CHAPTER I

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK
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INTRODUCTION : TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK

The USSR ceased to exist in December 1991. The unprecedented changes that took place between 1985 and 1991 leading to the disintegration of the USSR necessitate an understanding of the process of change in the former Soviet Union. Towards this end however, it is necessary to have an analytical framework. The main purpose of this chapter is to evolve one.

The underlying basis for this framework is the recognition that Soviet society, economy and polity have been constantly changing and within which patterns of continuity and change are clearly discernible. However, it is not the contention of either this chapter or this thesis to suggest that the disintegration of the USSR was inevitable. That is a matter that needs to be dealt with separately. The task of this chapter is to show what generated change in the Soviet system.

1. For a detailed argument on these patterns see, V.S. Aiyar, "An Inquiry into the Pattern of Changes in Soviet System, since the Brezhnev Years (M.Phil dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of International Studies, New Delhi, 1991).
THE SOVIET SYSTEM

The dialectic between continuity and change was not unique to the Soviet Union. However, ever since the revolution of 1917, the pace with which the former USSR underwent sweeping changes time and time again made the task of the political scientist that much more difficult. Alfred Meyer was once constrained to observe that "there is no such thing as "The Soviet Political System", only "a succession of systems sharply differing from each other in purpose, structure and functioning". However, it cannot be denied, as Zafar Imam has pointed out, that "Continuity and change has been the main recurring theme of Soviet Society since its very inception. Indeed these two ingredients have comprised a deterministic model of development of Soviet Society." Bearing this in mind, let us then briefly delineate the well known features of the Soviet Union as it existed in 1985.

The CPSU was constitutionally recognised as the nucleus of Soviet society. The party had led an alliance of the


working class and the peasantry to overthrow the Tsarist yoke in 1917. And so the party gained the legitimacy to govern. However, the party never stated that its purpose was to govern or even to rule. As the revolution had been conducted on principles of Marxism and Leninism, the purpose of the Party was to move Soviet society towards the ultimate goal of communism, when the state would wither away.

In other words, even as the Party had come to rule the Soviet Union, it had before it a definite agenda, the fulfilment of which was its raison d'être. The main question before it however, was how best to do it? The rest of Soviet history has been a result of the attempt of the Soviet Union to answer the question.

The answer broadly came in the form of the CPSU's monopoly over the task of governance - seen by it not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. Central planning was to guide the economy to the non-exploitative state of communism. And as communism meant a whole new way of living, it called for a whole new way of thinking about the individual in society. Thus, the CPSU set about organising life in its political, economic and social spheres. And over the years its presence became all pervasive in the life of the Soviets.
All this is, of course, a very broad and general understanding of some of the rudimentary features of the Soviet Union. And these are essentially features that Gorbachev inherited when he took over as general secretary of the CPSU in 1985. For long, scholars had interpreted and tried to characterise the USSR; now Gorbachev's point was to change it. But "Scholars will debate for years to come whether Gorbachev acted as a revolutionary who knew the system had to be transformed, or as a reformer who thought it could be perfected."4 However, it soon become evident that fundamental changes were in the offing.

In order to understand the significance of the Gorbachev years, i.e. the period of 1985-1991 under study, it is necessary to know what were the different ways in which scholars had looked upon the Soviet Union and accounted for change within it. The restructuring of the USSR embarked upon by Gorbachev and the disintegration of the Union were attempted to be explained by scholars with his or her own unique approach to the study of the Soviet system. Four such approaches stand out and we shall now discuss them in an

effort to evolve our own analytical framework for the study of political change.

TOTALITARIAN APPROACH

The approach that has had the longest lineage characterise the USSR as a totalitarian state. Some of the prominent proponents of this approach have been Merle Fainsod, John Hazard, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Alfred Meyer, Martin Malia, Richard Pipes, David Wolfe etc.. In fact, there's a long list of eminent scholars who have used the totalitarian model or a variant of it to understand the Soviet system. According to this approach, the all pervasive nature of the CPSU in combination with its monopolistic role in Soviet society, polity and economy was given to over centralization and therefore, authoritarianism. The Stalinist years also proved that terror and coercion were an integral part of the state machinery. But force was not considered integral to totalitarianism. "The essence of the total state is not tyranny nor terror but the fact that the state aspires to be 'total'." And for Wolfe, the October Revolution was merely a coup d'etat led by Lenin and his cohorts. Brzezinski

went further and drew from Russian history to sustain the argument that "the central and significant reality of Russian politics has been its predominantly autocratic character."\(^6\) Thus, authoritarian, dictatorial, autocratic or totalitarian became synonyms for the Soviet state. While some scholars emphasized the links with Russian history, others emphasized the nature of communism per se. While some emphasized the relatively static nature of the Soviet system others focused on its dynamic tension. Change was considered to be an inevitable result of the dialectical tension between a modernized society and an anachronistic policy.\(^7\) Alfred Meyer, best known for describing the USSR as a "bureaucracy writ large",\(^8\) pointed out the contradictory, unclear and often unattainable characteristics of the Soviet polity’s central commands and the bureaucratic hurdles that made transforming national party goals into workable policies difficult. And just as he spoke of the system’s propensity to change, John Hazard stressed the resilience of the system.

