Point of View

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Thirty Years from the End of the USSR

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ABSTRACT. *The article contains a brief retrospective assessment of the reasons given by various scholars and observers for the breakdown of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership and it situates that crisis in the larger context of history and the imperial legacy of the Russian state. It particularly looks at the issue of nationality as an ethnic, cultural and linguistic concept vis-a-vis the universalistic notion of empire as a community of destiny among diverse people. The author compares the Soviet Union's structure as a 'non-classical' empire to those of other European states and especially to Germany's which has also evolved from being a loose Central and East European 'Reich' inspired by the Roman and Carolingian heritage – to becoming a federal nation surrounded by smaller countries that share with it ancient civilisational and political legacy. Whereas Germany is gradually asserting leadership among many of its former dependencies and in the post-Brexit European Union as a whole, Russia is led by geographical and strategic compulsions to rebuild a Eurasian confederal association with erstwhile Soviet Republics and possessions of the Tsarist Empire, in conformity with its location between the 'West', the Islamosphere and the Chinese world. Will Russia be able to create a synthesis between the Slav Orthodox Oikoumene envisioned by Nikolay Danilevsky and the Eurasian syncretistic model promoted by Lev Gumilyov?*

KEYWORDS: *Russia, Soviet Union, Holy Roman Empire, German Reich, European Union, Pan-Slavism, civilisation, China, Brexit, NATO, Warsaw Pact, COMECON, Five Eyes alliance, United States, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Nord Stream, Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*

A Glance at the Soviet Union's Twilight Years

My first visit to Russia took place in 1991. I was invited there to meet officials who were considering options to make

commercial use of certain space facilities and platforms in then dire economic circumstances. I remember crossing Lubyanka Square while the statue of the Cheka's founder Felix Dzerzhinsky (Cheka is the historical predecessor of the KGB "secret police") was deliberated to be replaced by a large orthodox wooden cross. I caught glimpses of the dignified but anguishing poverty in which many people had fallen, especially those in the older generations such as the war veterans who seemingly only had their frayed, medal studded uniform jackets to wear.

I came to Moscow from Switzerland where I lived at the time, after having recently returned from years of life in the USA. My views of the Soviet Union were intensely influenced by the non-academic, journalistic literature one got accustomed to read everywhere as well as by the disapproval of the Marxist approach to handling society that was part of western upbringing, especially after the 1970's. The USSR was described through a filter of suspicion, fear and commiseration as a land of wasted opportunity and unnecessary scarcity; in other words, a naturally rich country inhabited by people made poor by their social and economic system. Visiting Moscow and its surroundings at one of the most tormented periods in its history (although the country, of course had seen much worse times earlier in the century) could not but confirm my perception that many things had gone disastrously wrong in that huge and great nation a long time ago. However, I also got glimpses at the embers of a sophisticated and proud culture flickering beneath the ashes of downfall like cheery blossoms breaking through muddy snow. While the main idea of this article is to throw light on the developments in the late Soviet Union that ultimately paved the way for the downfall of the superpower – it also concentrates on the dynamics of the post-bipolar evolution, with the purpose of comprehending the reasons standing behind Russia's most recent revival.

I was often reminded of a long series of articles published in *Paris-Match* magazine (unfortunately, not available online) written in the 1960's and the 1970's by Raymond Cartier, the famous reporter, about the Soviet Union [*Cartier,* 1961]. His overall intent was to explain that the West would win the contest with its socialist rival because of the former's economic wealth and dynamism, socio-political freedom and ability to evolve. Raymond Cartier was treating the USSR under Leonid Brezhnev's command as "sclerotic entity". Its government was addressed as "gerontocracy" and "alien" to any kind of development despite the continuing push for military expansion and space exploration. Since the time Cartier wrote his travelogue, many theories and explanations [*Strayer,* 1998; *River,* 2019; *Sheets,* 2012] have been given for the gradual decline and final collapse of the Soviet Federation built by the Bolsheviks. Among the causes of decline and fall described were: paralysis of the political hierarchy under the "iron law of oligarchy", lethargy and corruption of the state- run monopolistic public sector, lack of spiritual ideals and religious fervor which help sustain even "ideologically" materialistic societies, failure to catch the wave of the new electronic and information technologies, inefficiency in the production and distribution of goods and services, lack of incentives for talented individuals and isolation from the booming global financial networks, not forgetting internal ethnic divisions within the unwieldy 'empire' and the bitter fruits of the Afghan war. All these factors played a role as they all contributed to the growth of disenchantment and dissent in the population, and not only in the Jewish, Turkic, Baltic and Caucasian minorities. Helene Carrere d'Encausse, the renowned French academic of Georgian ancestry (née Zourabishvili) misdiagnosed the state of the

