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SPECIAL FEATURE

Soviet Inflection Points—A Play in Three Acts

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Abstract

This article is about contingency and determination. It identifies three "inflection points"—tipping points or points of no return—in the not-so-*longue durée* of Soviet history: 1929, 1959, and 1989. The article thus reflects on the collectivization of agriculture and associated brutalities; the promise and limitations of Khrushchev's reforms as well as the appeal—again, limited—of the Soviet Union to the emerging Third World; and the opportunities presented by perestroika and glasnost to reconfigure relations and purposes of production before the waves of nationalism and neoliberal market madness washed over the Soviet Union.

Keywords: collectivization; contingency and determination; industrialization; inflection points; khrushchev reforms; production collectives and communes

First, the title: "Inflection points." An inflection point is a term derived from mathematics referring to a point on a plane curve at which it crosses its tangent, that is, changes from being concave to convex, or *vice versa*, so, in layperson's language, a moment, an event, or the culmination of processes from which significant change can be expected in the affairs of an institution, an industry, or an entire country. It is a tipping point—and therefore a point of no return. This quality of immanent change is what distinguishes an inflection point from a conjuncture which, while associated with crisis, may or may not precipitate change. Inflection points do not necessarily determine the direction or nature of the change, only that change will occur.

"A play." Plays are conventionally either comedies, tragedies, or just dramas depending on the *denouement*. Does the protagonist get the last laugh, does she die in the end, or does a reconciliation follow the reckoning? Only after the *denouement* can we tell whether a crisis point was an inflection point, that is, whether opportunities were seized and whether as a result, things changed for the better, for the worse, for both.

Finally, why "three acts"? I cannot claim Hegelian dialectics as my inspiration. In this specific instance, all I can say is that two inflection points seemed inadequate and four (or more!) excessive.[1] Hence, 1929, 1959, and 1989.

1929 (mistrusting the masses)

In the preface to *Foundations of a Planned Economy*, the last series of volumes in his magisterial *History of Soviet Russia*, E. H. Carr wrote that "the formal adoption of the first five-year plan at the fifth Union Congress of Soviets in May 1929, seemed to provide the best stopping-point" for his project. This was because, among other reasons, the collectivization of agriculture, announced in the first days of 1930 but already underway by then, "opened a fresh and desperate phase in Soviet history."[2] Arguably, collectivization, which eventually would corral some 25 million peasant households into about 250,000 collective farms was the most fateful decision that the Soviet leadership—in this case, Stalin—ever made throughout that country's seven decades of existence.

Carr did not take up the subject, but many other historians did. Moshe Lewin's *La Paysannerie et le Pouvoir Sovietique*, the first attempt by an historian to reconstruct how peasants experienced the process, appeared in 1966, three years before Carr's *Foundations*.[3] Robert Davies, who collaborated with Carr on the *Foundations*' first volume, in effect continued it on his own, publishing three highly detailed volumes on *The Industrialization of Soviet Russia* (1980-1989) that covered 1929-1930, and, with Stephen Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (2004). Insistent that "rapid industrialisation was incompatible with the market economy," Davies characterized what emerged from the abandonment of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the plunge into full-tilt collectivization as a "paradoxical combination of enthusiasm and achievement with vicious repression and waste."[4]

The opening of Soviet archives in the 1990s enabled historians to shed light on not only the economic but other dimensions of collectivization. Both Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (1994) and Lynne Viola's *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (1996) emphasized the waywardness and pragmatic adaptability of Soviet Russia's peasant majority. After the turn of the millennium, debate about whether famine in Ukraine amounted to a Holodomor, that is, a genocidal Terror-Famine, nearly overwhelmed study of collectivization, which is why *The Hungry Steppe* (2018), Sarah Cameron's book on Kazakhstan's experience is so salutary.