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suggesting that if there were to be substantial change in the polity as a whole, then it must come in a few vital areas or "peril points".9

This is by no means an exhaustive discussion of the totalitarian approach, but it is meant to be illustrative of its scope and range. And despite the passage of years, this model continues to find favour among scholars. While the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years questioned the credibility of this approach, the Gorbachev years seem to have lent credence to it. Two of the most recent works in this field are that of Martin Malia's and Richard Pipes'.10 Malia in fact, unabashedly repeats the charge that Wolfe had made about the 1917 revolution being essentially a coup d'etat, while Pipes falls back on Russian history to show that democracy and Russia are relatively incompatible though autocracy and Russia are not. While disintegration for Malia was but an obvious and inevitable step as the Communist agenda was for him merely a cloak for a naked power struggle, for Pipes, the disintegration of the USSR was a result of the Bolsheviks


having taken the wrong turn in history. Pipes' point is not entirely new. Jerry Hough had suggested that not only was the Bolshevik revolution an "unnatural break" in Russian's attempt to modernize, but Gorbachev too is best understood as a return of Russia to its natural path of modernity - a development concomitant with its socio-economic growth over the past fifty years. 11

The totalitarian approach had some obvious flaws. It insufficiently explained changes that had taken place over a period of time. The point was made by Lewin.

If the Soviet institutions are so inert, how could Gorbachev have risen to power in the first place? Or, for that matter, how did Khrushchev, a product par excellence, manage to inaugurate so many momentous changes? The only way one can explain how and why quite powerful reformist thrusts have repeatedly appeared inside supposedly immutable Soviet institutions is by acknowledging that over decades many changes and transformations have occurred and accumulated within the system. 12

Moreover, the argument of 1917 being a Bolshevik coup d'etat pales when one wonders why the masses thwarted the earlier coup by Kornilov, and not that of Lénin and

Trotsky?\textsuperscript{13} John Reed\textsuperscript{14} has chronicled a wave of mass demonstrations that show that 1917 was an initiative from below. Further, this approach was blind to change taking place in society, concentrating mainly on Soviet institutions and leadership. For instance, it is totally silent on the problem of nationalities in the Soviet Union. The general attitude is that a nation long suppressed one day had to break free.

**HISTORY, ETHNICITY & NATIONALISM**

Another approach that comes very close to totalitarianism is one that views the Soviet experience as deriving purely from immutable historical tendencies. Let us sample a few such attempts to understand the former USSR. The main thrust of these arguments is that Russian history ensured the failure of *perestroika* through a resurgence of ethnic differences among nationalities that had matured over time. The latent nationalities problem them became manifest with the introduction of *glasnost*.

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14. John Reed, Ten Days that Shook the World (Moscow, 1923).
}
A very systematic study of the role of tsarist history on the former USSR can be found in Maksudov and Taubman's work. According to them, both the tsarist and the Soviet "empires" rested on three main pillars. Under the tsars, these pillars were orthodoxy, autocracy, and narodnost (national spirit). During the Soviet period, the pillars were ideology, dictatorship and nationalism. "... each [pillar] supplemented those that preceded it, at first reinforcing the empire, but ultimately weakening it when the nationalist pillar began to work at cross purposes with the others." Mandelbaum clearly ascribes the destruction of the first two pillars, that is ideology and dictatorship, to glasnost and democratization.

It is a valid question to ask why the nationalities problem surfaced so virulently only in Gorbachev's time. The convenient and easy answer is to point out the only distinctly new element in the old matrix of things namely, glasnost and democratization. The more difficult and fundamental question


16. ibid, p.16.

17. Michael Mandelbaum, "Introduction", in Mandelbaum, n.15, p.5.
to ask, however, is, why was glasnost and decentralization introduced then and not earlier? And that is a question that Maksudov and Taubman don’t answer. We will return to answer this question later.

The striking feature of Mandelbaum’s book is however, in its sub-title and its prognosis. The book was put together in early 1991, before the coup in August. Yet the sub-title is: *American Foreign Policy & the Disintegration of the USSR.* 18 And the book doesn’t stop at the title.

...the disintegration of the Soviet state... will pose...questions of policy for the US and the West: which claims to independence to support and what steps to take to protect the rights of minorities that are bound to be frustrated by whatever political arrangements emerge from the Soviet Union. 19

And the prognosis is explained suggesting that a "unified" USSR was now "no longer a real option." Even if force was exercised by the state it would not prevent a "bloody break up of the USSR...[as] force itself will bring on the very civil war it is supposed to prevent." 20 And then, leaving absolutely no room to doubt their true intentions, Maksudov and Taubman claim:

18. Mandelbaum, n.15.
If a viable, stable, postcommunist Soviet Union is ever to exist, we believe that the republic governments will have to reconstitute it voluntarily. If we are right, then a concern with stability, as well as with national self determination, suggests that the west reach out to support and influence all the peoples of the former Soviet empire, Russians and non-Russians alike.21

The book was, of course, brought out by a non-governmental agency, a think tank that nevertheless advises the US government, as it did above, in important policy matters.

The shocking thing about the above observations was that the authors, who are eminent scholars from Harvard University, attempted to give an intellectual justification for what must constitute a blatant and open US intervention in the domestic domain of the former USSR. And perhaps to appease their own conscience, in a line sneaked into the middle of all the policy advise meted out, they did admit that all the inevitability posited by their "pillars of History" was more posturing, for the real issue was "the economic crisis that underlies much of the ethnic unrest."22 So much for their theorising about the continuities in Russian traditions.