federation when she predicted, following earlier analysts, both Soviet and foreign, that the revolt of Central Asian Soviet Republics would bring it down [*Carrere d'Encausse, Schram,* 1966; *Carrere d'Encausse,* 1978]. Her Georgian native heritage seems to have influenced her perspective on the Russian equation in the Caucasian and Turkic "underbelly".

In fact the aforesaid Central Eurasian states/socialist republics remained mostly quiet throughout the turmoil of the early 1990's, which engulfed Russia and the westernmost "sister" Soviet republics. It took place, as we know, mainly, in the places geographically and culturally closer to the Central European "satellites" and "allied" states, where the earthquake struck after several lesser "tremors", beginning with the Polish uprisings of the late 1970's – early 1980's and "velvet" revolutions of the late 1980's ultimately culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. (As is known, among the Soviet socialist republics, only two, that is Russia and Azerbaijan, were the donors whilst the rest enjoyed the status of recipients, the most significant and needlessly lavish investments (called "subventions") being directed to Ukraine and the now-independent Baltic states).

Forensics of The Collapse

In a "non-classical" empire, it was logical that the Russian "centre"/"core" would choose to break free from a cumbersome and often restless periphery which saddled it with costly obligations. The age-old concern of successive Russian governments has been to expand buffer zones around the "core of the land" (now called the "Near Abroad") in order to protect it from external threats: Mongol, Polish, Turkish, Persian, Swedish, German or French. This had thrust upon them a semi-colonial (in a way, "tributary") burden that post-Communist Russia was initially happy to shed.

However, geopolitical realities which are stronger than ideologies and economic ambitions soon made a comeback. Releasing the Soviet peripheral lands from their bond with the "mother country" inevitably brought predatory neighbours closer and opened the door to unpredictable trouble in the newly independent nations. From Ukraine to Tajikistan and from Lithuania to Azerbaijan where large ethnic Russian populations remained or had to be repatriated, threats arose while conflicts boiled over, even within the autonomous republics within Russia itself in the Caucasus and elsewhere. The traditional task of the Tsars as "gatherers of the Russian lands" had to be resumed in order to keep at bay the NATO-driven pressure on the western border and the latent threat posed by overpopulated China, revivalist Turkey and Islamic militant forces around the Caspian Sea.

In a newly-emerged and temporarily unipolar world dominated by America, now the "lonely" superpower, the United States and its Anglo-Saxon confederates grew confident of having won the Cold War and eager to extend their socio-political and economic hegemony to the rest of the world, especially to the broken up, former Soviet territories (at present, post-Soviet space). After two hundred and fifty years of uninterrupted contest and competition in many areas since the days of Empress Catherine II, the erstwhile Russian empire was the greatest prize, to be brought into the Atlantic fold, like Germany had been after 1945.

What do Germany and Russia have in Common?

Historians of various academic "streams" have been engaged in serious studies of the complex relationships and the parallels between Germany and Russia: both states were initially linguistic-cum-cultural areas which achieved

