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WHAT IF... THE SOVIET UNION HAD NOT COLLAPSED?

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The 13th annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club includes a special session on the theme “What if... the Soviet Union had not collapsed?” On the one hand, this is a relatively new approach for the Valdai Discussion Club, which normally focuses on analysis of current and future trends in global politics and economics. For understandable reasons, historical retrospective, and especially historical reconstruction, normally remains outside the focus of its attention.

On the other hand, we are approaching the centenary of the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 – as it was officially called in previous years. And it is quite natural at this anniversary to seek a deeper understanding of the role the Soviet experience played in this country’s development – not only from a historical point of view, but also with regard to how it might influence the future. The question of what the Soviet heritage and foreign policy legacy mean for Russians today is undoubtedly crucial to understanding the ideological and moral underpinnings of the country’s current policy. That is why the Valdai Discussion Club has chosen to consider this dimension of the Russian reality.

Russians find it difficult to give an unambiguous assessment of their Soviet past in part because officials hold diametrically opposing views of the initial and final stages of the Soviet period. The current conservative camp consistently and unvaryingly sums up its view of the 1917 Revolution with the simple phrase: “Never again!”. Referring to the upcoming 100th anniversary of those events, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, speaking at the recent Sochi International Investment Forum, said very unequivocally: “This Revolution is an obvious example of how the loss of stability essentially destroyed the foundations of the economy and ruined the prospects for economic growth for many years. That is why I think we should treasure what we have right now.” For obvious reasons, this anti-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary approach will dominate the official ideological campaign during the upcoming anniversary year. Officials will no doubt issue similar statements against Lenin – for notoriously accepting money from Germany, Trotsky – for clearly having taken money from the United States, and against other leaders of the Revolution. A cavalcade of Lenin jokes will resurface in the mass culture. All of this will dovetail very naturally with the semi-official idealization of Rasputin that, in recent years, has lauded his fight against liberal plotters tied to the British Embassy. The only question is what official or semi-official line will be taken with regard to Tsar Nicholas II. Will it cast him as a loser whose actions led to the nation’s collapse – along with the inevitable and, in light of current events, justified comparison with Gorbachev – or will it lean in the opposite direction, toward Yeltsin’s period contention that Nicholas II was a “martyr tsar.” This is perhaps the only unknown regarding the official presentation of the anniversary.

On the other hand, the very same officials will undoubtedly take the exact opposite view of the events of 1991 and the Soviet period as a whole. Everyone recalls President Vladimir Putin’s famous remark that the collapse of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” That attitude, together with the reverence given Gagarin’s spaceflight and Victory Day – the two main pillars of Russia’s historical memory – greatly reinforces an almost pious attitude toward the Soviet era. There is also a positive reassessment of Stalin’s role – not as a communist, but as a statesman – that the media powerfully reinforced during the anniversary of the 20th Congress of the CPSU in February 2016. The aphorism “Stalin built it up and Khrushchev broke it down” also harkens to the Soviet era.

The reunification with Crimea in 2014 gave added impetus to the symbolic value of the Soviet legacy. This is despite the fact that the main historical symbol to which President Putin referred in his speeches at the time was “sacred Chersonesus,” the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy. He said that Chersonesus plays the same role for Russians as Jerusalem does for the Jewish people and Mecca for Muslims, and that it was wrong for Khrushchev to have given Crimea to Ukraine. Despite telling those assembled at a rally at the Kremlin walls on the night of March 18, 2014 that Crimea and Sevastopol had been returned to their home harbor, President Putin sparked among many Russians a wave of nostalgia for Crimea. It was a strictly Soviet nostalgia for a time when the health resorts on the peninsula served the entire Soviet Union, for Artek, the premier Soviet children’s summer camp, for the proverbial evenings “at the bluest of seas,” for Crimean movies, poems, and songs. Now officially part of the language, the term “geopoetics” – a combination of literary and artistic associations with a particular place – very accurately reflects the way in which many Russians perceive the events in Crimea. It is worth noting that the Crimean geopoetics of Russian memory are not ideological in nature: here there is little room for standard communist clichés. It is concerned with the romance and tragedy of human life set against the backdrop of the sea (recall, for example, the Koktobel poems of Yevgeny Yevtushenko or Yulia Drunina), right up to undisguised symbols of counter-culture based on Crimean images (“On a Winter Evening in Yalta” by Joseph Brodsky and scenes of Yalta in winter from the film *Assa* by Sergei Solovyov). In this way, the “Crimean geopoetics” of the Soviet period have become an integral part of the “Crimean consensus” in modern Russia.