22. ibid
However, there has been serious scholarship on the question of nationalities in the USSR. The approach has been one of constitutional federalism or ethnicity. Some of the prominent scholars have been Gregory Gleason, Nadia Diuk and Adrian Karatnycky, Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, Helene Carrere d'Encausse, Stephen Carter, Hajda and Beissingger and Ronald Grigor Suny. While it is not possible to discuss all their contributions, it is instructive to focus attention on R.G. Suny, for his approach contributes significantly in evolving our own analytical framework.

The significant departure in Suny's nationalist argument is that nations are "imagined communities"; the product of historical processes, and the languages and discourses of nationalism, rather than being "natural", eternal or primordial identities. And while Suny clearly delineates the problem in all its aspects, namely, Russian nationalism, republican autonomy and inter-ethnic conflict between nationality groups, he does not claim that the unresolved nationalities problem alone generated change in the Soviet system and led to its demise. He was, in fact, only acutely aware of how "The final outcome was contingent on a host of

other factors", though he knew that "none of these powerful forces necessarily led to an inevitable collapse of the system and the disintegration of the Union".²⁴ And in listing these factors he was aware that they "could have gone differently."

Systemically, he identifies secular decline, the programme of radical change brought on by Gorbachev, petrification of Soviet institutions, corruption in society and nationalism, as factors that weakened the system. But he's clear that the collapse of the Union was contingent on other factors, such as:

...the choice to embark on political and economic reform simultaneously; Gorbachev's inability (or unwillingness) to use the power he had to control opposition within the party, society, and the non-Russian republics at an early stage; the determination of many political actors, particularly the ---intelligentsia, to strike out for even more radical change; and finally, of course, the fateful decision by conservative Communists to launch a coup against Gorbachev.²⁵

In Suny's analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union the distinctive feature is the recognition of the occurrence of multiple processes of historical phenomenon, simultaneously. And this point is the starting point of his analysis (in fact, in the preface) not the point at which the analysis arrives. According to Suny, the Soviet system had

²⁴. ibid, p.159.
²⁵. ibid
been overwhelmed by "three simultaneous revolutionary processes": "marketization", which led to the collapse of the command economy without an alternative in place; "democratization" which undermined all forms of authority, particularly that of the political centre; and "decolonization", which led to the fragmentation of the Union itself and the devolution of power to the republics. It is this multiple process approach that we shall return to after taking a look at two more vital approaches to the study of the Soviet system and change within it.

POLITICAL CULTURE, CIVIL SOCIETY & THE ECONOMY

One of the most popular approaches to the study of the Soviet system has been to view it from the prism of political culture and seek in the system the epistemology of a civil society. Though the lineage of this approach is far more recent, it has the most appeal among scholars. And so within this approach one can distinguish various shades. Its broad sweep has also attempted to subsume other approaches to the study of the Soviet system. One of the reasons for this is the close association of the political culture approach to

26. ibid, p.xv.
historical thinking. For our purposes, we could start with Robert C. Tucker's understanding of political culture. 27

A political culture is a society's complex of real and ideal culture patterns, the former comprising the accepted ways of political action (such as voting in competitive elections in a democracy) and the latter comprising the accepted ways of political belief, i.e. the norms or values (such as the belief that citizens should vote in elections even though few, in this or that society, may do so). It can happen that certain patterns of political culture persist or revive after a revolutionary transition to another socio-political system. 28

Or to go by what Jeffrey Hahn says, "political culture is an important intervening variable between economic development and the development of democratic institutions." 29 And Hahn goes on to neatly show how the political culture approach has had adherents who believe that there is far more historical continuity than change in the way Russians think about politics, and those who believe otherwise. But the interesting feature of Hahn's work is that he concludes in favour of

27. For a discussion on the relations between civil society and the state in political theory see, Neera Chandhoke, State & Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory (New Delhi, 1995).


change rather than cultural continuity, and this study is the result of a case study of the Russian city of Yaroslavl, nearly a year before even the coup of August 1991. We shall return to this theme of continuity versus change later.

Some of the scholars involved in this approach have been Frederick Barghoorn, Stephen White, Robert Tucker, Archie Brown, Gabriel Almond, Mary McAuley, Frederick Starr, Gail Lapidus, Jerry Hough, Moshe Lewin and others. Undoubtedly, the most exhaustive treatment of the subject has come from the pen of Stephen White. And like Hahn, White has concentrated on distinguishing features of Russian political culture. Most scholars have taken this lead, as Russian political culture is seen as the dominant culture of the region.

Apart from the theme of continuity and change the political culture approach also deals with the emergence of civil society in the former USSR. Therefore the work of scholars can also be sifted further into those who suggest explicitly that the political culture in the USSR helped a civil society to grow and those who dispute it. A civil society is further understood as one having "civic culture", seen as essential for democracy. Very closely associated

with this theme is also the approach that some scholars like Mary Buckley have taken, that focuses on the impact of *glasnost* on the Soviet system. And towards this end, Soviet media and literature have been treated as barometers of change in the system. The economy too has been examined for the impact of *glasnost*, as for instance, Alec Nove has. In a sense, therefore, the searchlight of political culture has been trained by scholars at Soviet history, society, economy and, of course, Soviet polity. Stephen White, for instance, becomes understandable as one who is pro the continuity theme in Soviet politics and against "civic culture" (and therefore against the "emergence of civil society").

