 March: A majority of participants in a union-wide referendum favour a voluntary union
31 March: Warsaw Pact officially dissolved
23 April: 9 republic leaders reach agreement with Gorbachev on a revised Union Treaty
12 June: Yeltsin elected president of the RSFSR by 57.3 per cent in a general election
12 July: USSR Supreme Soviet approves the Union Treaty in principle but suggests changes
28 July: Gorbachev informs Yeltsin and Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev that he will remove KGB leader Vladimir Kriuchkov and USSR Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov after the Union Treaty is signed on 20 Aug.
2 Aug.: Gorbachev announces the Union Treaty is 'open for signing'
17–21 Aug.: Coup to oust Gorbachev attempted by Kriuchkov, Pavlov and Defence Minister Iazov
20–21 Aug.: Estonia and Latvia declare their independence, soon recognized by Russia, Iceland and many other countries
24 Aug.: Gorbachev suspends CPSU activities and resigns as CPSU General
Secretary; Ukraine declares independence, subject to a referendum on 1 Dec.
25–31 Aug.: Declarations of independence by Belorussia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; on 6 Sept. Georgia severs ties with the USSR
2 Sept.: US recognizes independent governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
6 Sept.: USSR State Council recognizes independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
1–5 Dec.: Ukrainian citizens vote for independence; Ukrainian parliament revokes Ukraine’s accession to the USSR treaty
7–8 Dec.: Presidents of Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia decide to end the USSR and create a Commonwealth of Independent States, joined by 8 other republics at Alma Ata on 22 Dec.; but not by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania or Georgia
25 Dec.: Russian flag replaces Soviet one over the Kremlin