The long version of the history of collectivization would include the peasant land seizures in 1917 which at least one historian recently argued should be considered the third revolution to have occurred in that year; the Soviet government's food brigades that requisitioned grain at miniscule prices and the peasant armies that fought against both Reds and Whites during the civil war; the succeeding reliance on market relations and encouragement of peasants in Lenin's last writings to form various cooperatives that prevailed during the NEP years, a policy encapsulated in the motto of the "*smychka*" or link between the city and the village understood as the alliance of proletariat and the peasantry; the "scissors crisis" of 1923/1924 when prices of manufactured and cultivated goods widened to the disadvantage of peasants threatening the *smychka*; the debates within the Communist Party about how to resolve the contradictions between the state socialist and small proprietor sectors that generated opposing solutions—Preobrazhensky's squeezing of surpluses from the peasantry via "primitive socialist accumulation" versus Bukharin's advice to peasants to "enrich" themselves; and the

shortfall in grain deliveries in 1927/28 due to peasants' withholding of supplies as they attempted to drive up prices.

This was the point—the beginning of the inflection point—when, after journeying to the Urals and Siberia to personally oversee the revival of the civil war-era requisitioning of grain, Stalin put collectivization on the party's immediate agenda. This was an economic policy that would have profound social and political implications. But how to make it happen? On whom could the party rely in the countryside where its membership was so thin? What, for that matter, would be collectivized? Only the land, as in the TOZ (the acronym for "Association for the joint cultivation of the land"); or the land and means of production, as in the *artel*; or everything including housing as in the *kommuna*? As late as June 1929 when slightly less than 4 percent of peasant households had signed up for collective farming, more than half (and in Ukraine, some three-quarters) of those farms were of the TOZ variety.[5]

Two months earlier, in April, the party's Sixteenth Conference approved a Central Committee resolution that called for five million peasant households—20 percent of the total number of peasant households in the country—to be collectivized by 1931. This was an ambitious objective, but, as Stalin would proclaim nearly two years later, "There are no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm!" Then in October, that target was deemed too modest. Not less than 13 million (50 percent of) households by the end of 1930, it was decided. "Total collectivization," screamed *Pravda* on the last day of that month, just one week before Stalin's article, "The Year of the Great Turn," claimed, quite erroneously, that the Party had succeeded "in securing the following … of the poor and middle peasants in spite of incredible difficulties, in spite of the desperate resistance of retrograde forces of every kind, from kulaks and priests to philistines and Right opportunists."

What explains this "great turn?" Collective madness? Hyper-optimism about winning over the peasants based on completely ginned-up reports by lower party officials dispatched to the agrarian front? The *hubris* of Marxists convinced that they held the magic key that unlocked the door to raising productivity, that amalgamated farms utilizing mechanized equipment—tractors, above all—could do the trick? Or was it more cynical than that? When and how did Stalin become convinced that if a certain percentage of peasants were identified as *kulaks*, had all their property expropriated, and were banished either to remote regions of the country or to nearby inferior land, then the rest of the households would sign up to join collective farms?

So many questions. And yet there are more: why did the party ultimately choose to promote neither the full-blown *kommuna* nor the most modest version of collectivism, the TOZ, but, like Goldilocks, the one that was just right—the *artel*? And why were peasant households permitted to keep a cow but no horses, not in 1929 and not for the remainder of the Soviet period? But the biggest question is couldn't it have been done more slowly, with more patience, with less arm-twisting and other forms of coercion? Would the number of draught animals, levels of agricultural productivity and other indices of the rural standard of living have plummeted as much, and along with them, support for the Soviet project, if Stalin himself hadn't become "dizzy with success"?[6]

Many of collectivization's antithetical consequences can be attributed to the mania for raising productivity that seized hold of the Bolsheviks during the famine years of the

civil war. "In the final analysis," Lenin wrote in 1919, "productivity of labour is the most important, the principal thing for the victory of the new social system." "Communism," he insisted, meant "the higher productivity of labour—compared with that existing under capitalism—of voluntary, class-conscious and united workers employing advanced techniques." Lenin was praising the "Subbotnik" movement in which workers volunteered to fulfill emergency tasks without monetary compensation.[7] These, of course, could only be occasional and symbolic efforts. More systematically, Lenin insisted on the imposition of a hierarchy of responsibility (*edinonachalie* or "one-man management"), wages pegged to skill grades and output (piece-rates), and the strictest "labor discipline."[8]