According to White, the absence of institutions or weakly developed ones for communicating popular demands, a highly centralized and largely unlimited autocracy and a highly personalized relationship between the autocrat and the vast majority of the population, were the main impediments to transforming the Soviet Union even on the lines desired by Gorbachev. The same "weak and ossified institutional


development" argument is found in other works, even though they have not explicitly adopted the political culture approach. Brzezinski, for instance, argued that Soviet political culture combines the features of modern totalitarianism and traditional autocracy.\(^{34}\) And carrying the theme forward he predicted in an another and more recent work that Gorbachev's reforms will be frustrated as "Russian history and Soviet reality will conspire against restructuring".\(^{35}\) He could only see more stagnation, a possible coup or fragmentation as the end result of all the reforms. In hindsight, though one may disagree with Brzezinski's analysis, it is unnerving to note that he could accurately predict the future.

The principal argument for supporting the idea of change rather than continuity from Russian history and tradition comes from the logic of industrial modernism. The particular variant of this logic applied to the Soviet Union starts with characterising the Soviet Union as an authoritarian state, much like in the totalitarian approach. But unlike the logic for change in the latter stemming from a need to balance

34. Brzezinski, n.6.

modernized society with an outdated polity, here, under industrial modernism the economy demands and forces change, much like the "base" determining the superstructure" logic of historical materialism. As W. W. Rostow put it, communism becomes merely a "disease of the transition" to industrialism and is not likely to survive the age of "high mass consumption". 36 This was a kind of economic determinism that suggested a convergence (ultimately) of capitalist and socialist systems. But as Brzezinski and Huntington 37 pointed out in the 60's, on closer examination all convergence theories of capitalist and socialist systems are in essence theories of submergence and not convergence at all. By the capitalist system acquiring greater socialist content and vice-versa, what is achieved is in essence the submergence of one in the other. This inevitably suggests a revolutionary transformation in either systems.

The point however was that be it the onward and relentless march of the economy or technology, or the increasingly antiquated nature of Soviet polity i.e. the push of political repression or the pull of economic modernism,


change was imminent and would bring with it invariable consequences for the political culture of the Soviet Union. What was becoming increasingly evident was that changes towards economic decentralization would naturally tend towards political liberalism. Similarly, fundamental social changes would inevitably force the hand of the leadership towards economic liberalism. Thus, the political culture approach tended to see an intimate link between political and economic change. While, Holt and Turner, for instance, argued that the "demands of a mature industrial order" would generate change because of its "incompatibility" with "the classical Stalinist dictatorship", 38 Frederick Starr suggested that "economic stagnation, like its kin, corruption" occurred because "the system failed to adjust to the emerging value of the populace", especially its best educated and technically most competent elements. 39 Starr credits forces of modernization for the development of a civil society in the Soviet Union, such as urbanization, the vast expansion of the Soviet educational system and the proliferation (despite government


efforts to curb them) of methods by which citizens could communicate with each other.

Indeed, even Soviet scholars have analysed their society through the prism of political culture. In fact, Tatyana Zaslavskaya’s insightful analysis of the "historical preconditions for the transformation of Soviet society" that made restructuring "essential", pointed to a very similar set of developments linking political and economic change. According to her, gradual changes in the quality of people engaged in social production, indirectly prepared the ground for social restructuring. These changes principally amounted to greater awareness among the people of their legal rights, together with an independent and critical quality of opinion, even as their working and intellectual potential grew. And these changes were credited by her to fundamental processes like the rising level of education, increased social, professional and regional mobility, rapid urbanization and a mass communicating network that put a citizen in the remotest area in touch with the world. While this part of


41. ibid, p.50. Starr’s analysis on the growth of civil society in the USSR was written at least a year before Zaslavskaya’s.
Zaslavskaya's analysis fits in well with those of Starr, she made two other points on the "objective preconditions necessitating perestroika". Firstly, the development of the material and technological basis of production created the need for professional "planning and finance officers" to manage the "ever growing structural complexity of the economy and the increasing interdependency of its linkages". 42

This also meant an increasingly complex system of external control over work quality due to the growing specialization and spatial division of labour in both agriculture and industry, resulting in an expensive, unwieldy and ineffective bureaucratic system of control. 43 And secondly, a gradual lessening of economic pressure on workers to work intensively and efficiently, emboldened by large number of job-vacancies due to a labour shortage and an unequal and irrational wage system that robbed the worker of the incentive to do intensive and skilled work, prompting him to adopt strategies regarding employment and earning which were very often not in the interests of society as a whole. 44

42. ibid, pp.47-48.
43. ibid, pp.48-49.
44. ibid, pp.51 ff.
The point here is that the political culture approach was applied to economic spheres by going beyond the economic crisis in the Soviet system and locating the problem in the human sphere. Even dissident Soviet economists like Shmelev and Popov, while identifying the "built in" defects in the Soviet economy recognise that as "perestroika is also a political process...Unless we change the current political structure, which rests on a bureaucratic pyramid, economic transformations will only be well intentioned wishes."\(^45\)

The above presentation of the political culture approach has been deliberately selective to cover the range of ideas on change in the Soviet system that have a direct bearing on the framework we are interested in evolving. Towards this end we need to take a look at one more approach to the study of political change in the USSR.

**FATALLY FLAWED COMMUNISM**

The most intriguing aspect of the disintegration of the USSR that compels a scholar to look for a systemic analysis for political change, is the near exultation of Western scholars in equating the disintegration of the USSR with the


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death of communism. The dissipated Soviet Union was not only the largest country in the world that had rivalled the US in formidable military power and played a pivotal role in international politics for nearly three quarters of a century, it had also "sought to blaze a trail by its endeavour to translate an ideal into reality". And so, the incredible temptation for Western scholars is to show up the USSR as an example of the failure of communism. Indeed, they go further and show that communism *per se* or as practised in the Soviet Union would inevitably fail because of its inherent weaknesses.