strategic autonomy and political unity rather recently in comparison with many of their neighbours. From the early seventeen hundreds and even earlier until 1945, the "German World" and the Greater Slavic-Russian Area overlapped and went through alternative phases of conflict and symbiosis in their borderlands, in the field stretching from the Baltic States and Prussia in the north – to Ukraine, Romania and the Slav lands in the south. Both Russia and the dominant German states (Austria, Prussia and Saxony) expanded and annexed areas that formerly lay outside their respective ethno-political confines. The once central and now peripheral position of Austria in the German cultural and geopolitical area can be compared with that of Ukraine, "the borderland" (literally) of the Russian neo-byzantine sphere. Both the German and Russian "imperial projects" were derived from the concept of the Imperium Romanum in its respective western and eastern "avatars". Later the Russian Tzars sought to imitate the neo-Roman "imperial model" and compete with the German Kaisers in several territorial domains. Large and ancient German settlements dotted western Russia and adjoining Slavic and Baltic majority lands. Reciprocally, the Tsars, who through many marriages became increasingly Germanic genetically, played a meaningful role in the "Teutonic Concert". They became *de facto* protectors and balancers between the German powers (Prussia, the bigger member-states of the Frankfurt League and Austria) at the Congress of Vienna, following Napoleon's defeat and the dismemberment of the French Empire. Saint Petersburg's influence on the German states increased from 1833 as a result of its enduring alliance with Austria which was only shattered by the Crimean war some twenty years later [*Fenenko,* 2021].

Indeed, as a result of successive partitions of Poland and the Seven Year War (1756–1763) Russia had acted as a major stakeholder in eastern German lands as much as France was for the western part of the "Holy Roman Empire" until the Austro-Prussian war of 1866.

The gradual rise of Prussia as the new hegemonic power in Central Europe, culminating in the proclamation of the "Second" Reich by Bismarck in 1871 heralded the reunification of the former Holy German Empire and led Russia to ally with France and the United Kingdom in order to contain Berlin's resurgent expansionism. In my humble opinion, the historical memories of these times may be of contemporary geopolitical relevance.

The 1914–1918 war put an end to the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires and resulted in an extensive redrawing of borders within Europe. Hitler's interwar annexations and the consequent Second world war brought about further turmoil, and, after the 1945 Allied victory, allowed the Russian/ Soviet geopolitical "recovery" in the form of Eastern Prussia (whose centre was the city of Koenigsberg) and the extension of the USSR's domain/ "protectorate" over oriental German lands (since 1949 referred to as the German Democratic Republic), embracing some of the territories formerly existing under German and Austrian suzerainty (Western Prussia, Silesia, Bohemia and Slovakia, Hungary, Western Ukraine and Galicia, Transylvania) while Yugoslavia and Austria remained more or less neutral ("maverick") between the Eastern and Western political-cum-military blocs.

After the end of the Second world war, the "bipolar system" materialised and the Soviet Union obtained enough power to play a role similar to that of the Tsarist Russia that was acting as an efficient buffer to the tentative Teutonic expansion and a viable counterweight to the "ubiquitous" North Atlantic Anglo-Saxon "axis" dominant in continental Europe, the Levant, Persia/Iran and East Asia.

A Few Consequences of the USSR's Demise

It became evident that this new balance of power, the by-product of the Second world war functioning around and beyond the "iron curtain", ceased to exist with the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, the dissolution of the COMECON and the subsequent dismemberment of the USSR. Reunified Germany, henceforth, resumed its traditional geopolitical *Drang nach Osten* in terms of economic strategy and expanded its financial and industrial dominance over Central, South East (former Yugoslavia) and Eastern Europe by meticulously absorbing this area into the European Union and NATO [*Hoffbauer,* 2014]. These twin organisations rapidly expanded up to the boundaries of Russia in the Baltic North and around the Black Sea, sowing the seeds of the Ukrainian internal conflict ("conceptual schism" as argued by the eminent Russian scholar Tatyana V. Yudina) [*Kozhokin,* 2014, p. 4] and of the sharp tensions and "regime change" operations recently supported by Poland and the Baltic States in Belarus. However, the age-old contestations between Poland and Germany have also been revived to the extent that the current government in Warsaw regards Germany and Russia as almost equally inimical state entities. One may therefore wonder, along with many perceptive observers like George Friedman[1], if the termination of the bipolar European order has not increased the risk of war by rekindling ancient national rivalries and suspicions.