But apart from an analysis of the value-weighted symbols associated with the Soviet era that strongly influence ideological policy in Russia today, posing the question “If the Soviet Union had not collapsed” undoubtedly requires looking again at how various historical events continue to influence modern politics.

In considering these “historical turning points,” it is worth asking how events would have developed differently without Mikhail Gorbachev. That question, in turn, consists of several others, starting with: “What if Yury Andropov had lived longer?” In the context of the resurgence of the “Chekist myth,” many now view Yury Andropov as the ideal leader of the Soviet era. During his little more than a year in office he managed to strengthen labor discipline, fight corruption, and establish a tougher foreign policy. It was at the height of his power in 1983 that the mutual deployment of medium-range missiles in Europe reached its peak, Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire,” and the Boeing passenger plane was shot down over South Korea. What’s more, it was during his rule that inexpensive “Andropovka” vodka was sold (a true union of the government and the people, however you look at it), and the authorities “tightened the screws” on dissidents (although many memoirs from that time reveal two sides to the story). But would Andropov have wanted – and could he have managed – to launch full-scale economic modernization (let’s not call it “reform”), and would he have become a Soviet Deng Xiaoping? We will never know. Although the memoirs of his assistants suggest he would have been, the “Chekist myth” raises doubts about it.

And finally, published sources show clearly that Andropov held a positive opinion of Gorbachev and that, had Andropov lived longer, he might have made Gorbachev his heir – the unofficial “second secretary” of the CPSU Central Committee instead of Chernenko. Still other conspiracy theories suggest that Andropov would have eventually realized that Gorbachev

was “rotten to the core” and instead promoted a member of the “young team” of politicians who had received senior posts in the Politburo, Central Committee Secretariat, and Council of Ministers during Andropov’s rule. (They include Heydar Aliyev, Yegor Ligachyov, Grigory Romanov, Nikolai Ryzhkov, Vitaly Vorotnikov, etc.)

The second question is more paradoxical. “What would have happened, if Chernenko had lived longer?” It might seem that, in 1984-85, a terminally ill person unable to survive without an oxygen mask would have committed the most shameful and ridiculous deeds in the whole history of the Soviet Union. But here, too, everything is not so straightforward.

Until quite unexpected (so to speak) deterioration of health during Crimean vacation in the summer of 1983 Konstantin Chernenko

had felt quite well. What’s more, he had earned a reputation as an outstanding apparatchik who ran the Central Committee well during the final years of Brezhnev’s life. If not for his health, Chernenko’s rule would have come to be viewed as a sort of “Brezhnev 2” – conservative, but manageable and stable. And Gorbachev would not have been given the same authority in the Central Committee Secretariat that he gained once Chernenko fell ill. At the same time, Chernenko, even in poor health, was not completely averse to reform: it was on his watch that the large-scale reform of secondary schools was undertaken. Chernenko also refused to rehabilitate Nikolai Shchelokov, Interior Minister under Brezhnev, who had been charged with corruption and dismissed by Andropov. It is also significant that Shchelokov shot himself not during Andropov’s rule, but Chernenko’s. Another interesting fact in the context of today’s Soviet legacy is that Chernenko restored Communist Party membership for Vyacheslav Molotov, a close ally of Stalin that Khrushchev had expelled from the Party. Interestingly, both Chernenko’s and Andropov’s assistants seem to vie with each other in their memoirs in arguing just how much the country would have thrived had their respective chiefs lived a little longer.