Broadly, the approach that focuses attention on the theoretical flaws of communism presumes that the Soviet Union was its faithful practitioner. And why not, considering that is what the Soviets too officially claimed. And even if they were not, they at least officially intended to be one. While the explanations given for the Soviet Union's dimise are sought in the fatal flaws inherent in communism as an institutional design of political economy, the same have been woefully inadequate in explaining the course of the communist movement in other parts of the world. Without going into a

detailed discourse on the rise and fall of the world communist movement, we will focus on specifically the charges levelled against communism as professed by the Soviet leadership. These charges were either levelled against the Leninist contribution of the role of the communist party as the vanguard of the proletariat, or central planning as the core of a socialist economy or the utopian or idealist goal of communism.

The role played by the CPSU was the butt of scholarly attack in a number of different approaches to the study of the Soviet system. We have already seen how in the totalitarian model the party's all pervasive role was characterised as a dictatorship. Turner, for instance, attributes this to the "proletarian myth" embedded in Marxist-Leninist philosophy. "According to this belief, 'truth' resides in the working class, which is destined to inherit the earth and to rule in the new social order".47 And as the proletariat requires effective leadership to realize its destiny, the communist party filled the role, which because of its task of revolution, could not be democratic in its structure. Such a view is attributed to Lenin, who felt that opposition and factionalism within the party could weaken the solidarity of

the movement. And Stalin is often cited as a prime example of Leninist traditions as he declared: "The Party represents the unity of will, which precludes all factionalism and division of authority in the Party". The idea was to develop an inexorable logic to the argument against communism, as practised in the USSR, by pointing out the fundamental contradictions of Leninism that reduced revolution to a coup d'état and socialism to a dictatorship, that is anti-people in essence. This is a largely Western view that forms the basis of not only the totalitarian approach but also that of political culture. The number of scholars who start their analysis at this point are too numerous to list. Suffice it to say that there is not one Western scholar who would agree with Lenin on the role of a communist party:

Naturally, the exploiters [capitalists] are unable to suppress the people without a highly complex machine [the state] for performing this task ["extension of democracy to an overwhelming majority of the population"], but the people can suppress the exploiters even with a very simple

48. ibid, pp.6-8.

49. Josef Stalin, Problems of Leninism (Moscow, 1945), p.90. However, what is often missed is what Stalin said before that. "On the contrary, iron discipline does not preclude but presupposes criticism and contest of opinion within the Party. Least of all does it mean that discipline must be 'blind'". ibid, p.89. But once a decision was taken then the iron law of discipline was to work, which in itself is quite comparable to a "whip" issued by parties in other countries, and is in itself not dictatorial. It is however, in practice that the procedure was violated by Stalin brutally.
"machine", almost without a "machine", without a special apparatus, by the simple organisation of the armed people (such as the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, we would remark, running ahead).  

Similarly, central planning was attacked by scholars as a fatally flawed system of managing the economy. The soundest critique of central planning however, came from Soviet scholars and Gorbachev himself. In his first reference to his policy made in a speech before he became general secretary of the CPSU, Gorbachev bluntly suggested that the country was economically illiterate, and needed to make use of concepts of "price, profit, credit" - all new terms then, and identified the "main task" to be "to find methods for significantly increasing the rights and economic independence of enterprises while simultaneously strengthening their responsibility for the final product." 51 This speech contained much of the meat for his later policy of perestroika.

Soviet economists further spelt the problem out. Amongst some of the most noted analyses of the economics of the creeping crisis in the Soviet Union, Abel Aganbegyan has been quite accurate and forthright. He spoke of shortages that

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plagued the Soviet economy and said, "If the material allocation system is to be abolished only after shortages have been overcome then it will be necessary to wait for ever since the allocation system itself generates and reproduces shortage." Central planning, the key to the functioning of the Soviet economy, was identified as the culprit. This point found favour even with Soviet economists not favoured by the Soviet government, as pointed out earlier, Shmelev and Popov had identified "the monopoly of producers with the consequent perennial shortages" as one of the "central built-in defects" of the Soviet economy. The same view was held also by the most celebrated socialist economist in Eastern Europe, Janos Kornai, a Hungarian. Kornai located the problem in what he calls the "soft budget constraint" of central planning. According to him, this manifests itself when monopolistic enterprises increase prices to offset income shortfalls; when state subsidies bail out wasteful enterprises; when an infinitely flexible tax system sets off a chain of bankruptcy even when only one enterprise goes bust, in the absence of


53. Shmelev and Popov, n.45, p.xvi.

legal protection to suppliers.\textsuperscript{55} Kornai calls them "special system-specific conflicts in the socialist economy."\textsuperscript{56} The emphasis was clearly on identifying a systemic problem. Polish economists Brus and Laski argue the same point while identifying "systemic failure", not "policy errors", in locating the roots of the crisis in the Marx-inspired economic system.\textsuperscript{57} And to bring the argument right up to date is the post-Soviet work of Ellman and Kontorovich, which suggests that the collapse of the Union was a result of systemic failure engendered by Gorbachev's reforms that had removed the system's driving force i.e. pressure from above. The collapse was thus a "contingent" phenomenon which resulted from the interaction of the system, the economic policies pursued and the domestic and international environment in which it found itself.\textsuperscript{58}

Thus, the essence of such economic analyses of the USSR lay in identifying a "systemic" crisis. While Soviet and East

\textsuperscript{55.} Kornai's views can also be found in Road to a Free Economy (New York, 1990).

