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The Collapse of the Soviet Union and Its Repercussions: A Literature Review

Matthew G. Guerdat

I AM A CHILD OF THE post-Cold War world. I was born in 1986, and the earliest memories I have are all of events that occurred in the early 1990s. By the time I first heard an adult talk about something called the “Cold War,” it had already been over for at least half a decade. Even as I learned more about this strangely named war that had apparently never actually happened, it didn’t seem terribly relevant; after all, it had ended years ago. So this big, evil country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) was around for a while and then collapsed in the early nineties. Why should that matter in the modern world?

Yet many aspects of the world as it exists today were shaped, either directly or indirectly, by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Governments rose and fell with its demise. Decades-old globes and maps of the world suddenly became obsolete as whole nations split and fragmented nations reunited. Theories that had been the topics of heated political, economic, and social discourse for almost a century lost their legitimacy overnight. The very paradigms through which people in the West evaluated their own species shifted as the looming threat of nuclear Armageddon that had hung ever present over the lives of an entire generation suddenly vanished into thin air. Everything had changed with the fall of the Soviet Union, and the course of everything that was to come had been irrevocably altered.

But what caused the Soviet Union to collapse in the first place? And for that matter, how exactly has its collapse affected life in the present day? The answers to

these questions vary considerably depending on who is asked. In the years since its collapse, countless historians, political scientists, and economists have struggled to piece together the chain of events that ultimately doomed the Soviet Union, and countless others have sought to understand the repercussions of its demise, both in terms of its immediate effects in the years thereafter and in the long-term picture of human civilization. So vast is the body of literature on these subjects that a comprehensive examination of each of them is unfeasible. Thus, the following discussion will focus on the relevant information provided in five different books: *The Cold War: A New History*, by John Lewis Gaddis; *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present*, by Michael H. Hunt; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, by Samuel P. Huntington; *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008*, by Paul Krugman; and *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, by Robert Kagan. Through an analysis of these authors’ writings, and through a comparison of their conclusions, we will seek to understand the underlying reasons behind the Soviet Union’s collapse and the event’s lasting effects, both within Russia and in the world in general.

Before we delve too deeply into the larger reasons for the Soviet Union’s demise, a more basic question begs asking: was its collapse inevitable? Most authors seem to be in agreement that, yes, the Soviet Union’s self-destruction was bound to happen sooner or later. Krugman and Gaddis both make this assertion in their respective books; Krugman describes the Soviet Union as “a sort of ramshackle affair, doomed to eventual failure,”¹ while Gaddis

¹ Paul Krugman, *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* (New York: Norton, 2009), 11.

denounces not only the Soviet Union itself, but the very ideology upon which it was founded as “a sandpile ready to slide.”² Looking back on the events leading up to its demise, and armed with the knowledge gifted to us by the countless authors, political scientists, and others who have painstakingly pieced together the events of the U.S.S.R.’s last days, one can come to the conclusion that its death was only a matter of time. However, as both authors also take care to point out, our modern day perception of the Soviet Union’s collapse as an inevitability is possible only because we have the benefit of hindsight. At the time, the event came as a tremendous shock to virtually everyone on the Western side of the Iron Curtain. Gaddis recounts the fumbling, uncertain efforts of a dumbstruck Bush administration to rework their own policies and perspectives in the wake of what was obviously a wholly unexpected turn of events. At a summit in Malta in 1989, Bush admitted to Mikhail Gorbachev that his administration had been “shaken by the rapidity of the unfolding changes” in Eastern Europe, and that he had been forced to reverse his own position “by 180 degrees”; now his only goal was “to do nothing which would lead to undermining [Gorbachev’s] position.”³

What were the factors, so obvious to the modern scholar but completely unnoticed by scholars and politicians at the time, which led to the Soviet Union’s collapse? As an economist, Krugman offers explanations grounded primarily in the U.S.S.R.’s economic woes in the last years of its existence: the hideously expensive and unproductive war in Afghanistan and the tremendous burden placed on Soviet industry by the attempts to keep up with Reagan’s arms buildup. However, he also delves into some of the more psychological elements of life in the late Soviet years. He speculates that perhaps it was simply that