The zeal for raising productivity sparked the Scientific Organization of Labor (NOT), the League of Time, and other movements which sought to adapt to Soviet conditions the time and motion studies pioneered in the United States by Frederick Winslow Taylor. Through the application of "positioning" (*ustanovka*) and other psychotechnical methods, the NOTists claimed they could set output norms scientifically and at optimal levels.[9] Workers themselves had nothing against raising productivity *per se*, but they did object to ceding control over the labor process to politically suspect *spetsy* ("specialists") who ridiculed their tried-and-true methods as "backward." Until the late 1920s, these battles were largely subterranean and fought to a standstill. But then, as the pace of industrialization quickened, and large numbers of young semi-skilled workers entered the factories, the Stalinist leadership urged them to outproduce each other. It threw its weight behind the budding socialist competition movement in which groups of workers challenged each other to overfulfill their output norms, thereby earning the title—and associated privileges—of "shock workers" (*udarniki*).

Labor historians wrote quite a bit about this movement but never fully appreciated it was part of an inflection point. I am referring to the conjuncture that occurred in 1929 when shock workers contributed to collectivization by volunteering as "Twenty-Five Thousanders" to head collective farms, a "cultural revolution" swept through the professions encouraging much experimentation while destroying the careers of those considered insufficiently revolutionary, the leadership of the Central Council of Trade Unions was purged, the Bukharinists (aka "Rightists") within the party were decisively defeated, Trotsky was deported, and the stock market crashed in the United States bringing on not only the Great Depression but political instability. This conjuncture, in other words, produced a mutually reinforcing radicalization with economic, political, social, cultural as well as international dimensions.

Just at this moment there arose in factories across the country—in Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkiv, and the Urals—production collectives and communes. These consisted of groups of workers, usually on successive shifts, that gave themselves names like "The Spark" (*Iskra*), and "The Five-Year Plan in Two-and-a-Half Years." They produced their own statutes, work plans, record-keeping, and other attributes of worker self-administration. Whereas collectives distributed their total wages based on different skill grades, communes divided wages equally regardless of skill level and in some cases adjusted for family need. Discovering these institutions in the mid-1980s, I considered them "fortresses erected by workers to defend themselves from the depredations caused by forced-pace industrialization and collectivization," and argued that

their prevailing spirit of egalitarianism and collectivism made their relationship to socialist competition fraught.[10]

For some two years, party and trade union officials pondered these institutions. Were they vestiges of the old *artel*s or harbingers of the future communist society where people would be paid "according to their needs"? Should they be embraced, kept at arm's length, or abolished? In June 1931, Stalin more or less settled the matter. In his speech to a conference of industrial executives about "New Conditions, New Tasks," he called for "new methods of management," and specifically an end to "the 'Leftist' practice of wage equalization" which he blamed for high turnover rates.[11] There followed increasingly harsh assessments in the party press, and although no injunction or decree banned them, no production commune appears to have survived the First Five-Year Plan.

Two postscripts are in order. At the Communist Party's Seventeenth Congress in February 1934, Stalin, savoring his victory over the naysayers within the party as well as the millions of now cowed peasants, couldn't help but condemn some party members' "infatuation with the egalitarian tendencies of agricultural communes." "Our 'Leftist' blockheads," he continued,

> at one time idealized the agricultural communes to such an extent that they even tried to implant the commune in the factories, where skilled and unskilled worker … had to put his wages in the common fund [to be] shared out equally. We know what harm these infantile egalitarian exercises of our "Leftist" blockheads caused our industry.[12]

But why should Stalin have the last word? A recently published book about Finnish immigrants to North America details how, not in 1929 but rather a year or two later, they caught "Karelia fever" and resettled in the backwoods of that Soviet territory where many worked as lumberjacks. Wanting to uphold what they had fought for in their unions and socialist organizations back in Canada and the United States, they resisted the Soviet official policy of differentiated pay. As one of them, Lauri Hokkanen, put it, "We had been taught that even though some people weren't physically able to do as much as the others, they deserved full pay if they were doing their best."[13] The incompatibility of such sentiments with official policy demonstrates the distance the country had traveled since the inflection point of 1929.