\textsuperscript{56.} Janos Kornai, Contradictions and Dilemmas Ilona Lukacs & Others, trans., Andras Nagy Jr & Others, eds. (Gyomaendrod, Hungary, 1985), p.3.


European scholars still favouring a socialist economy tended to go beyond the systemic economic crisis and look for a deeper cause "in the power structure of society and the form of ownership and institutional system in it", Western scholars saw in it the seeds of its own destruction. In short, they argued that if the Soviet economy, rapidly increasing in complexity, was to achieve the efficiency necessary for continuing rapid economic growth, certain characteristics of the market would inevitably have to be introduced. It is this attempt of both Soviet and non-Soviet scholars to identify a systemic crisis in the economic sphere that leads Western scholars to exult over the failure of the Socialist system of economic development and (strangely) therefore the success of the capitalist one.

From here it is just a tempting step away to also see a paradox in the utopian and idealistic goal of communism.

Jerome Gilison’s work of the 70’s directly addressed the issue.  

59. Kornai, n.55. Also known as "investment hunger"; see Kornai, n.54, vol. A, ch. 9.2.

60. For instance, see Francis M.Boddy, "Soviet Economic Growth", in Holt and Turner, n.38, pp.62-89.

The goal of building communism is a paradox for the Soviet regime. In the short run it can restore lost enthusiasm for the many immediate chores the regime sets before its people. Yet the regime pays a price: it has borrowed the people's energies, but it must repay with a finished, indeed perfect, product in the foreseeable future. If the delivery is postponed, or if the product is delivered in unfinished condition, the regime in the long run will have contributed to the demoralization of the people.62

Gilison's work is an ideal example of this approach to the study of change in the USSR, i.e. one generated by the "paradox" of building communism. Although Marxist-Leninists abhor the use of the term Utopia and pride themselves on the "scientific" basis of their precept, Gilison felt that there was much in common in practice with Utopianism. And from this "paradox", Gilison drew number of conclusions which showed the inevitable crisis that the Soviet system must end up in. He argued that by incorporating the Utopian premise into its legitimizing doctrine, i.e. CPSU as "vanguard", the "Soviet party-state" had accepted a standard of perfection against which its "present" performance could be judged.63 This meant that any loss of Utopian legitimacy would be a threat to the party's legitimate monopoly of power. This would in turn throw

62. ibid, pp.16-17.
63. ibid, pp. 52 ff.
open a window of opportunity to Soviet society. "Ironically, the loss of utopian idealism could lead to a liberalization of Soviet society". 64

Gilison's conclusions are not radically different from those of other scholars, but the approach is more intellectual. The obvious weakness in his effort, which he admits in his book, is the lack of empirical information. 65

The point that Gilison raised, however, was quite relevant. The goal of communism may have been a desirable one, but did the "forced march" through transition to communism, engendered by Lenin's "premature" revolution, contain within it the seeds of its own ultimate destruction? We shall return to this question shortly.

And finally, there have been attempts to discredit communism as an illogical and unattainable goal, destined to destruction as this institutional model of political economy tends to overreach itself. An example of such an attempt is that of the Chinese scholar, Gang Ke. 66 In what he refers to

64. ibid, p.54.
65. ibid, p.18.
as the "institutional principle of fusion", Gang Ke subsumes the attempts to identify fatal flaws in all three areas associated with communism a practised in the former USSR, namely, the party system, central planning and the paradox of communism as a goal. According to him,

What sets apart state socialism (...as practised in the former Soviet Union and China) from other politico-economic systems lies in its unique symbiosis of the state with society and the economy. As a result of this fusion, both politics and economics lose the distinctive features characteristic of a well-ordered society. This fusion principle determines the political and economic logic of state socialism. It is precisely this all encompassing principle of the institutional design that leads to the demise of communist society.67

And in a schematic exposition of this "fatal institutional design" he characterises state socialism by the following three formulas of inequality:

(a) the communist party &gt; the state
(b) the state &gt; the civil society
(c) the civil society &gt; the individual.68

All these three relations of inequality highlight a fundamental systemic problem. According to Gang Ke, this is

67. ibid, pp.463-4.
68. ibid, p.464.
the "functional perversion" of the social system: "the institutional design of the positive state and the negative economy." In a "well-ordered society" the state would play a restraining role on the individual, unlike the "parenting" role played by the state in telling people what they ought to do in state socialism. In the former the state thus plays a negative role, while in the latter it plays a positive role. Similarly, in a "well-ordered society" the economy is driven forward by a sense of real personal incentive felt by the individual, unlike the "depersonalized" economy of state socialism owing to the indivisibility of state ownership of the means of production and the bureaucratic structure of the economy. Again, in the former, the economy is positive, while in the latter the economy is negative. "This perversion explains the incurable social pathology characteristic of the communist institution, the over-efficient political movement coupled with the over-deficient economic performance."  

These are the contradictions in the construction of a communist society that, according to scholars, generated change in the system. It is now time for us to spell out the lessons we have learnt in discussing various approaches to the

69. ibid, pp.470-2.
70. ibid, pp.471-2. Emphasis added.
study of the USSR, in an effort to construct our own approach. While a detailed discussion of all approaches to the study of the soviet system has been avoided and can be found elsewhere, a selective discussion of four broad approaches has been presented. This selection was made on the basis of four basic themes that form the backbone of our framework of analysis.