“revolutionary fervor, above all the willingness to murder your opponents in the name of the greater good, cannot last more than a couple of generations,” and wonders whether “the stubborn refusal of capitalism to display the proper degree of decadence” and “the rise of Asia’s capitalist economies” gradually undermined faith in the effectiveness of the Soviet system.⁴ Gaddis also focuses on the psychological state of the people of the Soviet Union, attributing its fall to such things as frustration over the temporary divisions of countries that had become permanent in the decades since the Second World War, the continuing fear of nuclear war, and a building resentment over the failure of the Soviet government to raise living standards. However, Gaddis also significantly includes factors such as a gradual shifting of power from the government to the people, and a growing sense that it was now possible to establish standards for making moral judgments that were independent of the Soviet authority’s official positions.⁵ These last two factors are important because they show that while the decline of the Soviet Union might be attributable to failures within the government-run national economy, its actual breakup was a result of action by the people. Soviet policy decisions made in the late 1980s and early 1990s gave people living in the Soviet satellite states a degree of freedom that they had not experienced since their countries had been incorporated into the U.S.S.R. at the end of World War II. Occurring as it did in the midst of the existing economic hardships and widespread disillusionment with the Soviet system, these policies essentially opened the floodgates of public discontent; if the implosion of the Soviet Union was indeed inevitable, then the Soviet leadership’s loss of control over the masses was the final nail in the coffin. Once the disgruntled citizens of the U.S.S.R. realized they could now protest their situation without consequences, there was no turning back.

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 238.

³ Gaddis, 248.

⁴ Krugman, 11-12.

⁵ Gaddis, 238.

What were these new policy decisions, introduced by the Soviet government in the late 1980s, which ultimately doomed the Soviet Union to destruction? And who was to blame for these disastrous new policies? On the second point, the literature is unanimous: responsibility for the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union lies with Mikhail Gorbachev. During his time as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991, Gorbachev made it his personal mission to correct the many problems that he saw within the Soviet system. In the process, he inadvertently set in motion events that would ultimately destroy the Soviet Union from within.

In terms of the general idea that Gorbachev's actions as Politburo chief were to blame for the Soviet Union's collapse, the literature is in agreement. However, the authors disagree on what exactly it was that Gorbachev did that ultimately doomed the Soviet Union. In *The World Transformed*, Hunt emphasizes the role of one of Gorbachev's best-known reforms: *glasnost*. Literally meaning "openness," *glasnost* encouraged Soviet citizens to openly discuss the problems with the Soviet system and seek solutions. According to Hunt, the ultimate goal of *glasnost* was to promote the free flow of ideas between the U.S.S.R. and the outside world, especially in the realms of science, technology, and culture.⁶ Gorbachev believed that the Soviet people would use their newfound freedom of expression to calmly and rationally examine the problems plaguing the Soviet Union and search for possible solutions. However, he was only halfway right in his prediction. While the Soviet people were more than happy to use their new freedom to talk about the problems with the Soviet system, and they readily proposed a common solution, the discussions were not calm and rational, and the ultimate solution they agreed upon was to break away from the Soviet Union one country at a time. With the benefit of

hindsight, it seems that Gorbachev's primary miscalculation in his *glasnost* initiative was a fundamental underestimation of the sheer level of disgust that had developed for the Soviet system, especially within the satellite nations. While crippling economic problems resulted in suffering for people throughout the U.S.S.R., the people within the satellite states had been burdened with these problems by a foreign entity that had forcibly incorporated them into its own sphere of influence at the end of the Second World War. While Gorbachev might very well have been right in believing that the *Russian* citizens of the Soviet Union would desire to fix the problems within their mighty empire rather than watch it crumble, the majority of people in the Eastern European nations of the Soviet bloc simply wanted their own countries back. Thus, by giving the people of these regions the freedom to express their displeasure and voice their desires openly, Gorbachev essentially gave them a free pass to revolt against the Soviet regime.

