

The Case for Nationalism in the Demise of the Soviet Union

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SETH CARROLL, AUG 28 2012

What ultimately caused the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe? Was it a revival of nationalist sentiment, a failure of Soviet central economic planning to provide comparable lifestyles to those in Western Europe, or was it a fundamental failure of communism to integrate itself into Eastern Europe? These issues span different countries, each with their own individual histories. All, however, ultimately acted to the same ends in a relatively uniform period of time to achieve the same result, a result which ended the last European empire of the modern era. The nations of Eastern Europe, defined as Poland, East Germany, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, the Baltic States, Hungary and Finland, all had indigenous Communist parties prior to occupation on the Second World War, all had national pasts, and all had survived as independently viable entities prior to Soviet occupation. It was the expansion of Soviet power during the Second World War, and the refusal to allow free elections in its occupied territories which allowed for the takeover of communism, although not by the popular will of the people, despite the strong presence of local Communist parties. The events that would eventually cause the shackles of non representative Soviet sponsored governments to be cast off were the result of a series of events which, taking advantage of time passed, and the experience with Soviet ideology and economic theory, allowed the resurgent force of nationalism to take hold and confront the Soviet Union at precisely the worst point in its history to resist. While the failure of the communist ideology and economic failure played important parts in delegitimising Soviet control, nationalism was the defining feature of the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe.

Communist regimes emerged in Eastern Europe in numbers following the defeat of Fascism in the Second World War. The ground had been prepared prior to the beginning of World War Two for, if not communist control, then socialist governments and far left sympathies. Czechoslovakia and Poland, for example, had seen their countries divided up and over run with little to no action taken by the democratic West. The communist parties that existed were not an aberration imposed on them by the Soviet Union as it advanced. For example, prior to the war the communist party of Czechoslovakia was the second largest in the country¹ and earned 39% of the vote in a free election held after the defeat of Germany. While other examples of 'free' votes in the Soviet Army occupied states were, at best, rigged, [2] the fact remains that the communist parties that won these votes or took power in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary for example, were national in origin and not new institutions imported from the Soviet Union. Their governance objectives may have been Soviet in origin, [3] but they themselves had at least nominal legitimacy in nationalist origin.

The circumstances present in the immediate post war period promised a long term anti-German stance in policy from the nations of Eastern Europe, with the Soviet Union by convenience, proximity and intention, filling this requirement. The semi-imaginary public, but not private, threat of German resurgence [4] and the need for a powerful offset allowed for the tacit acceptance by the international community of the Soviet sphere of influence in the East. The coup's in Romania, Bulgaria, the denial of the Polish government in exile, and the refusal to withdraw Red Army forces from the territories it had occupied were all violations of the spirit and letter of the Yalta agreement. However, it cannot be said that the communist parties that eventually took power in those nations which the Soviet Union claimed spheres of influence were imported directly from the Soviet Union. Local communist like Tito in Yugoslavia, Gottwald in Czechoslovakia, Szakasits in Hungary, and Boleslaw Bierut in Poland were all local figures with local connections and support prior to the imposition of Communist rule aligned with Moscow. [5] Even then, this forcible imposition of

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communist rule was accomplished by a merging of existing communist and socialist parties to form majority governments. [6] Put in an absolute perspective of non-bias, the formation of these governments could conceivably be called 'governments of national unity', a practice used by Western parliamentary democracies in times of crisis.

While their ideology had the semblance of legitimacy, in actuality, the practice and policies of these governments had no legitimacy. Except in Yugoslavia and Albania, the form of communism practiced in Eastern Europe was an imposed Soviet variety. [7] In the waning years of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe, the force of the need to remove the ideological constraints of communism would come into sharp focus in elections and protests in support of democracy, but the impetus behind it was economic and nationalistic, due to the need for improvement in their own Nation-States. Even then, the focus was on reform of the system by introducing democratic elements into the governments, steps that even Gorbachev would make in 1990-91. [8]

The economies of Eastern Europe were to play a key, although not determinate, role in the eventual collapse of the de facto Soviet Empire in the 1980s. The starkest measures of the effect that the economic differential that existed between those countries in Western Europe and those in Eastern Europe is in the relative Gross National Product per person. In either competing alliance, after 40+ years of imposing their respective economic system, combined Gross National Product in the Warsaw pact countries was 10.7 Billion USD, whereas in NATO countries it was 21.2 Billion USD. [9] Similarly, in the late 1980s, Warsaw pact countries owed much in debt to NATO countries from economic loans totalling over 100 Billion USD by 1988, [10] Also, the quality of life in the western countries, as opposed to those under communist rule, was consistently improving. [11] 'Equally striking was ... a rise in infant mortality and a fall in life expectancy from the early 1970s onward'. [12] Further, the countries of the Warsaw Pact could not become self sufficient in basic staples necessary for the continuation of normal life. Specifically, grain had to be imported from the United States and Canada, an embarrassment to the Soviet leadership, and one to which significant concessions had been applied. [13] By the 1980s, in the newly emerging technological and information revolution that was sweeping the west, the Warsaw Pact countries were hopelessly behind. 'It is estimated that in the early 1980s the United States held a twenty-five to one lead over the Soviet Union in the use of computers'. [14] Even East Germany in 1989, the strongest performing economy of the Warsaw pact, in terms of resources, people and infrastructure, possessed a per capita GDP that was less than half that of West Germany. [15]

The dichotomy of East vs. West in Berlin and the readily apparent difference in such a basic notion as quality of life is impossible to overestimate in terms of propaganda value as to which system of government and its economic system were superior. [16] The Berlin wall, preventing people from moving to improve their lot in life, made this even more poignant as a symbol of the development of either side. Even in Hungary, where small movements towards some measures of a free market had begun, [17] gross economic product and quality of life were still well below Western standards. This came against the background of the 1980s, which witnessed increasing eastern bloc indebtedness to the Western powers, as well as increased economic output by the West, recovering from the slow growth decade of the 1970s. Combined with a reduction in world wide oil prices, which had traditionally been a source of hard currency for the Soviet Union and thence subsidies to its East European allies, this brought into effect a confluence of increasing economic weakness in the areas under the influence of Moscow, and decreasing fiscal weakness for the West. [18] Though momentarily forgotten, due to the lean years of the 1970s, the strength of the free market was at this point coming into its own in confronting a weak and regressing Soviet system.