1959 (between First and Third Worlds)

Nineteen-fifty-nine owes its designation as the second point of inflection to its centrality within several extended processes. Some of these relate to how the first inflection point turned out for workers and peasants; others involved the expectations and material improvement of the swelling Soviet middle class, and still others Soviet relations with the peoples of the burgeoning Third World and the government of the People's Republic of China. More generally, the year figures as the mid-point in the period when the Soviet way of life enjoyed both the broadest support at home and the highest prestige abroad. Certainly, the Soviet space program's spectacular achievements, beginning with the successful launch of Sputnik I in October 1957 and continuing through Yuri Gagarin's feat of orbiting the planet in April 1961, helped burnish the

Soviet Union's reputation.[14] But these also were the years of the Khrushchev reforms that broadly improved the material conditions of and contributed to the raising morale among millions of Soviet citizens.

Back in 1967, Alec Nove summarized them as follows:

- "Systematic rearrangement of the wage structure"—reduction of differentials; modification of individual piece-rates; elimination of extreme incentive schemes; introduction of a minimum wage and reduction of high salaries.
- Reduction of worktime—"shorter hours for juveniles without loss of pay"; "a 7-hour day"; "the lengthening of paid maternity-leave to 112 days."
- "The repeal of the criminal-law liability for leaving work without permission and for absenteeism";
- "The abolition of tuition fees in secondary and higher education";
- "Great improvements in pension and disability benefits" increasing the average pension by 81 percent.

Nove also noted "a big increase in the rate of house construction" between 1955 and 1959 with the number of square meters of state and cooperative housing more than doubling and that of private construction rising by more than three times.[15] Because of their drabness, "forbidding similitude," and flimsiness, much of the dwellings erected in these years eventually would be ridiculed as "*khrushcheby*," a play on "Khrushchev" and the Russian word for slum—*trushchoby*. But, as emphasized by Mark B. Smith, the rise in the standard of living of the tens of millions who moved into new apartments was real enough. "The separate apartment," he writes, "meant that new residents had the chance to pursue an enclosed family life, and to have exclusive family access to a kitchen and a bathroom." People wrote letters of complaint about the small size, thinness of the walls, and remote locations of their apartments," but as Smith asserts, "the typical expression of disappointment was that the acknowledged improvement should have been greater." And, besides, "the sound of satisfaction in the archives is usually inaudible: the vast majority even in this culture of letters of complaint never complained about their housing conditions." The Khrushchev housing program certainly did not bring about communism, and I am not sure I agree with Smith's assessment of it having reached "proto-communism," but it unquestionably "amounted to one of the great social reforms in postwar Europe."[16]

Smith makes another good point when he remarks that "by reading too much back from the 1980s and too much forward from the 1930s, the picture of the late 1950s and early 1960s loses focus."[17] To identify this moment as an inflection point is to suggest that this one great social reform could have led to others inspiring ever-growing and deepening popular identification with the building of communism. That is, things could have gone differently from then on, or, since contingency is ever present, the chances of things going differently were greater at that time than before or since. But what sort of things? And why, after all, didn't they?

Before addressing these questions, let's revel in the moment. Scientific-technological advances, greater social equality, and the provision of single-family housing were all to the good, but for the CIA the Soviet figures for Net Material Product, its equivalent of Gross Domestic Product, looked too good to be true. "[A]lways lower than the glowing

stats from Moscow," writes Francis Spufford in his imaginative *Red Plenty*, the CIA figures

> were still worrying enough to cause heart-searching among Western governments, and anxious editorializing in Western newspapers …. For a while, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, people in the West felt the same mesmerized disquiet over Soviet growth that they were going to feel for Japanese growth in the 1970s and 1980s, and for Chinese and Indian growth from the 1990s on.