While the importance of Gorbachev's *glasnost* reform cannot be overlooked, Gaddis takes an altogether different approach when examining Gorbachev's actions. Rather than looking at the specific policies that caused the cascading failure of the Soviet system, Gaddis highlights Gorbachev's *inactions* as being the critical piece of the puzzle. As he puts it, the revolution against the Soviet system succeeded "chiefly because Mikhail Gorbachev chose not to act, but to be acted upon."⁷ Gaddis provides numerous examples of incidents when Gorbachev, through his own inaction, allowed people within the Soviet bloc to gradually reclaim power from the authoritarian central government. Gorbachev's lack of objection and censorship when the Hungarian government, while reviewing an uprising within their country in 1956 that Khrushchev had violently suppressed, concluded that the rebellion had been a "popular uprising against an oligarchic system of power

⁶ Michael H. Hunt, *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 320.

⁷ Gaddis, 239.

which had humiliated the nation.”⁸ When it became clear that Gorbachev did not intend to object to the report, the Hungarian government organized a ceremonial reburial of the leader of the failed uprising, whom Khrushchev had ordered executed.⁹ In an equally shocking development in Poland in 1989, Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarity, a banned non-communist party-controlled labor union, was invited along with the rest of Solidarity’s representatives to participate in a national election for a new bicameral legislature. To everyone’s surprise, Wałęsa and the other members of Solidarity won by a landslide—apparently, there had been no attempt made by the Soviet authorities to rig the vote in their favor. Even more surprising, when officials in Moscow asked Gorbachev what should be done about the situation, one of Gorbachev’s top aides informed them that “this is entirely a matter to be decided by Poland.” Thus, Wałęsa’s election stood, and the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe since the end of the Second World War came to power without incident.¹⁰

Given the events that took place under his watch, it is not difficult to make the argument that Gorbachev had a tremendous impact on the course of the Soviet Union during his time as Politburo chief. Additionally, given the repercussions of his actions, it could easily be argued that Gorbachev’s actions as Politburo chief finally sent the ailing U.S.S.R. spiraling into the abyss. A more difficult question to address is how history should judge Gorbachev’s decisions. Granted, his actions resulted in the destruction of the Soviet Union, and as individuals who have grown up in a democratic, capitalist Western society, it is extremely tempting to automatically assume that this was the best thing that could have happened to the people of the U.S.S.R. Gaddis certainly believes so. His descriptions of Gorbachev practically glow with admiration for the man,

whom he describes as “the most deserving recipient ever of the Nobel Peace Prize.”¹¹ To be fair, there are plenty of aspects of Gorbachev’s actions that deserve admiration. According to the information we have about the man, he was committed to the idea of reforming the Soviet system from the day he took office. Gaddis and

Everywhere, impossible
dreams were suddenly
becoming reality.

Hunt both recount the story of how, on the night of his appointment as Politburo chief, Gorbachev lamented the state of the Soviet Union to his wife, saying, “We can’t go on living like this.”¹² Given the near-absolute power that came with Gorbachev’s new position, it would have been a simple matter for him to sit back and enjoy the fruits of his success. Instead, he strove to solve many of the problems that he saw plaguing the Soviet Union. His efforts to bring free speech and self-determination to the Soviet people made him extremely popular in the Soviet satellite states (though he was reviled at home), and the fact that he encouraged these kinds of reforms when so many of his predecessors had violently suppressed them is truly remarkable. But his methods for achieving these reforms left much to be desired.

While Gorbachev’s intentions may have been good, the fact of the matter is that his methods for enacting the reforms he desired ultimately left the country under his care in a state of utter chaos. The problem was that, with the exception of rather broad, general policies like *glasnost*, Gorbachev was usually content to simply sit back and allow the Soviet people to change society on their own. This was catastrophic for the Soviet system. Gorbachev’s “reform through inaction” approach meant that the central

8 Ibid., 240-241.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 241-242.

11 Ibid., 257.

12 Gaddis, 229; Hunt, 320.

government in Moscow quickly lost control over the extent and direction of these reforms. For instance, a vague statement about a border crossing being opened, muttered by a poorly informed party aide at a televised press conference, could quickly turn into a mass exodus and a frenzied (and highly televised) attempt by the people of East Germany to tear down a decades-old symbol of Soviet authority and control. In a society that had been built on the idea that the government controlled every aspect of the people's lives, simply opening the floodgates of public expression—or more accurately, neglecting the floodgates to the point that they collapsed on their own—was a recipe for total anarchy. Viewed in comparison with the many revolutions that have occurred thus far in the twenty-first century, it is a wonder that the toppling of the Soviet Union was accomplished with so little violence and bloodshed. However, as we will see, the fact that the revolution was relatively bloodless does not mean that it was not without negative consequences for the people of Russia, Eastern Europe, and the world as a whole.