Other indirect consequences of the USSR's self-dissolution include the loss of ideological moorings in the "free" world where the need to fight communist influence ("counter centre") more or less disappeared. Turkey for one has moved from being a pillar of the "secular liberal" western alliance to its current position as a Neo-Ottoman Islamic power playing a complex diplomatic game between the USA, the EU states, Russia, Iran, the Arab nations and China. The old territorial disputes between Greece and Turkey have come back to the fore in the Aegean Sea, and Ankara has grabbed the opportunity to revive the pan-Turanian vision of the late 19th century by staking leadership claims in the former Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian Republics and Russia. Even in ethnically Turkic parts of the Central Asia the success of the Turkish outreach in these linguistically kindred nations has been mixed but the policy has accelerated the drift of President Erdogan's state away from the West in general and the EU in particular. Turkey is once again, after an interregnum of more than a hundred years, a challenger and a potential foe to both the European states and Russia.

On the other side of Asia paradoxically, post-communist Russia has forged a strong agreement with post-Maoist China, its socialist rival and foe during the second half of the 20th century. India which had formally declared itself socialist in 1975 and was informally a Soviet ally or at least a special strategic partner gradually opened up to liberalisation in the wake of the USSR's eclipse and has come close to the USA and the latter's allies in the Asia-Pacific.

For its part, India is actively participating in forging international cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, as broadly as possible and at different levels. This concept of world politics is usually addressed as a "loose geometry of international relations" with traditional ideological differences gradually substituted by commonality of "situational" interests.

1 George Friedman on the Future of the EU (2016). *The Sounding Line*, December 21, 2016. Available at: https://thesoundingline.com/george-friedman-on-the-future-of-the-eu/, accessed 18.09.2021.

As a whole the geostrategic bipolarity of the last century (American-Soviet "condominium", according to Henry Kissinger) has been replaced by pragmatic and opportunistic multipolarity. The coming international order addressed by some intellectuals as "After Empire" does not revolve around America. "Nor is it dialectical – the United States versus China, the West against Asia, or democracies versus autocracies. The developments … have cumulatively led to an international order with multiple poles, cooperating and competing with one another, with no single pole being allowed to act as the hegemonic power. Quite simply, the age- old balance of power is back at work" [*Hiro*, 2010, pp. 5–6].

The "after empire" situation is in no way and form unprecedented for global history as certain nations such as "neutral" Austria and Yugoslavia and even post-NATO Gaullist France managed in post World War II years to stay astride the "ideological" divide. The point is that the "after empire" scenario seems to be far more kinetic and confusing nowadays. The revitalised American-English "League" (manifest in the Five Eyes Pact concluded by the US, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia during the Second world war, in December 1941) is attempting to return to a "new" cold war of sorts. It is stirring up divisions between the EU and Russia and spearheading an alliance to "contain" and curb China's rise. Still, despite BREXIT, the Ukrainian imbroglio and the ardent pro-American stance taken by the Baltic states, Poland and some Central European entities – the convergence of interests between Germany and Russia and to a somewhat lesser extent between Italy, France and Russia has not allowed bilateral relations to fully break down. Berlin, in its own strategic interests (not only economic but geopolitical also), has held steady on to the Nord Stream pipeline projects and continues to regard trade with Russia as a critical factor for its economic prosperity.

Rifts between the Atlantic partners became more visible under Donald Trump's presidency and it is unlikely that Joseph Biden's claims about the USA's return on the European scene will change the newly emerged geopolitical reality.

It has often been pointed out that the fall of Soviet Socialism, apart from evincing its failure, at least in the eyes of those who opposed its principles, freed "liberal" or hitherto mixed economies from the need to build and maintain generous social welfare polities and limit inequality by heftily taxing the more financially privileged section of society. The deregulating reforms launched from the late 1970's by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States were followed by most other countries in one way or another and resulted in the disappearance of the industrial working class, further attrition of the agricultural population and gradual impoverishment of the middle classes in general, as a flip side of the enormous growth in the wealth of the now legendary "one per cent". We have reached such an excess in this new kind of financial and high-tech "feudalism" that a few hundred billionaires in the world now own and control more resources than the rest of the population which are increasingly looking like "serfs" of the global oligopolies that manipulate and influence governments, industries, the media and NGOs. That is surely *at least in part* an effect of the removal of the USSR as the champion of an alternative system which had, until decline set in, a major influence on the West's political economies and its dependents from the international "chessboard". Put differently, it was "cold war sobriety" (Allan Bloom) that "disciplined Western states to raise their game and confront rival ideas in a way that would never have ensued if geopolitical rivalry had not prevailed" [*Daulet Singh,* 2020, p. 129]. The demise of the Soviet Union enabled the neo-liberal econo-

mists, like Milton Friedman their prophet, to proclaim the notoriously famed logo "TINA": There is no alternative (to the theoretically understood free market which however turns out to concentrate power in fewer and fewer hands).