Even if, as Spufford notes, the rate of growth in the Soviet Union during the 1950s did not come close to the official figure of 10.1 percent, or even the CIA's lower estimate of 7 percent, the "upwards from 5 percent a year" suggested by more recent post-Soviet calculations was still mighty impressive.[18] No wonder the Soviet intelligentsia, or "the white-collar middle class" as John Bushnell redefined the category for Western sensibilities, was so optimistic. Its "confidence about future prospects," he wrote, was based not only "on perceptions of present national achievement" but also personal betterment.[19]

Of course, the Americans did what they could to minimize the propagandistic value of Soviet achievements. No matter how much coal or steel "the Russians" produced, anxious commentators pointed out, they hadn't a clue about such things as mod cons, the wonders of synthetics and plastics, or fashion. And no matter how many times "the Soviets" displayed models of their Sputniks, the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, with its cars, fashion shows, TV sets, and "Miracle Kitchen of the Future," seemed to have wowed the public far more.

But there were publics and publics. Two years earlier, Moscow had hosted the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students. A semiannual event, the 1957 gathering attracted some 34,000 attendees, the largest number up to that point, with 130 countries represented.[20] Though it would become a cliché, the festival's slogan of "Peace and Friendship" rang true for the throngs especially those from recently decolonized lands that were beginning to be referred to as the Third World. The Soviet Union potentially had much to offer these countries. Having itself overcome the backwardness it inherited from the tsarist predecessor, it could serve as a model, sharing its technical knowledge and thereby fostering economic and political ties that would progressively isolate the advanced capitalist countries of the First World. India's Bhilai Steel Plant (1955-1959) and Egypt's Aswan High Dam (1960-1970) represented concrete manifestations of this effort, repaying the country's considerable investments by extending its "soft power."

The People's Friendship University, founded in Moscow in 1960 to train students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, had a similar purpose. Its rechristening as Patrice Lumumba University, shortly after the Conglolese leader's assassination in January 1961, was a powerful symbol of solidarity with the emergent Pan-Africanist movement. In one assessment, it constituted "Soviet socialism's most ambitious attempt to 'go global' through higher education," representing "the single most important venture in international higher education during the Cold War."[21] In the meantime, Soviet propagandists highlighted the USSR's own decolonized peoples as "honorary Africans," making sure to choose young accomplished Central Asians (especially women) to represent the country at international conferences.[22]

But placing the Soviet Union at the head of the Third World turned out to be a more complicated proposition than expected. African students at Lumumba, for example, ran afoul of Soviet authorities when they attempted to form a Black African Students' Union. Many were subjected to racist treatment at the hands of Soviet citizens, ordinary and otherwise.[23] In a larger sense, as Adom Getachew recently has emphasized, postcolonial nationalists "resisted the move to subsume decolonization and self-determination under the auspices of the Soviet Union."[24] Pan-Africanism, the Non-Aligned Movement, and other initiatives that gained traction in the 1950s by promoting national self-determination were not easily accommodated within the binary structures of the Cold War which is to say they did not necessarily look to Soviet-style Communism as their end-points, the Cuban Revolution notwithstanding.

Complicating the Soviet expansion of its global influence even more was the challenge posed by China to Soviet hegemony within the Communist bloc. Although tensions between the two most populous Communist states can be traced to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Soviet Communist Party's Twentieth Congress in 1956, in Stephen A. Smith's judgment, "the Sino-Soviet alliance was far more dynamic up to 1958 than many appreciated at the time." He attributes Mao Zedong's decision in that year to launch the Great Leap Forward—"in essence a recklessly utopian leap away from the Soviet model"—as "at the root of the Sino-Soviet split," which was formalized by the PRC's condemnation of Soviet "revisionism" in 1961.[25] In this case too, 1959 came to be the spinal year. In September, Khrushchev embarked on his make-nice trip to the United States, further antagonizing the Chinese, and a few weeks later turned up at the PRC's tenth anniversary celebration of its coming to power, only to be snubbed by his hosts.

