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The Soviet Cauldron

25 April 1991

1. Economic crisis, independence aspirations, and anti-Communist forces are breaking down the Soviet empire and system of governance:

- Boris Yel'tsin has become the archfoe of the old order and has a good prospect of becoming the first popularly elected leader of Russia in history, acquiring the legitimacy that comes with such a mandate.
- In the Ukraine, the union's second largest republic with 50 million inhabitants, the drive for sovereignty is picking up speed.
- Belorussian authorities have recognized and begun negotiations with the strike committee that is opposed to continued rule by the republic's own Communist Party as well as the Kremlin.
- The Baltic republics are using the uneasy calm between themselves and the Kremlin to solidify new institutions and the support of nonnative populations, primarily Russians, for independence.
- Georgia has declared its independence, and all the other republics are insisting on much greater local power.
- The striking miners are persisting in their demand not just for economic benefits, but for structural economic and political change as well. Their call is now resonating in other industrial sectors.
- The centrally-planned economy has broken down irretrievably and is being replaced by a mixture of republic and local barter arrangements, some of whose aspects resemble a market, but which do not constitute a coherent system.
- The center's reassertion of control over central television has not stifled the birth of new radio and TV companies and of some 800 new independent newspapers that are filling the news breach.

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--The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) is breaking up along regional and ideological lines. A still inchoate but growing system of new parties is arising.

2. In the midst of this chaos, Gorbachev has gone from ardent reformer to consolidator. A stream of intelligence reporting and his public declarations indicate that Gorbachev has chosen this course both because of his own political credo and because of pressures on him by other traditionalists, who would like him to use much tougher repressive measures. His attempts to preserve the essence of a center-dominated union, Communist Party rule, and a centrally-planned economy without the broad use of force, however, have driven him to tactical expedients that are not solving basic problems and are hindering but not preventing the development of a new system:

--The union referendum with its vaguely worded question is turning out to be a glittering nonevent and is having no impact on the talks for a new union treaty.

--The newly unveiled anticrisis program contains the government's umpteenth economic plan and, like its predecessors, holds out the promise of reform following a stabilization program that will not work.

--In a successful effort to dominate its proceedings, Gorbachev has expanded the Federal Council into a massive group of varying membership. This stratagem has undermined the one institution that, under its original design of membership for the presidents of the union and the republics, could have become a forum for airing out and settling disputes.

--As a result of his political meandering and policy failures, Gorbachev's credibility has sunk to near zero. Even some of his closest, newly found, traditionalist colleagues are distancing themselves from him. (One sentence deleted.)

3. Gorbachev has truly been faced with terrible choices in his effort to move the USSR away from the failed, rigid old system. His expedients have so far kept him in office and changed that system irretrievably, but have also prolonged and

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complicated the agony of transition to a new system and produced a political stalemate in the overall power equation.

- The economy is in a downward spiral with no end in sight, and only luck can prevent the decline in GNP from going into double digits this year.
- Inflation was about 20 percent at the end of last year and will be at least double that this year.
- The continued preference given to reliance on a top-down approach to problems, particularly in regard to republics, has generated a war of laws between various levels of power and created a legal mess to match the economic mess.

4. In this situation of growing chaos, explosive events have become increasingly possible.

- Public anger over deteriorating economic conditions could produce riots or massive strikes, particularly in the newly disadvantaged industrial center of the Slavic republics with their large labor populations.
- A failed maneuver by the central government, such as the violence in Vilnius in January, could give new impulses to antigovernment forces that would attract Western sympathy.
- Gorbachev, Yel'tsin, and other lesser but nevertheless important leaders could die under the incredible strains in which they work or be assassinated with incalculable consequences.
- Some potent new leader could arise in one or more places, much as Walesa in Poland or Landsbergis in Lithuania, and begin to make history.
- Reactionary leaders, with or without Gorbachev, could judge that the last chance to act had come and move under the banner of law-and-order.

5. Of all these possible explosions, a premeditated, organized attempt to restore a full-fledged dictatorship would be the most fateful in that it would try to roll back newly acquired

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freedom and be inherently destabilizing in the long term. Unfortunately, preparations for dictatorial rule have begun in two ways:

--Gorbachev may not want this turn of events but is increasing the chances of it through his personnel appointments; through his estrangement from the reformers and consequent reliance on the traditionalists whom he thereby strengthens; and through his attempted rule by decree, which does not work but invites dictatorship to make it work.