The Turning Tide and the Revolving Wheel of History

F. Fukuyama's End of History "paradigm" [*Fukuyama,* 1992] and S. Huntington's Clash of Civilisations "prediction" [*Huntington,* 1996] came in the wake of that sudden consecration of America's supremacy by default. The tide has turned since then and the United States increasingly finds itself, with its major western allies, in a situation comparable in some ways to the failing and "ailing" Soviet Union of the late eighties because of America's inability to repair the disastrous aberrations of its political and financial operating system. The world system is being continuously diversified and the geopolitical clout being proactively dispersed. Nowadays, it is a statement of fact that a brief era of unipolar American hegemony is now waning fast partly as a consequence of inner processes of decay and disintegration in the USA and partly because of the rapid rise of the Asian giant states of China, Indonesia and India – from which many countries such as Australia and even the USA are becoming economically very dependent. Also, serious attention deserves the revival of Russia, along with the increasing autonomy of Latin America under the aegis of Brazil and the undefeated defiance of a few "resistant" states such as Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Syria, backed to a certain extent by the new great powers of the East and South. This process is complemented by the internal developments in the United States. As aptly argued by the Indian analyst and strategist Z. Daulet Singh: "An overwhelming majority of Americans have been alienated in the otherwise dynamic age of globalisation, and a distorted political system has utterly failed to salvage this structural decline of the middle class in the US. The neoliberals have struggled to advance their global governance and trade ideas because they are, in many instances, the source of the problem. As a result, even more latent divides in the US – questions of race, identity and culture – have surfaced and increased the prospect of civil strife" [*Daulet Singh,* 2020, p. 128].

Russia's gradual reconstruction and return to a position of transcontinental and, in certain areas and aspects, global power gives birth to a new version of the ancestral division of Europe into rival spheres of influence, broadly the Protestant Germanic North, the Catholic Latin South and the Slavic East. The increasingly resented preponderance of an often heavy handed Germany in the European Union is pushing many countries to support a new balance of power. Some are relying on the long-standing American Big Brother and others welcome Russia's and China's influence in order to retain some reasonable freedom of action. The fissiparous trend in the European Union is likely to intensify in view of the oppressive imposition of the so-called "European values" on member-states, used to browbeat and control smaller countries by appointed unelected EU authorities commandeered by the two largest remaining member-states.

Widespread dissatisfaction is perceptible with the undemocratic management of the European Union whose leaders make no secret of their desire to eliminate the ability of the less powerful countries to make sovereign decisions for themselves. The insistent calls from Germany (a society politically fragmented as the most recent parliamentary election has demonstrated convincingly) to abrogate the unanimity rule in the EU Council and replace it by simple majority procedure is another nail in the coffin of the cumbersome or-

ganisation which is not expected to last in its present form for many years to come [PostScript Insights, 2021]. As the Russian scholar Alexei Fenenko writes in the earlier cited article: "{this} situation is based on the stability of the EU institutions that keep Germany within the Atlantic system". The author tries to answer a central question: will the imperial idea be revived in Germany? His survey of the "German idea" which shaped its evolution through history either as a loose cultural confederacy, an inheritor of the Euro-Roman Empire or as a nation-state co-existing with other Germanic nations – is rather penetrating. It is surely applicable to other nations including Russia and the "Slav orthodox world" in relation to the Pan-Slavic doctrine crafted in the late 18th – early 19th century and elaborated by a Russian economist, ethnologist and historian Nikolay Ya. Danilevsky (1822–1885), an ardent proponent of the "circular" paradigm of global history.