Between the triumphal entry of the revolutionaries into Havana in early January 1959 and the Cuban Missile Crisis that came to a head in October 1962, Khrushchev's agenda to advance what Czechoslovak reformists would call a few years later "socialism with a human face" came unstuck. Bureaucratic resistance combined with his own impetuousness and overreach are familiar explanations, and they are not wrong. Not for nothing did the phrase *Pravda* used in its editorial announcing Khrushchev's ouster in October 1964—"hairbrained scheming, immature conclusions and hasty decisions and actions divorced from reality"—become inextricably associated with him.[26] But a less top-down perspective would cite "Bloody Saturday," the massacre of striking electric locomotive factory workers in the southern Russian city of Novocherkassk. There, on June 2, 1962, in front of the city party headquarters on Lenin Square (!), soldiers fired on thousands of assembled workers, killing 24 and wounding scores of others.[27]

The authorities failed to cover up the incident entirely, but its long-term effect had less to do with popular outrage at the massacre than with the cause: The Novocherkassk workers struck partly to protest food price increases, specifically meat and butter, and partly because factory management, with impeccably bad timing, had decided to induce a bout of socialist competition to raise output norms. The circle was thus complete. The liability of collective farm-based agriculture combined with the imposition of an industrial technique from the hoary Stalinist past to produce an explosion not unlike those in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956. "Never again," noted Samuel Baron in his history of the event, "… until the collapse of the Soviet Union did the authorities dare to raise food prices."[28]

1989 (renewal or end?)

It was the "miracle year" of the twentieth century. At its start, the Communist world was still intact. By its end, six countries—Poland, Hungary, East Germany (GDR), Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania—had experienced massive upheavals leading to the dissolution of Communist party governments. With the opening of the Berlin Wall in November, prospects for unification with the Federal Republic suddenly increased while those for Yugoslavia's survival seemed dim. Clearly, the old post-war, bipolar order frozen in Cold War had ended. Then, and ever since, political scientists have had a field day explaining why it all came about, why, though it now seems to have been inevitable, it was so unpredictable, and why, within two years, the Soviet Communist Party crumbled and the Soviet Union disintegrated while the Chinese Communist Party, after crushing pro-democracy demonstrators in June, strengthened its grip.

Surely, Mikhail Gorbachev played the leading role in this, the third and final act of the play. His renunciation of the use of force to keep the "satellite countries" within the Soviet orbit, so much in contrast to Leonid Brezhnev and his eponymous "doctrine," proved fateful. This, plus his articulation of a "common European home" and determination to eliminate medium-range nuclear weapons made him an obvious choice to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. But how much credit or blame should Gorbachev get for the dismantling of the Communist Party and the dissolution of the USSR? In the view of Vladislav Zubok, to cite one of the most recent and well received accounts, a great deal. His hubris combined with indecisiveness at crucial moments and unrealistic expectations of western assistance to drive the Soviet Union into the ground. Contrary to "the dominant narrative created in the West and within anti-communist circles inside the Soviet Union," the Union's collapse was not, Zubok insists, inevitable.[29]

Fair enough, but, accompanied by a good deal of finger-wagging ("had he …, he would have"), this argument tends to overlook or at least downplay structural features of Soviet (and even pre-Soviet) history. One can hardly exaggerate the difficulty of presiding over so many different peoples/nations. Stephen Kotkin points out that Stalin "would find a way to cultivate loyalties through and across the different language groups," and those loyalties persisted for at least another generation.[30] But once it became evident that the emperor had no clothes, that is, that the Kremlin had no intentions of exercising its imperial powers, the nation as an organizing principle proved ineluctable. Or, as the chief analyst of the KGB quipped, "The Soviet Union resembled a chocolate bar: it was creased with the furrowed lines of future division, as if for the convenience of its consumers."[31]

If not inevitable, violent confrontations between crowds of rival nationalities or those demanding national independence and Soviet armed forces became far more likely. In the case of Georgia, outrage at the separatist aspirations of the Abkhaz minority—themselves provoked by the upsurge of Georgian nationalist rhetoric—fueled the protests in Tbilisi that convinced the commander of the Transcaucasus Military District to mobilize his troops. After the crowd had ignored the pleas of the Patriarch Ilia II to disperse, the armed forces accomplished the task, albeit at the expense of some 21 lives. Gorbachev denied responsibility for the tragic events of April 9, 1989, blaming both "irresponsible persons" among the protestors and the army.