Let us now look at these themes.

THE FRAMEWORK

These four basic themes are:

(1) continuity versus change

(2) relation between politics and economics in the Soviet Union

(3) simultaneity of multiple, distinct processes

and

(4) recurrence of a gap between Soviet "theory" and practice.

Let us deal with them in turn.

71. For an excellent methodological discussion of various approaches to date from the Western perspective, see Fleron Jr. and Hoffmann, n.28. Some of the classical texts of some these approaches have been deliberately left out, e.g. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York, 1951,1966) or Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy (Cambridge, MA, 1956,1965). But these can be found in contributions to the Fleron Jr & Hoffmann compendium. The references of works of authors cited under each approach in this chapter can be found in the bibliography.
Continuity vs Change

The arguments posited in the first three approaches discussed in this chapter, namely, totalitarian, historical and political culture, dealt with the dialectic of continuity and change in the Soviet system from different angles. What emerged was that while the totalitarian argument in favour of continuity proved inadequate, the historical and political culture approach was overwhelmingly in favour of change. Continuities in Russian tradition got only qualified support from them. "Contingent" factors were identified by Suny, for instance, along with the recognition of "multiple processes" at work in addition to factors of continuity from Russian history. The emphasis however, has been on the potential of the Soviet system to change rather than remain impervious.

In our framework, therefore, one of the basic tenets will be the premise that the Soviet system emphasized change rather than continuity in its growth and development. The factors that helped it to change stemmed from the very party that was seen as the nerve centre of totalitarianism, by the compulsions of Russian history as manifest in the diverse nationalities in the former USSR, the development of civil

72. Suny, n.23.
society, the paradoxes of building communism and the simultaneity of some or all of these processes at various points in time.

**Politics and Economics**

The relation between the Soviet economy and polity is one of the keys to understanding change in the former Soviet Union. This theme starkly emerges as a point of confluence of all the four approaches analysed so far. The success and failure of Gorbachev's reforms and indeed the future of the Soviet Union depended on it. Soviet scholars were keenly aware of it. "The principal means and resources for the improvement of the economic situation of the USSR which should be unleashed by Perestroika are, of course, domestic ones and these lie mainly in the sphere of politics, rather than in the economic sphere." The implications of this made one wonder about the future of the USSR. The Defence Minister of Norway voiced these concerns in 1989.

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73. Oleg T. Bogomolov, "The Origins of Change in the Soviet Union", *Adelphi Papers* (London), no.247, (1989-90), p.27. These are the papers of the 31st Annual Conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, held in Oslo between September and October 1989. The conference involving the government of Norway too, was on the strategic implications of change in the Soviet Union. Bogomolov was then the Director of the Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Moscow.
A basic question confronting the Soviet reformers is the relation between economic reforms and political change. Is it possible to reform the economy in the necessary direction within the framework of a Leninist political structure? ... The Soviet parliament has become to some extent a means of outflanking the apparatchiki. However, the history of parliamentary government suggests that parliaments tend to appropriate power rather than perform within established limits. The new Soviet parliament could evolve into a threat to the monopoly position of the communist Party.  

However, even before the new Soviet parliament had taken root, scholars had pointed out the lack of understanding within the Soviet Union itself on the relationship between their economy and polity. "The neglected and misunderstood interconnection of the system’s basic spheres - the relationship between economics and politics, for example - was to become the hub of the Soviet predicament." And sure enough, it was soon seen as a "latent threat to perestroika" as the "process of democratization of economic and social life [was seen] lagging behind the developing political consciousness of the nation." In essence, therefore, it was this seemingly inverse relation of Soviet economics to Soviet


75. Lewin, n.7, p.ix. Though the book was published in 1988, the manuscript was ready in February 1987 itself!

76. Bogomolov, n.73, p.22. Emphasis added.
politics that seemed to determine the course of development of Soviet society and the pace of change.

In our framework, this inverse relation will be a key parameter in measuring the potential of the Soviet system to change. So now we are armed with a perspective; namely, the emphasis on change rather than continuity in the Soviet Union; and a barometer to measure the potential to change, namely, the inverse relation between economics and politics in the former USSR.

Multiple, Distinct Processes

As we have seen in the four approaches examined in this chapter to study change in the former USSR, no one theory explains all the causes and consequences of the years of perestroika. Deudeney and Ikenberry dealt with this question in detail while examining ten theories that attempt to explain the USSR after 1985, in the light of general patterns not unique to the former Soviet Union. 77

Their observation that the inadequacy of these theories stems from the "irreducible plural nature of the phenomena",

is shared by others too.\textsuperscript{78} Paradoxically, they claim, the weaknesses or inadequacies of each of the theories only show that the events analysed are "conjunctional: the outcome of multiple, distinct processes."\textsuperscript{79}

The main thrust of this point is to avoid trying to isolate any single factor as the ultimate cause of change and later, disintegration. Similarly, one also needs to avoid categorizing factors into mutually exclusive groups of causes and consequences. For instance, arguments that hold the multinational character of the Soviet state to be the "primary" cause of the disintegration of the USSR are to be avoided as woefully inadequate. Similarly, all teleological arguments and deterministic models are to be avoided for the same reason. Any argument or analysis favouring the idea of the "inevitable disintegration" of the USSR is therefore to be avoided.