--More ominously, military, MVD, and KGB leaders are making preparations for a broad use of force in the political process:

-Through speeches, articles, and declarations, various leaders have laid the psychological groundwork. Kryuchkov has denounced foreign interference and argued that the military's help is sometimes necessary in restoring internal order. Akhromeyev has called for a strong hand. Yarov has issued public orders permitting the use of firearms allegedly to defend military installations and monuments; although admitting that the Vilnius garrison commander should not have acted the way he did, he failed to discipline him for the killing of innocent civilians. Ground Forces Commander Varennikov called for a tougher policy in the Baltic republics at a Federation Council meeting, and a number of commanders have either petitioned Gorbachev for tough measures or called for them in large meetings.

-The Communist Party is doing its utmost, with Gorbachev's approval, to retain its leading role in the military by retaining the structure of the Main Political Administration while modifying its external appearance--in essence a change in name only. Party conferences have been held at the all-Army level and below to institutionalize the new structure. They have almost certainly been used as well to propagandize the need to retain a center-dominated union at all cost.

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--A campaign to retire democratically inclined officers or at least move them out of key positions has been going on for some time. (Two sentences deleted.)

--The deployment into Moscow on 28 March of some 30,000 troops from the Army and the MVD, with KGB participation, went smoothly, indicating that a command structure for such an operation has been set up.

It is probably the totality of these psychological and actual preparations for the use of force that moved Shevardnadze to reiterate his warning that "dictatorship is coming." (S NF NC OC)

6. Should the reactionaries make their move, with or without Gorbachev, their first target this time would be Boris Yel'tsin and the Russian democrats.

--Yel'tsin is the only leader with mass appeal and with support outside his own republic, most importantly in the Ukraine.

--He is gradually and with much difficulty maintaining Russia's drive for autonomy.

--Those who would preserve a center-dominated union know they cannot do so if Russia escapes their control.

7. Any attempt to restore full-fledged dictatorship would start in Moscow with the arrest or assassination of Yel'tsin and other democratic leaders such as Mayor Popov and Deputy Mayor Stankevich; the seizure of all media and restoration of full censorship; and the banning of all gatherings enforced by an intimidating display of force. A committee of national salvation--probably under a less sullied name--would be set up and proclaim its intent to save the fatherland through tough but temporary measures that would pave the way for democracy and economic reform.

8. The long-term prospects of such an enterprise are poor, and even short-term success is far from assured:

--The number of troops that can be counted on to enforce repression is limited.

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--The cohesion of the participating forces would be hard to sustain if, as is likely, the democrats refused to fade away.

--Any action against Yel'tsin would spark activity in other places, and security and military forces would be spread thin in any attempt to establish control over other Russian cities.

9. Even if the putsch works in Russia, a number of other republics would make use of the turmoil for their own ends. If it did not collapse rapidly, the attempted authoritarian restoration would fail over the next few years. Its putative leaders lack any constructive program and would not have the economic resources, nor most likely the political savvy, necessary to make dictatorship stick. It would probably run its course much as martial law did in Poland, with the added element of secessions, but would almost certainly entail more bloodshed and economic damage along the way.

10. Even a putsch is not likely to prevent the pluralistic forces from emerging in a dominant position before the end of this decade. They are blunting the center's drive against them and consolidating their own regional holds on power, while the traditionalist forces, which still control the government and other central institutions, increasingly discredit themselves because they lack a viable, forward-looking program.