It is hard to say which confrontation, if any, tipped the balance. Was it already in February 1988 when the Karabagh Armenians, "inspired by the rhetoric of *perestroika*," sought to remove their autonomous oblast from Azerbaijani rule, the pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait that same month and Baku in January 1990, or a year later in Vilnius when Soviet paratroopers fired on pro-independence Lithuanian demonstrators? Probably not that late, because the Lithuanian Supreme Council of the Republic already had declared the country's independence in March 1990 to be followed within two months by similar actions in Latvia and Estonia. Yet, a case has been made that it was not until the failed August 1991 coup attempt and even later, in December when Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly in support of independence, that the die was cast.[32] Contingency vs. inevitability; individual responsibility vs. unintended consequences—historians seem less in agreement about why this third point inflected the way it did than the previous two.

But what about state socialism, the play's real protagonist? Could it have been saved? Gorbachev obviously thought so, but he was mistaken. Indeed, as some have argued, the very policies he pursued to try to save it—*perestroika* and *glasnost*—contributed to killing it.[33] To which, one might respond, what is left of socialism anywhere including—or especially—in China? There, already in the 1970s under Deng Xiaoping measures to integrate the country's economy into the global capitalist system—later codified as the "socialist market economy"—produced a system that increasingly resembled authoritarian capitalism.[34] So, it does seem that socialism could neither be introduced nor saved from on high, leastwise by leaders of Communist Parties.

What about from below? This is where for me things get particularly interesting but also painful. Back in 1989 I spent several weeks among the coalminers of Donetsk as a member of an oral history video crew. Our visit coincided with and would be shaped by the strike of some 400,000 miners throughout the country, beginning in Vorkuta and spreading thence to Siberia's Kuzbas and Soviet Ukraine's Donbas. The miners struck because they sensed the time had come to go on the offensive, to demand from their employer, the Ministry of the Coal Industry, higher wages and from their immediate bosses, better treatment. They sensed, correctly, that thanks to Gorbachev, the state's typical response to worker protests—repression and retribution—was unlikely. Unwilling to rely on the officially sanctioned trade union, they formed strike committees which mutated into workers' committees and eventually an Independent Miners' Union. Up to that point, *perestroika* had been top-down, "by and for the intelligentsia," as one strike leader put it, adding, "We haven't seen it, in any case." The point was that from the miners' perspective, nothing had fundamentally changed, but now that they had made their voices heard, it might, and for the better. This was *perestroika* from below, and it was exhilarating. If it did not exactly mean socialism, it did seem to be "what Soviet democracy looks like."

And so, I became *engagé*, interviewing those associated with the miners' movement, participating in the making of a documentary film, writing articles about the movement for *The Nation*, returning to Donetsk twice more in 1991 and 1992 to do more interviews, co-authoring a book on the subject, and otherwise doing what I could to amplify the cause.[35] Why the miners but not other workers, I kept on asking myself? Eventually, I determined that the unique condition of coal mining as a "planned loss" industry was responsible. That is, the traditional practice of setting the price of coal well

below production costs to provide industrial and other enterprises with cheap energy required the ministry to subsidize regional coal associations which in turn distributed what they received to their constituent mines as they saw fit. Miners knew that they were not getting a fair return for their strenuous and dangerous labor and thus bitterly resented this system, characterizing it as "ministerial feudalism."