How exactly the fall of the Soviet Union changed the world is a difficult question to answer with any degree of certainty, largely because the answer tends to change dramatically depending on who you ask. Even when addressing the much simpler question, “How much did the fall of the Soviet Union change things?,” authors’ opinions seem to run the full gamut, ranging from “completely” to “not at all.”

Krugman and Kagan, for example, express widely different views on the lasting effects of the Soviet Union's collapse in their respective books. In *The Return of Depression Economics*, Krugman depicts the fall of the Soviet Union as a paradigm-shifting event that completely and utterly destroyed the legitimacy of the principles upon which the Soviet Union had been founded. As he sees it, the “humiliating failure of the Soviet Union” did not merely bring an end to the oldest and most powerful of the world's communist nations, it “destroyed the socialist

dream” itself.¹³

While Karl Marx's ideas on socialism had not actually originated in Russia, it was nonetheless the first country to officially integrate them into (what, at least from the outside, appeared to be) an effective national system. The (apparent) success of socialism in Russia inspired countless disgruntled intellectuals around the world who had become disillusioned with the capitalist system. The fact that this system not only survived the Second World War, but actually increased in power and size with the addition of the Soviet Bloc countries until it stood toe-to-toe with the very capitalist nations it opposed, was a beacon of hope to anyone who sought to overthrow the bourgeois capitalist rulers of their own countries and establish a new, socialist system in its place.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the communist movements around the world that it had supported collapsed with it. Krugman lists several examples. Cuba, that tiny island nation a stone's throw from American shores, had been regarded by supporters of communism as “a heroic nation, standing alone with clenched fist confronting the United States.” Once the Soviet Union fell, however, and the island home of Fidel Castro's glorious communist revolution began to fall into disrepair, it became obvious to everyone that “the heroic stance of the past” had only been possible thanks to enormous subsidies that had been funneled into Cuba by Castro's supporters in Moscow. Another, though less romantic, example is North Korea, which, “for all its ghastliness, held a certain mystique for radicals, particularly among South Korean students.” With the loss of aid from Moscow in the wake of the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, however, and the resulting widespread starvation in the North Korean countryside, the “thrill” once provided by South Korea's communist northern neighbors is now a thing of the past.¹⁴

¹³ Krugman, 13.

¹⁴ Ibid.

As Krugman sees it, the destruction of the Soviet Union destroyed the credibility of communism itself because it destroyed the main ideological and financial backer of the entire movement. Even if advocates of communism had been able to write off the Soviet Union's collapse as a fluke, or discredit the country's system itself as not representing "true socialism," the dramatic degeneration of so many of the communist nations that had been the U.S.S.R.'s greatest success stories made it painfully obvious to people around the world that communism was not the pinnacle of human societal development that its proponents had claimed it to be. With the loss of their movement's greatest champion, the vast majority of those who had held socialist ideals in high esteem shifted their own views in favor of capitalism and democracy. The grand socialist experiment, so many decades in the making, had ultimately failed, and democracy rose triumphant as the uncontested champion of world politics. As far as Krugman is concerned, that's where the story ends.

Kagan begs to differ. Where Krugman ends his discussion with the disgrace of the socialist system and the championing of democracy around the world, Kagan continues to trace the course of world events after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and as a result he comes to a conclusion that is the polar opposite of Krugman's. Whereas Krugman believe that the numbers of people who embrace the values represented by the U.S.S.R. have been on a rapid, continuous decline since its collapse, Kagan sees not a decline, but a *return* to these values.