11. Such slow progress by the pluralist forces, however, leaves them at risk for several years to a putsch and to popular disenchantment with them for failing to produce rapid improvements. Knowing this, they are likely to intensify their push for a breakthrough involving most importantly a union treaty that gives the republics considerable say over the policies of the central government. They might succeed. Even Gorbachev himself is not yet totally lost to their cause. Faced with the choice of throwing in irrevocably with the traditionalists, who hate him and do not share his aversion to the use of outright force, or tacking back toward the reformers, he might still choose the latter course. Despite this policy of repressive retrenchment, after all, the central government is also condoning or even initiating some actions that could lay the groundwork for the restart of a reformist effort:

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- A number of laws necessary for the establishment of a market system have been passed.
- Gorbachev's advisor Shakhnazarov and Yel'tsin have both talked about the desirability of a national roundtable, although with very different declared purposes.
- The central and Russian governments are at least establishing, albeit extremely slowly, the mechanisms for settling differences and responsibility about military and XGB issues, primarily through Col. General Kobets' Russian Committee on Defense and Security.
- Similarly a collegium of republic foreign ministers under the chairmanship of the USSR foreign minister has been created.
- Talks with the Baltic Republics have started, although again with much difficulty and with the two sides totally at odds over their ultimate purpose.

So far, these various actions have not had any operational significance. Nor will they if the central government persists with its current policy objectives. But if it were willing to change its policy direction, these actions have the potential for creating a way out of the current stalemate.

12. The reformers would most likely seize upon any such effort to retard the chances of intensified repression and then try to turn it into a strategic breakthrough. With or without Gorbachev, with or without a putsch, the most likely prospect for the end of this decade, if not earlier, is a Soviet Union transformed into some independent states and a confederation of the remaining republics, including Russia. This confederation will have the size, economic resources, and accumulated hardware to remain a major military power, but its decentralized nature will prevent it from replicating the militaristic, aggressive policies of yesteryear.

13. The current Soviet situation and the various directions in which it could develop over the short term present us with three possible Soviet Unions over the next year:

- Continuation of the current political stalemate would maintain the current Western dilemma of developing the

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proper mix of relationships with contending forces. The dilemma would probably sharpen because the struggle is likely to intensify and the economy to spiral downward at an ever faster rate. Social explosions such as the current miners' strike and the Belorussian flareup would occur and could transform the situation into major violence or martial law at any time. Short of this, the USSR would be more and more of an economic basket case and Gorbachev a spent force who would multiply his appeals for Western assistance. Although the USSR might still try to take some new initiative on the international scene, such as in the Middle East and in the arms control sphere, its growing instability would greatly diminish its diplomatic clout and probably prevent it from effectively advancing its agenda. Its growing instability will have a negative effect on Eastern Europe in the form of lost economic interaction and inability to develop a new basis for Soviet-East European relations.

--An attempt at the restoration of dictatorship would face the West with a repetition of Poland 1981, but almost certainly with more brutality and bloodshed. The country would still be an economic basket case. The new régime would pledge to maintain a cooperative policy toward the world and most likely continue troop withdrawals from Eastern Europe, probably with even greater attempts at extortion. In reality there would be greater foreign policy truculence, but this USSR could not regain its previous influence in the world nor its position in the Third World. It would, however, attempt greatly to step up arms sales for cash; look for gains in the Middle East at US expense; and may well work with fifth columns in Eastern Europe in an attempt to subvert those developing democracies. Some in Western Europe would argue that this domestic retrenchment might be regrettable but that Gorbachev, or whoever was in charge, really had no choice but to restore order and that the best way to influence the situation toward the better (and save whatever Western investments and credits that had been advanced) was through continued cooperation coupled with symbolic gestures of disapproval. Unless brutality reached a level much higher than it did at Tiananmen Square, a

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Western consensus on either interpretation of events or policy would be highly unlikely.

--An accelerated breakthrough by the pluralists would create the best prospects for internal and external stability based on cooperative arrangements. But this pluralist victory would also bring problems of another sort. The ability of pluralist forces to rule effectively is unproven and might not be assured for quite some time, probably a generation. The nationality problem could not be settled overnight, and there would be tensions within and between republics over the most desirable politicoeconomic system. Some of the republics would not be governed by democrats, but all republics would lay claim to US assistance. New leaders who would have prevailed because of their domestic appeal and single-minded determination would not have much experience in foreign affairs and would probably make exaggerated demands, much as is already happening with some of them. Despite these difficulties and the likely lengthy process of internal and external adaptation to new rules of behavior, this breakthrough, particularly if it occurred in the Slavic core, would present the best prospects for an East-West reconciliation analogous to that which has brought Franco-German relations to what they are today.