Thus, in our analysis of change in the Soviet Union we will move from event to event by identifying the points of confluence of multiple, distinct processes. For it is when multiple, distinct processes occur simultaneously that one can fully discern the shift or transformation in the system. So,

\textsuperscript{78} For instance Suny, n.23. Also known as contingent factors in Ellman and Kontorovich, n.58.

\textsuperscript{79} Deudney and Ikenberry, n.77. Emphasis in the original.
in addition to a perspective, a barometer for measuring the potential of change, we have now armed ourself with a searchlight, that will help us focus our attention on only the relevant course of events in the former USSR, of the period, 1985-1991.

**Gap Between Theory and Practice**

Finally, the last and perhaps, the most crucial theme of our analytical framework, indeed its bulwark, is the recognition and understanding of the role of the gap between Soviet "theory" and practice in generating change in the Soviet system. This is a point that is latent in the totalitarian approach, where change was said to be the result of the dynamic tension between a modernising economy and an antiquated polity. It is manifest in the historical approach, where change was posited as a conflict between a powerful centre and weak and suppressed, though constitutionally sovereign, republics i.e., the unresolved nationalities problem. What was promised in the constitution was not practised. What was promised as the dictatorship of the proletariat degenerated to merely being the dictatorship of the party and finally, one man. "During Lenin's time, a theory
of government by the working class became in practice rule by the Communist Party.80

In the political culture approach, the gap between theory and practice was again the basis for much of the felt Soviet need to reform the system. The boldest declamation of this crisis is best heard from Gorbachev himself, who gave the term Formalism to the gap between Soviet theory and practice.

The essence of formalism is incompetence, indifference and the substitution of a bureaucratic approach for a party political approach: importance is attached not to getting things done but to looking good . . . But the Party has always followed an immutable Bolshevik principle: Judge people by their deeds, not words, and judge work by results, not by, "measures" adopted.81

And finally in the approach identifying the paradoxes of communism the gap between theory and practice was at its manifest best where change was sought to be seen as a result of setting society an unattainable goal and forcibly mashing towards it at great cost. Whether the goal is unattainable or not, there was a great need felt by the party to establish


the "correctness" of its thinking and acting. "The first task of every party of the future is to convince the majority of the people that its programme and tactics are correct," said Lenin.82 It is this "programme and tactics" decided by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that was referred to in Soviet writings, speeches of leaders, government documents and indeed, Soviet society at large as Soviet "theory". And any doubts regarding the "correctness" of the party was laid to rest by Trotsky's pronouncement. "The Party in the last resort is always right... One can only be right with the party and through the party since there is no other way for correctness to be expressed."83

Thus, in all four approaches discussed in this chapter the overarching phenomena not only common to approaches discussed here but also intertwining the other three basic themes of our analytical framework, is the phenomena of a gap between Soviet theory and practice. The important point to remember is that we are concerned with only the Soviet view of the gap between "theory" and practice. After all, the establishment of the Soviet state was a result of their world-

view and their attempts to reform it is a result of their sense of inadequacy. And it is this that we must be concerned with.

The Marxist and indeed, Soviet view can be expressed in the words of Barry Smart:

Alongside an emphasis on social and political practice as some sort of "mechanism of verification" we [will] also find that the question of the theory-practice relationship within Marxism has remained both ambiguous and problematical, although a tendency to accord priority to the political dimension, to political practice has remained a consistent feature of Marxist discourse. 84

CONCLUSION

Having said all this, we are now ready to adumbrate the broad framework of analysis that will be applied by us in the rest of this study. Essentially, the dominant and mainly Western view has been to see the development of Soviet society through the prism of modernity. 85 However, we have not assumed any functional dichotomy between socialism and modernity. On the contrary we assume that the very meanings of socialism and modernity are entwined closely in Leninism.


85. What we referred to earlier as "industrial modernism" under the political culture approach.
Several studies interpret the evolution of the Soviet system in terms of the tension between the conflicting imperatives of utopia and development, and trace the gradual erosion of initial commitments to a classless, egalitarian and democratic society in the face of pressures for systematic adaptation to the functional requisites of modernization. But this approach, we believe, obscures more than it clarifies as it ignores the Leninist understanding of modernization. As Lapidus said, perhaps, "the crucial problems in the development of the Soviet system involve[d] less the conflict between socialism and modernity than conflicting elements in the definition of both." 86

Thus, according to the perspective of our framework the former USSR favoured change rather than continuity of either Russian traditions or immutable Soviet institutions. The barometer of measuring the potential to change at a particular place is provided for in our framework in its understanding of the inverse relation between Soviet economy and polity. The searchlight of the simultaneity of multiple, distinct processes will be applied by our framework to identify points of major confluence of historical phenomena which, as will be

shown, will be the milestones in the process of change that was at work in the former USSR. Finally, the overarching principle in our framework that strings its perspective, barometer and searchlight into a meaningful whole and allows us to make sense of and discern the various strands of historical phenomena, is the gap between Soviet "theory" and practice.

In the next chapter we shall analyse the first two years of the Gorbachev era, i.e. 1985 and 1986, within the framework delineated here. We will see whether there were greater continuities or change; we will ascertain in which direction was the inverse relation between the Soviet economy and polityy moving; we will identify the multiple, distinct processes of change at work and will then check the health of the engine of change, namely, the nature of the gap between theory and practice.

Let us now go back in time and enter the USSR in those heady days when Gorbachev took over as the youngest ever general secretary of the CPSU, bringing with him fresh blood, zeal and hope. Let us in our own little way attempt to participate in what was undoubtedly a turning point in human civilization.