In Kagan's view, Krugman's worldwide paradigm shift at the end of the Cold War did indeed occur, but in the long run it has proved to be mere wishful thinking. As he puts it:

The years immediately following the end of the Cold War offered a tantalizing glimpse of a new kind of international order, with nation-states growing together or disappearing, ideological conflicts melting away, cultures intermingling, and

increasingly free commerce and communications. The modern democratic world wanted to believe that the end of the Cold War did not just end one strategic and ideological conflict but all strategic and ideological conflicts. People and their leaders longed for "a world transformed."¹⁵

The emphasis in this statement is on the phrase "*wanted to believe.*" By Kagan's estimation, the pro-democracy, pro-unity, and pro-peace rhetoric that was repeated so widely in the years immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union was not so much excitement over the changes that had already happened as it was excitement over what was *expected* to happen as a result of the Cold War's end.

Given the context of the time, it is easy to see why so many people were optimistic about the future. On the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, people were optimistic because they had finally managed to regain control of their own countries after decades of foreign rule and social oppression. On the Western side, they were excited because the country that had loomed like a dark cloud on the horizon for half a century had evaporated seemingly overnight, and, for the first time in a generation, there was no threat of a nuclear war erupting at any moment. Perhaps most significant for people on both sides of the Iron Curtain was the realization that these changes had been brought about *by the people*; they were brought about by the average person in Hungary who voted for the non-communist candidate in a national election, then watched in astonishment as he was sworn into office; and by the East German citizens who had picked up sledgehammers and *personally* dismantled the Berlin Wall with their own two hands. Everywhere, impossible dreams were suddenly becoming reality. Why should other equally impossible dreams like universal freedom and peace on Earth be off the table? In a world where the Soviet Union could be dismantled by the

15 Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 3.

very people it oppressed, the whole of human aspirations seemed to be up for grabs.

But what caused the lofty ideals of the immediate post-Cold War years to be lost? A major factor was the realization that the economic hardships that the former Soviet states had endured under the old regime were not going to simply disappear with that government's demise. Krugman recounts how Russia's economy remained stagnant for years after the Soviet Union's collapse, and how its leaders were unable to establish a new, functional market system from the ashes of the old, centrally organized Soviet system. In a humiliating turn of events, the nation that had once used its tremendous wealth to fund communist movements around the world was forced to turn to the United States for financial help. Playing on fears in the U.S. that Russia's colossal stockpile of nuclear weapons might be sold to interested buyers if the economic situation became serious enough, Russia's leaders managed to convince the United States to pressure the International Monetary Fund into lending Russia enough money to stabilize their economy until a new economic plan could be implemented—notwithstanding the fact that such a plan did not yet exist. For a time, the plan worked. Russia's economy was still teetering on the brink of collapse, but its apparent ability to use its Cold War nuclear stockpile to acquire international aid was enough to encourage high-rolling investors to risk putting money into Russia. This was all fine and good, until the Russian government actually *did* try to implement an economic plan. Their solution—devaluing the ruble—quickly cascaded out of control, with the ruble becoming essentially worthless overnight. At that point, Russia's western backers threw up their hands in disgust, refusing to throw any more money into Russia's economy.¹⁶ Even the threat of nuclear terrorism could only coerce so much funding out of a nation's leaders.

If you found it odd that the preceding story of how

the economic misery of pre-collapse Soviet Russia persisted for years after the U.S.S.R.'s dissolution was recounted by the very same author who had earlier excitedly expounded upon the many ways in which the Soviet Union's collapse had changed the world so entirely, then you are not alone in your confusion. At first glance, Krugman's assertions early in the book about capitalism emerging triumphant from the ashes of the Cold War seem to be directly undermined by his own story of how Russia's economy continued to falter even after its conversion to capitalism. It is important to remember that Krugman is writing about the collapse of the Soviet Union from the perspective of an economist. As such, *The Return of Depression Economics* has a much stronger emphasis on the economic factors that were at play in the post-Soviet years than on the ideological shifts that were occurring at the same time. Be that as it may, Krugman nonetheless addresses the contradiction between ideology and economic reality in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. In one section he writes:

Several hundred million people who had lived under Marxist regimes suddenly became citizens of states prepared to give markets a chance. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this has in some ways turned out to be the least important consequence of the Soviet collapse. Contrary to what most people expected, the "transition economies" of Eastern Europe did not quickly become a major force in the world market...only now, almost two decades after the fall of Communism, are a few countries... starting to look like success stories.¹⁷

