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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State by Mark R. Beissinger

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Bellamy has made a substantial contribution to current scholarship by providing an anatomy of failed conflict prevention and by refocusing the debate over Kosovo on the decisions that could have been taken to stop the war in the first place. The only real flaw of the book—underplaying the tragic dimension of international society's engagement with the Albanians' cause—is forgivable in light of the lessons that it will impart for those interested in preventing conflicts elsewhere.

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## Russia and the former Soviet Republics

**Nationalist mobilization and the collapse of the Soviet state.** By Mark R. Beissinger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002. Index. 503pp. ISBN 0 521 80670 4. Pb.: ISBN 0 521 00148 x.

A decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars continue to debate the causes of its collapse. Clearly, one of the most proximate causes was nationalism, which tore asunder a state that claimed to have solved the nationalist problem. Few saw this coming, but in retrospect many have advanced theories on the 'inevitability' of the Soviet collapse.

Beissinger enters this debate with a prodigiously researched volume on the wave of nationalism that swept the USSR in its final years. This work is very ambitious, with Beissinger attempting to add to our understanding both of the Soviet collapse and of how nationalism emerges and evolves as a political force more generally. In an amendment to Gellner, Beissinger's position is that there is nothing inevitable about the rise of *particular* nationalisms; in short, in Beissinger's view, history is made by people, and is not pre-determined solely by structural factors. Furthermore, in an effort to transcend the often sterile debate between those who view nationalism instrumentally and those who see it in primordial terms, he submits that one needs to look at how nationalism is constructed by human actors and is shaped by events and tumultuous periods of 'emboldening politics'. He grants that structural variables and institutional constraints are important, particularly initially in setting the stage; but he recognizes that events can take on a life of their own, encouraging others to mobilize, altering conceptions of the nation and political possibilities for its development and spreading across space in a contagion effect as 'latecomers' take advantage of the successes of those who mobilized earlier owing to structural advantages. In Beissinger's view, once a 'wave' of nationalism emerges, *ex ante* structural or institutional factors lose much of their relevance, allowing for extraordinary events—in this case the collapse of the Soviet state.

Beissinger catalogues the thousands of protests in the late Soviet period, and mixes his analysis with various perspectives and case-studies, utilizing both constructivist approaches and rational choice theory. He tries to account for a number of issues: why nationalism emerged in some places (i.e. the Baltic states) and not in others (i.e. in Turkmenistan or among smaller, sub-republic groups); how the discourse of secession developed; what accounts for widespread violence in some republics; and why nationalist movements ultimately prevailed against a state that previously had shown little tolerance for dissent. Whereas many works in this genre focus on one or a couple of republics or a few issues, Beissinger's work is quite sweeping and magisterial, utilizing statistical models and well-developed counter-factual arguments. It should stand as the definitive work on nationalist mobilization in the Soviet Union. Moreover, he makes an important contribution to the literature on nationalism more generally, and those who are not specialists in post-Soviet studies should take away important insights from this work.

This work is an important one, and sets a new standard for research and analysis. I suspect it will and should appear on numerous graduate-level syllabi. If I were to offer one critique, however, it would be that at times it coats a relatively simple story (Gorbachev opens up the system and new actors take advantage of it, and those nationalities that are larger, less assimilated, more urban and with prior experience of statehood were more likely to mobilize first and be successful) with a lot of social science concepts and jargon that will put off some readers, particularly, I suspect, undergraduates. This critique, of course, would fail to do justice to the

expansive treatment that Beissinger offers, and even if he merely confirms what we previously 'knew' (in practice he does much more than this), he has still done a great service to those interested in questions of nationalism and nationalist mobilization. There is, to be sure, a lot to digest in this volume, but to Beissinger's credit, the chapters and arguments flow together nicely. Those interested in the important subjects that Beissinger tackles will benefit from a close read of this book.

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**Conversations with Gorbachev on perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the crossroads of socialism.** By Mikhail Gorbachev and Zdenek Mlynar. New York: Columbia University Press. 2002. 225pp. Index. \$24.95. ISBN 0 231 11864 3.

Perestroika and the Prague Spring were both unsuccessful attempts to reform socialist systems from within. Initiated by reformers within the party elites, both attempts failed because of the contradictions between the dynamics of mass democracy and the socialist system. The socialist system proved unable to cope with mass popular pressure, and this inability led, in the case of Czechoslovakia, to a progressive abandonment of socialism and consequently to an invasion by Warsaw Pact forces and a hard-line crack down. In the case of the Soviet Union, this dynamic resulted in the abandonment of socialism and eventually in the collapse of the Soviet Union. The key difference is of course that the Prague Spring was a reform attempt in the periphery of the Soviet empire; perestroika was an attempt to reform the centre itself. Still, it is because of these comparisons that this dialogue between Mikhail Gorbachev, the initiator of change in the Soviet Union, and Zdenek Mlynar, one of the protagonists of the so-called Prague Spring, is significant and stands out among Gorbachev's numerous publications.

Gorbachev and Mlynar were classmates at the Moscow State University. Their dialogues span the time from their studies in the first half of the 1950s to the early 1990s. Both authors are members of the so-called generation of the 20th Congress: young party cadres influenced by Khrushchev's secret speech about the crimes of Stalinism. Their lives diverged significantly, but they had to deal with similar conceptual issues throughout them.

The book is split into three dialogues. The first two—one dealing with their lives from their university years to the beginning of perestroika and the other with reform in the Soviet Union—are the most significant ones. The dialogues are not always easy, and not at all complacent. Spurred on by inquisitive questioning by Mlynar, Gorbachev admits to having been in favour of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. He also admits to not having understood for quite a long time the need for more than just cosmetic change to the Soviet system. As late as 1987, Gorbachev was thinking that it was possible to get the economy going again just by changing the personnel in the apparatus. Throughout the dialogue, Mlynar seems always to be ahead of Gorbachev. This is evident especially on the subject of the CPSU. With hindsight it appears quite naive that Gorbachev tried until 1990 to reform the hardliners within the party.

Another basic question discussed is whether it is possible to combine democracy and socialism. While Mlynar became convinced about the impossibility of this happening after the Prague Spring, Gorbachev attempted to achieve it until quite late in his tenure. Even after the first multi-candidate elections took place in March 1989, marking the beginning of pluralism in the Soviet Union, he regarded multi-partism as neither inevitable nor desirable.

What emerges from these dialogues are the key dilemmas of socialist reform, which were probably unsolvable. Reform was unthinkable without the party, and yet the party apparatus was bound also to become the key obstacle to reform. At the same time, with the party sidelined in 1990, a power vacuum was created which made it impossible to govern the country. But what also surfaces in the dialogues are the key accomplishments of the Gorbachev era. Transition to democracy was initiated not only in the Soviet Union but also in large parts of Eastern Europe. And, by deciding to solve political problems without resorting to force, the country was spared what might have been a bloody civil war and an important precedent was set for the creation of a democratic Russia.

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