And finally the question arises as to what would have happened if someone other than Gorbachev had come to power after Chernenko’s passing. Among the possible alternate candidates mentioned in publicly available sources are Grigory Romanov, Viktor Grishin, Andrei Gromyko, and Vladimir Shcherbitsky. It seems likely that any one of them would have continued the conservative “Brezhnev 2” course. Of course, it is also very interesting to ask what foreign policy course the Soviet Union would have pursued had the long-serving Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko reached the summit of authority. His deep understanding of international affairs would obviously have made the Soviet Union’s involvement in world affairs far more strategic and coordinated overall. There is some weight to the argument that Gromyko, with his broad knowledge of the situation, would have pursued a more cautious and less radical foreign policy with regard to nuclear missiles than Yury Andropov. At the same time, a Soviet Union under Gromyko would not have lost its influence on allies and partners – as happened under Gorbachev – and could therefore have enabled Gromykov to exert a moderating influence on other leaders, inclining them to listen to the opinion of the Soviet Union. The first example that comes to mind is Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Perhaps the Soviet Union under Gromyko could have persuaded him against attacking Kuwait, which as we know, unleashed irreversible consequences in the Middle East and the world as a whole, opening the door to U.S. interventions around the world. But the question of whether Gromyko would have been more

open to dialogue with the West and China remains unanswerable. Would he have launched a new round of détente in international relations (without, of course, giving up the whole game as Gorbachev did) or would he have maintained the *Zugzwang* in Soviet-U.S. affairs that Reagan and Andropov had established?

While considering alternatives to Gorbachev, another line of historical reconstruction worth looking at is if the Soviet-era leader of Ukraine, Vladimir Shcherbitsky, had become the leader of the Soviet Union. (After all, a number of different memoirs mention that Brezhnev himself had named Shcherbitsky as his successor.) This is an especially interesting question given the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Would Shcherbitsky have simply continued Brezhnev's "Dnepropetrovsk" course, with its focus on developing Ukraine's industrial centers and recruitment of Ukrainian staff for senior Moscow posts? Or would he have elevated Ukrainian culture and ideology to the status of the "second national culture" on a par with Russian? Would he have adopted the approach of his former political opponent, Petro Shelest, described in his book "Україно наша Радянська"? Would he have sought to "Ukrainianize" all of Soviet social life?

But in the end, as we know, no alternative candidate came to power, and Gorbachev, whom Andrei Gromyko ultimately backed, eventually told his close associates, "What a mistake I've made!"

The second consideration in our turning points in history is this: "Could the Soviet Union have remained intact under Gorbachev?" And that question logically transforms into another: "Could anyone have stopped Gorbachev?" Here, unfortunately, it is necessary to state that the obsequious culture of the CPSU Central Committee made the idea of "collective leadership" little more than a fantasy. In fact, the overriding principle was "the boss is always right." Therefore, with regard to the resultant question of whether it would have been possible to accelerate change without perestroika, it is unlikely that economic reforms would have succeeded given the prevailing conservative political mindset. (Deng Xiaoping pursued this path, and it led to the Tiananmen Square events). Gorbachev's overly enthusiastic nature, coupled with the activities of his closest associates and assistants (Yakovlev, Shakhnazorov, and others) pushed him toward political reform and apparently made political restructuring inevitable. The events that transpired next were probably foreordained. Of course, it is impossible to let the genie out of the bottle only little by little. From the moment perestroika grew beyond the limits of the "thaw" that Khrushchev had started and liberal magazines had publicized, when Gorbachev transformed the old Supreme Soviet into the newer Congress of People's Deputies, and when the parliamentary tribune became a mouthpiece for the elimination of the multiparty system and for consolidating separatist nationalist movements into unified autonomous republics – at that point, it was impossible to halt the process. Gorbachev was also unsuccessful in his attempts to manage and slow this transformation. Right up until 1991, he managed only to win recognition of his right to personal and supreme power in exchange for new steps aimed at dismantling the Soviet political system. On the sidelines of a meeting that openly discussed Estonia's departure from the Soviet Union, Gorbachev famously remarked to Estonian Council of Ministers Chairman Edgar Savisaar, "Edgar, you are in a hurry!" implying that he had no problem with the idea, but disagreed only with the speed of the process. Gorbachev took the same view with regard to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, holding doubts only as to the pace.

Another question in this regard concerns the frequently voiced criticism that Gorbachev, unlike Deng Xiaoping, focused too heavily on foreign policy to the detriment of domestic reforms. Here, too, however, events could hardly have developed otherwise. First, even before coming to power, Gorbachev fell under the spell and influence of Margaret Thatcher during his visit to London in 1984. It then became obvious that he had quickly fallen in love with the global publicity he received from his international travels. Add to that his enthusiasm for his new foreign policy theories (that his assistants – many of whom were former foreign affairs experts – actively fed him). Finally, there was the controversial figure of Shevardnadze as Foreign Minister. All of this made it highly unlikely that Gorbachev would have shifted his emphasis from foreign to domestic policy.