A weakened and internally conflicted United States may not be able to retain a decisive influence in Eurasia for long and a splintered EU will provide opportunities for Russia to form mutually beneficial agreements with some European states which need to secure and develop the vital land road and rail routes to and from China and the rest of Asia. The recent Franco-German proposal to engage Russia through a bilateral summit between Brussels and Moscow was scuttled as a result of the opposition of smaller pro-American members, primarily Poland and the Baltic states which are part of the anti-Russian "*cordon sanitaire*" created by NATO. Nonetheless, that failure does not foreclose the possibility for Berlin and Paris to conduct separate talks with the Kremlin and pursue a foreign policy line of their own.

Instead of the largely segregated and closed Soviet space which for decades was surrounded by hostile neighbours to its west (NATO), south (Turkey, Iran and Pakistan) and east (China, South Korea, Japan and the US bases in Alaska and the Pacific – Russia, buttressed by stable and improving economic and political relations with Iran, Syria, Turkey, the Gulf States, China, the two Koreas, Japan, ASEAN countries and India is beginning to fulfill its geopolitical and geoeconomic calling as the heartland and crossroads of Eurasia, linking the major civilisations and economies of two continents, with the further potential to tie in overland with the Americas through a future Bering road and rail connection. The Asia of 2030, notes Z. Daulet Singh, "will look very different from the Asia of today and will most likely be an amplified version of the interdependence that has already been established over decades… Greater Eurasia has the energy resources and strategic commodities of Russia including its strong scientific base of human capital, as well as the commercial technologies of Japan, China and Korea. It also has the human capital and the demography to maintain a self-sustaining political economy" [*Daulet Singh,* 2020, p. 291]. "Greater Eurasia", the cradle of several civilisations, could be synonymous to a new project centred around Lev Gumilyov's (1912–1992) "Eurasian idea" in which Russia is destined to play a pivotal role. Connecting history and modernity, the so-called "Third Rome" can emulate its Byzantine ancestor which for more than a thousand years linked the Mediterranean *oikoumene* with the lands of Rus' and western Asia.

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АННОТАЦИЯ. *Историографическое введение статьи содержит ретроспекцию работ зарубежных и российских ученых и экспертов, освещающих причины распада Советского Союза. Автор, анализируя особенности политического лидерства М.С. Горбачёва, помещает позднесоветский кризис в контекст русской истории и имперского наследия России. Особое внимание обращено на проблему нации как единства этнических, культурных и лингвистических составляющих ее элементов в противовес универсалистскому пониманию империи как сообщества народов, объединенных общей исторической судьбой. Автор сопоставляет Советский Союз как империю неклассического типа с европейскими имперскими образованиями, в частности с германской, сформировавшейся из «конфедеративного» объединения государств Центральной и Восточной Европы. Германский «рейх» опирался на исторические традиции Древнего Рима и династии Каролингов и впоследствии трансформировался в своеобразное федеративное государство, окруженное небольшими территориальными единицами, которые приняли цивилизационное и политическое наследие «рейха». В настоящее время Германия постепенно утверждает свое лидерство как среди в прошлом зависимых от нее территорий, так и на пространстве Евросоюза, лишившегося Великобритании. Россия же, побуждаемая географическими и стратегическими императивами, пытается воссоздать евразийскую «конфедеративную» ассоциацию с бывшими советскими республиками в соответствии со стратегической задачей возвращения себе значения силы, связующей Запад, исламский мир и Китай. В заключительной части статьи автор задается вопросом: удастся ли России создать синтетическую модель государственного пространства на основе симбиоза идей «славянской православной ойкумены» Н.Я. Данилевского*

(1822–1885) и синкретической евразийской модели Л.Н. Гумилёва (1912–1992)?

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: *Россия, Советский Союз, Священная Римская империя, германский рейх, Европейский союз, панславизм, цивилизация, Китай, Брекзит, НАТО, Варшавский договор, Совет экономической взаимопомощи, «Пять глаз» (разведывательный альянс), Соединенные Штаты Америки, инициатива «Один пояс – один путь», трубопровод «Северный поток», Евразийский экономический союз, Шанхайская организация сотрудничества.*

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