As an economist, Krugman readily acknowledges that the fall of Communism did not suddenly bring financial order and stability to Eastern Europe. He simply disagrees with Kagan's assertion that the fall of communism ultimately did *nothing* to change the world. Rather, Krugman sees the collapse of the Soviet Union as a dramatic first step

¹⁶ Krugman, 132-133.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

on a long, difficult journey. As Krugman views it, capitalism did indeed defeat communism, communism is indeed dead and gone, and the majority of the world's intellectuals have already discarded its once revolutionary ideas on economy building in favor of the more conventional, but historically much more effective, ideas of capitalism. It might take time for Russia and the other nations of Eastern Europe to adjust to their new capitalist systems; the road will likely be long and difficult, but Krugman believes that capitalism is nonetheless there to stay.

In some places, the success of these new capitalist systems is already being seen. The collapse of the Soviet Union may have resulted in economic hardships for its former member states in the years immediately following, but Russia at least seems to have returned with a vengeance. According to Kagan, the Russian economy has been growing steadily by seven percent every year since 2003, while real income per capita grew by 64 percent and the national poverty rate was reduced by half between 1998 and 2006.¹⁸

Russia's economy has also benefited greatly from its newfound trade connections with the Western world. Russia's abundant natural resources have made it an invaluable trading partner for energy-starved Europe, which now imports more of its energy from Russia than it does from the Middle East. Russia has further increased its connections to the European energy market by buying up strategic energy-producing assets across the continent, further strengthening its position within the European economy.¹⁹

You would think that the nations of the Western world would consider Russia's newfound involvement in the global economic system to be a good thing. After all, isn't unity and interconnectedness through capitalism exactly what everyone was hoping for in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse? The problem, as Kagan and Huntington see it, is that Russia's new capitalist system may

have connected it with Europe, but the country is no more *united* with Europe than it was during the Cold War. Kagan, for example notes that rather than striving for greater cooperation with its European trade partners, Russia has used its newfound leverage within Europe's energy industry to pressure the nations of Europe into acquiescing to its demands, thereby manipulating European politics and playing individual nations against one another (and dividing the European Union against itself in the process).²⁰

Huntington takes a different approach, examining instead Russia's attempts in recent years to re-establish its economic and political connections with its former Soviet member states. Given the enthusiasm with which the people of these countries strove for independence from Russian control during the *glasnost* years, and the jubilation that ensued once that independence was finally achieved, one would expect that these countries would be the last places that Russia would be able to find allies in the years thereafter. However, that does not seem to have been the case. Huntington recounts how, one by one, many of the former Soviet satellite states begrudgingly turned to Russia for help once times got hard. In Moldova, for example, people had initially been excited at the end of the Cold War over the prospect of finally being reintegrated into Romania. Yet the Soviet Union's collapse brought economic hardships to both countries and enthusiasm for reunification quickly waned. Eventually, the economic situation became so bad that Moldova finally yielded to pressure from Russia and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), greatly expanding trade with Russia in the process. In the years thereafter, Moldovan economic ties with Russia increased, and in the 1994 parliamentary elections in Moldova, pro-Russian candidates were elected by an overwhelming majority.²¹

¹⁸ Kagan, 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 165.

The re-emergence of Russian control was much more dramatically accomplished in Georgia. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia declared independence, and they replaced their Soviet government with a new Georgian one. But this government soon became as repressive as the old Soviet government it had replaced and it was violently overthrown. A new leader was elected, but he in turn was challenged by a separatist movement in the region of Abkhazia (a movement which, incidentally, was directly financed by Russia). Unable to defeat the separatist movement on its own, the new Georgian government was finally forced to ask Russia for military assistance. Russia agreed, on the condition that they would be allowed to establish three military bases in Georgia and to maintain these bases indefinitely. In this way, Russia thus managed to effectively conquer and occupy Georgia without a word of protest from the Georgian government.²²

Clearly, then, after languishing economically and politically in the last years of the Soviet Union and in the years immediately following its collapse, Russia is once again on the rise, but what implications does this have for the rest of the world? Should the West be worried about a return to the Cold War? Again, the answer seems to depend on whom you ask.