In addition to these general issues, external factors also undermined the stability of the Soviet system. In April 2016, as part of the 30-year anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, articles and even a feature film were released that examined the question: “What if Chernobyl had never happened?” For example, in the popular television series “Chernobyl – Restricted Zone,” a group of modern youth use a time machine, return to the last day before the Chernobyl accident occurred and manage to stop the catastrophe before it happens. The whole futures changes as a result, and in the final scenes viewers see skyscrapers towering over a modern Chernobyl, the Soviet Union still intact, the Soviet ruble stronger than all other currencies, most of the countries of the world following a socialist path to development while the United States, alone, heads toward collapse, and a global Internet – the Runet – created by Soviet scientists. The only thing in that world that remains the same is that Vladimir Putin is the General Secretary of the CPSU.

In any case, even with the enormous scale of the Chernobyl disaster, its political consequences for the Soviet Union only slightly exceeded its technological repercussions. The days of the Chernobyl events made it clear to the whole country that “the authorities always lie about everything” and that “it is impossible to go on living like this.” The attempts to cover it up in the first days after the accident and Gorbachev’s three-week silence on the subject truly became a turning point in Soviet public consciousness.

In addition a major external factor was the sharp drop in oil prices in the mid-1980s coupled with Gorbachev’s anti-drinking campaign that reduced internal revenues – and stood in stark contrast to Andropov’s policies on alcohol. All of this led to a critical decline in revenues to the state budget. Those economic difficulties led in turn to food shortages, the issuance of food coupons, and higher prices that were at first unnoticeable and later unmistakable – all of which undermined the social stability of the Soviet system. The result was the end of the Brezhnev-era social contract of sorts that provided social welfare on the condition that the people remain politically passive. After that, the massive support base that Gorbachev enjoyed during the early years of his rule began to decline sharply and disappear.

Another subjective turning point arose against this backdrop – the “Yeltsin factor.” Yeltsin clearly played a key role in the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The protest movement of the time – fragmented and greatly marginalized – gained in Yeltsin an extremely popular and dynamic leader who had emerged from the highest echelons of power and who was willing to pursue extremely ambitious political objectives. What would have happened if Yeltsin had

chosen to hold back from delivering his critical and now-famous speech at the October Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in 1987? What if the system had not responded so “forgivingly” – by simply dismissing Yeltsin and leaving him free to pursue his public activities – by depriving him of that freedom and forcing him into obscurity? And finally, what would have happened if the Emergency Committee had arrested Yeltsin in the early hours of the putsch in August 1991, thereby depriving the opposition of a recognized leader and preventing it from acquiring the scope it eventually achieved? Thus, the question of whether the Soviet Union would have collapsed if there had been no Yeltsin is just as pertinent as asking whether it would have happened without Gorbachev.

And finally, there is the question of whether it would have been possible to save the Soviet Union in 1990-91. Could the “500 Days” economic program of Shatalin and Yavlinsky have worked? And what if the Emergency Committee had not staged a putsch? Would a new union of Soviet republics have taken shape with Nursultan Nazarbayev as prime minister? Kazakh experts report that Nazarbayev still holds a deep grudge against Russia (and against the Gorbachev and Yeltsin administrations) because he was denied the chance to become prime minister of the Soviet Union. And what would have happened if the putsch by the Emergency Committee had succeeded? Again, there is a sharp contrast between the Moscow authorities who were unwilling to use force to disperse those defending the White House and the authorities in Beijing who were determined to crack down on the protestors in Tiananmen Square. Was Gorbachev himself behind the putsch, as many memoirists claim? Which domestic and foreign policies would the Soviet Union have pursued if the putsch had succeeded?

Unfortunately, history has no subjunctive mood. We will never have any definite answers to these questions. However, when analyzing all the available sources, it almost seems as though some form of inevitable doom led Gorbachev and the whole country to ruin, and that nothing could have prevented it. In any case, here we have presented a strictly textbook introduction to the role that specific individuals played in history.

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