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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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## Reviews

Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, xv + 503 pp., £60.00 (\$80.00) h/b, £21.95 (\$30.00) p/b.

BY CONCENTRATING ON the emergence and spread of nationalist movements among Russians and non-Russians, Mark Beissinger examines the perceptual changes many Soviet citizens experienced between 1987, when they considered the USSR's disintegration to be impossible, and 1991, when they concluded that its break-up was inevitable. How and why did this paradigm shift occur?

When Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in early 1985 he inherited a stable society. Not only did he and his senior colleagues believe that seven decades of communist rule had created a solid and deep-rooted system, but the overwhelming majority of the population, including its dissidents, concurred. This overall confidence in the long-term stability of the Soviet order facilitated Gorbachev's efforts to reform the USSR by introducing *glasnost*, *perestroika* and democratisation. In doing so he loosened the long-standing political constraints and attempted to establish a legal framework to regulate public affairs.

This endeavour failed. In many areas the intentions of the central authorities could not be implemented at the local level. As a result of the ensuing gap between these plans and reality, the population's faith in the permanence of the Soviet system wavered. Inasmuch as most individuals 'adjust their beliefs to the limits of the possible, accepting a given institutional arrangement as unalterable, natural, and to some extent even necessary precisely because it cannot be changed' (p. 20), Gorbachev's reforms called into question the location of the line dividing the permissible from the impermissible and the possible from the impossible. The Soviet leadership, in short, undermined its own credibility and punctured its hull of political capital.

Nationalist activists stepped into this breach. In the Baltic republics in the 1980s they introduced 'contentious events' in order to disrupt the political arrangements which the Soviet Union imposed upon its citizens. These 'events', which included demonstrations, strikes and (later) mass violence, generated mass nationalist mobilisations and challenged the status quo. In the post-1945 period the non-Russians for the most part had 'never faced the opportunity or the necessity of choosing between loyalty to the Soviet order and loyalty to one's ethnic identity' (p. 54). Increasingly, as a result of Gorbachev's reforms and of their own national mobilisation, they now could express their own preferences in public. The reformers never expected the new-found non-Russian option to emphasise their identities along national lines would become a powerful wild card in Soviet political life.

The Soviet government's failure to repress mobilisational challenges in the Baltic republics inspired protests by other national groups. Each of the 127 officially recognised national groups living in the USSR experienced different degrees of assimilation, lived in varied demographic and political circumstances, and possessed unique histories and institutional constraints. With the introduction of Gorbachev's reforms, not all groups responded in the same way.

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Tracing the history of 18 Soviet nationalities from 1985 to 1991 and beyond, Beissinger provides a differentiated analysis of how nationalist mobilisations in one region of the USSR produced an irrepressible momentum which influenced nationalist mobilisations in the rest. Developing first in the Baltic republics in the summer and autumn of 1988 and then spreading as a massive flood to Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaidjan, Moldova, Ukraine and even eventually to Russia itself, nationalist mobilisation in the Soviet Union constituted an interactive 'tide of nationalism' (p. 160), in which the contents and end results produced by multiple waves of nationalist mobilisation influenced one another (p. 27). The Soviet government could not gain control of the emerging multi-headed hydra of myriad nationalisms.

Without this tide, Beissinger asserts, the Soviet Union would not have collapsed. As it swept across the USSR, this trend eventually radicalised the perceptions of the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian elites, who had closely identified themselves with the Soviet state. It injected them with the idea of the inevitability of Soviet disintegration, even before the August 1991 coup. Faced with failed economic reforms and nationalist revolts, the leaders of these three republics played a critical role in abolishing the USSR in December 1991.

The author successfully demonstrates how the post-1985 nationalist tide undermined the Soviet population's faith in a common future. Waves of nationalist mobilisation attracted more adherents to their banners than those movements espousing liberal-intellectual or labour-based economic reforms. But even in areas where nationalist mobilisation movements failed to generate secessionist movements, separatist nationalism 'often succeeded due to its strategic appropriation by dominant elites, largely under the burgeoning influence of tidal forces' (p. 270). Few regions remained untouched by the nationalist flood.

This short review does not do justice to Beissinger's extensive research or his sophisticated analysis. The author's work thoroughly investigates the heretofore unexplored interaction of a set of political tectonic plates, pre-existing structural conditions, institutional constraints and the outcomes generated by 'contentious events'. When these plates abruptly shifted, they unleashed a major tidal wave of nationalism, which destroyed the multi-national Soviet state.

As the most comprehensive study of the last years of the Soviet Union, the author's superb monograph not only dissects the evolution of 'contentious events' and their after-effects within and across the Soviet republics but also integrates unspoken assumptions, contingencies and unintended consequences into his inquiry. Beissinger reminds us of the central role of perceptions in politics and how changes in perceptions can spark radical political conflagrations. Most importantly, he depicts how 'the interdependence of human action across time and space renders deterministic, linear or atemporal explanations of social and political phenomena problematic' (p. 453). Everyone who wants to understand the interactive dynamics behind the Soviet collapse should read this book.

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GEORGE O. LIBER

Josephine T. Andrews, *When Majorities Fail: The Russian Parliament, 1990–1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, x + 284 pp., £47.50 h/b.

THE DEMISE OF RUSSIA'S first competitively elected parliament, the Supreme Soviet (1990–93), continues to engross scholars' attention. Intuitively, many feel that the failure was something more than a constellation of extremely unsuccessful circumstances. Therefore Russia's early parliamentary experience provides fertile ground for testing various theoretical perspectives on the choice of legislative institutions. In an important new book, Josephine Andrews offers a rigorous account of the development of Russia's transitional legislative institutions.