The failure of the Soviet style economic system is, in hindsight, readily apparent. However, while the notion that the 'West' was advancing further and further away from the Soviet sphere in the 1980's was correct, and by default the 'East' was going in reverse, it was not the economic conditions alone that would lead to the end of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe. A suppressed nationalism, ready to exert its influence, existed just below the official surface of the European Soviet Empire just as economic failure delegitimised the role of the Soviet sponsored governments. [19]

Nationalism was to be the medium through which the revolutions that would end the Soviet Empire were to emerge. The countries under the effective control of the Soviet Union during the Cold War had all previously been, and are today, free and independent Nation States, with lengthy national memories and national traditions. Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Baltic States, Bulgaria, and most notably the German Democratic Republic all had been, if not great powers in Europe, then acknowledged and accepted national entities prior to the Second World

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War. Russia and most of its constituent republics had been as well. The force of nationalism had been somewhat blunted by a 'perceived' need for protection from Germany in the aftermath of the second of two severely damaging wars [20] that encompassed Europe, but by the beginning of the 1980s the structure of European security had fundamentally changed. [21]

While the economic distresses of the Soviet domain were the most popular, the gradual relaxation of controls and the 'new thinking' proposed by Gorbachev gave long simmering ethnic tensions and national movements new vacuums to fill. [22] Also, as the state was perceived to weaken following the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the ability of the internal functions of the Soviet governments to control their own people was dramatically weakened, nationalist sentiment experienced a significant revival. [23] Crucially, the strength of these nationalist movements within the member states of the Soviet Union was underestimated to that whom it should have mattered most, Gorbachev. [24]

The Long Telegram from Moscow by George Kennan depicted nationalism as the force that would eventually break the communist system. [25] And while the initial impetus for the revolutions that would eventually end communist rule in Europe can be most easily explained away as a result of economic failure, the revolutions themselves were national in nature. They were not completely directed against Soviet rule or influence, but the failure of their own governments to provide their ends of the social contract between the nation and the state. [26] The events in Poland, which began the process, exemplify this. The beginnings of Solidarity, with its series of strikes, were directed against food price increases [27] and spread throughout Poland in 1981. Specifically in Poland, which was the most populous, most in debt, and a leader among Soviet occupied nations, the election of Pope John Paul II provided a nationally unifying figure to rally around. [28] Moreover, from a Soviet perspective, even if they had decided to use force, the loyalty of the Polish Army, officially subordinate to the Warsaw Pact command structure was now determined to be in doubt. [29] The events of the preceding years had delegitimised the Soviet model of rule, resulting in nationalist movements, not only in Poland, that had found scope for expanding their long repressed influence. [30]

Implemented by Gorbachev, the Sinatra policy, of each nation doing it its own way, cemented the nationalistic nature of the revolutions. [31] While economic growth or the lack thereof, was the catalyst for the revolution, it was shaped from a nationalist attitude, with each country doing it their way. The difficult nature of interstate travel in the Soviet system precluded any sort of mass organising across borders, as travel and two-way communications were restricted. This left action from a state-centred perspective as the only viable outlet for enforcing change in Eastern Europe, short of personal abandonment and leaving for the West.

The nature of how the individual nations enacted their sovereignty from Moscow, though similar in analogous in result, was very individualistic, lacking ideological or economic uniformity. In Poland, open elections for a portion of the seats for representation were allowed, in Hungary the focus was on complete and free elections. [32] This compares to Germany, which had been completely opposed to reform, [33] but was then swept away by the events of November 9th, 1989. That revolution wasn't 'negotiated' by any pseudo communist party, but enabled by mass flight and the tearing down of the foremost symbol of the Cold War and the first step towards reunification of Germany, the division of which had crystallised the conflict originally in the 1940s. [34] In Czechoslovakia, mass demonstrations followed the collapse of the Berlin wall and brought pressure on the government to reform. [35]

Every East European country that emerged from Soviet control during 1989-1991 reformed its method of governance to include substantial democratic and free market reforms. Could the role of a variance of ideological foundations have been more crucial to the revolutions that overtook communist Europe then? Possibly, but then the issue that brought the impulse of change to the Warsaw Pact countries was initially economic, and aimed at government reform, and not necessarily revolution. In addition, the existence of statistically notable communist parties has not yet disappeared in Europe to this day. Did the economic crisis in which Eastern Europe found itself in the late 1980s have a principal role in providing the revolutions with a cause? Probably, but reform of the economic system, the initial goal of the revolutions of 1989, was not necessarily a goal that would cause Soviet control to end. Reform of the state structure, however, could only take one form; moving away from de facto Soviet control and towards a truly independent Nation-State. What is established by history is that a nation, Poland, for a variety of internal reasons began a process focused on national reform that led to independence, which was then copied and expanded upon,

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first by Hungary, then Czechoslovakia, and finally the rest of Eastern Europe. Nationalism was not the trigger for the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Europe, but it was the instrument.

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