Huntington views the situation as a sign of Russia's continuing feeling of being isolated from the West, primarily by cultural differences. As he views it, Russia has re-established its Cold War connections with the Eastern European nations largely because it has historically had more in common with these nations than it has with

the rest of Europe. According to Huntington, the primary factor linking these nations (economic and military dependencies notwithstanding) is their common Orthodox heritage. The prevalence of an Orthodox belief structure in

Everything had changed with the fall of the Soviet Union, and the course of everything that was to come had been irrevocably altered.

Russia and in the countries of Eastern Europe leads them to side with one another, rather than with Western Europe, when there is a need to do so. This is a reasonably plausible answer. A similar explanation could be offered for the United States' support of Israel over the course of its existence.

On a cultural level, the United States feel compelled to defend Israel because of its status as a tiny bastion of (mostly) Western civilization in a region otherwise filled entirely with Muslim nations. Of course, the Israel analogy also applies in another context: it is an invaluable strategic ally in a region where military support for Western operations would otherwise be uncertain at best. From this perspective, by expanding its influence into its neighboring countries, Russia is "creating a bloc with an Orthodox heartland under its leadership and a surrounding buffer of relatively weak Islamic states."²³ If the map of Russia's expanding sphere of influence bears an uncanny resemblance to its old Soviet holdings, Huntington says that this is because many of the countries in proximity to Russia also have a long history of cultural and political ties with Russia, in much the same way that the nations of Europe (once they grew tired of killing each other) decided to form a union of the various nations in the region that shared a common general culture. Russia's new ties with its neighbors, as Huntington sees it, is not a prelude to a second Cold War, but more of an effort by Russia to re-establish—in its own, distinctively Russian way—its own little clique of like-minded friends.

Kagan is not convinced, however. He sees the

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 164.

return in Russia of centralized power under figures like Vladimir Putin, and his public reminiscing on the “good old days” of the Soviet Union, as a sign that Russia intends to reclaim the status as a world superpower that it lost at the end of the Cold War. Where Huntington sees nations with similar cultures forming ties as a result of their common beliefs and practices, Kagan sees the same events and concludes that “the old competition between liberalism and autocracy has also reemerged, with the world’s great powers increasingly lining up according to the nature of their regimes.”²⁴

However, it is vital to note that Kagan uses the word “autocracy” in the context of the modern Russian government, despite Russia’s current status as a democracy. In the context of recent, high-publicity accusations of corruption within the Russian democratic system, Kagan asserts that at some point since the end of the Cold War, the Russian “turn toward liberalism at home stalled and then reversed, and so has its foreign policy.” Instead, “great power nationalism has returned to Russia, and with it traditional great power calculations and ambitions.”²⁵

Note again Kagan’s choice of words. If the nations of the Western world are getting nervous about Russia’s increasing power in the region, it is not because they are worried about modern Russian power calculations. They are worried about a return of *traditional* Russian power calculations. In other words, a return to the old days of the Cold War, when powerful, outspoken Russian leaders like Stalin and Khrushchev had people in the Western world convinced that a Soviet invasion was just around the corner, and that “commie” spies were hiding under every bed waiting for the order to strike. This, ultimately, is what Kagan is afraid Russia is trying to resurrect: the old Soviet ways of power, expansion, and, above all, intimidation of the Western powers.

I believe this fear of a return to the Cold War is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Russian people want. Russia has always been a proud, independent nation—not truly European, but not Asian either—and it has never been more successful than it was during the years of the Soviet Union. Granted, the Soviet years brought a great deal of hardship and oppression to the Russian people, but hardship and oppression have always been a part of Russian life, and Russians pride themselves on their ability to endure what other peoples could not. The Soviet Union was by no means a perfect system, but in terms of national prestige, there has never been a greater era in Russian history. That this greatness came at the expense of individual freedoms was an unfortunate side effect of the Soviet system. It is doubtful that any Russian who was alive during the Soviet years would want a return to totalitarianism, but some aspects of the old Soviet system—standing toe-to-toe with the arrogant nations of the West, for example—are nonetheless quite appealing. If the elements of the Soviet system that made Russia powerful and respected could be replicated in the modern system, without a return to the totalitarianism of the old days, then that would be ideal. This, I believe, is what modern Russians actually want: not to return to the Soviet way of life, but to regain the international respect they lost those many years ago, when the Soviet Union fell.

²⁴ Kagan, 3-4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.