Gorbachev's alternative, a "regulated market economy," found little support among the miners. "A regulated market," as one member of the Donetsk strike committee put it, "is simply the same system trying to save itself, survive, remain on top and continue to distribute everything." They proposed instead that mining associations market what the mines produced "at world prices" and that the mines retain a greater proportion of their proceeds. Or as another Donetsk strike committee member said in May 1991, "The mines, all mines, should not be asking the Union or republic government to raise the price for coal, but set it themselves instead."[36]

By this time, strike committees throughout the USSR were calling for Gorbachev's resignation and, both reflecting and furthering the weakening of the center, negotiating new contracts with corresponding republic governments. The breakup of the Soviet Union thus found the miners having realized virtually all their demands—economic as well as political. But be careful about what you wish for.[37] The loss of subsidies and the freeing of prices meant that enterprises could no longer afford to pay their workers. Wage arrears mounted, leading to both militant and desperate actions by workers throughout Russia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, the future of the Donbas mining industry looked grim.[38] This is as far as I will take the story because it is well beyond the inflection point. Which was, that when everything was breaking down—the legal structure, the value of the ruble, and the Soviet Union itself—the miners (and by their example, other workers) might have sought to alter their relationship to the institutions that disposed of and depended on the surpluses their labor had created. In more concrete terms, they might have restructured the social division of labor toward ends that better served their (and others') needs including investment in new, alternative sources of energy less destructive of the environment. But to imagine this alternative scenario is to be wise after the fact. In 1989, the miners and just about everyone else in the USSR were mesmerized by the magic of the market and the neo-liberal order that represented the antithesis of the centralized state planning system they had come to despise.

Conclusion

From the perspective of two centuries of socialism, all 74 years of the Soviet state version might be seen as one big inflection point. Initially, the history of that project was written largely "from above," based on evidence produced by its leading figures and official institutions, as well as assumptions about the constraints of Marxist ideology. When that project ended, those who persisted in understanding its essence in these terms proclaimed its termination as having been inevitable.[39] Here, a different approach has been taken, one which explored the dynamic tension between workers as ideal subjects of an emancipatory political project and as creators of capital accumulation. In this analysis, whenever the balance or *modus vivendi* between these two contradictory roles became seriously disrupted, the direction that Soviet socialism had

been moving was altered. Three such reconfigurations occurred, each following upon what has been identified as an inflection point.

Such an approach to Soviet history provokes some questions for further consideration. Did the tangent that emerged from each point of inflection determine or at least set up the conditions for the next one? That is, did the brutal extension of state control over agriculture and the simultaneous rapid expansion of an industrial working class engaged primarily in capital goods production deprive the Soviet Union of its potential for further developing democratic practices that were at least incipient during the years 1917 to 1929? Even while the Khrushchev reforms improved material conditions for and expanded optimism among the general population, did his fitful de-Stalinization campaign undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet Communist Party and weaken the international Communist movement? Finally, can we attribute the failure of the miners' movement to reverse the deterioration of their working conditions as well as their status within Soviet society to the siren-song of neo-liberal economic assumptions, and if that were the case, did such thinking signify that at least the state version of socialism had run its course?

Notes

1. The most obvious candidates for additional points would be 1921, the year of the Kronstadt Rebellion and the Tenth Party Congress that banned factionalism and 1945 when the victorious allies effectively divided postwar European successor states between them.
2. E. H. Carr, *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926-1929* (Harmondsworth: Macmillan, 1974), vol. 1, v.
3. For the English edition, see Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968).
4. R. W. Davies, *The Soviet Economy in Turmoil, 1929-1930* (Houndsmills: Penguin, 1989), xviii. See also 456–72.
5. Daniel Thornily, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Rural Communist Party, 1927-39* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 31–32.
6. The reference is to Stalin's *Pravda* article of March 2, 1930, in J. V. Stalin, *Works* 12 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), 200.
7. V. I. Lenin, "A Great Beginning," *Collected Works* 29, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm.
8. V. I. Lenin, "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government," *Collected Works* 27 (4th ed., London: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1963–70), 258.
9. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "Soviet Norm Determination in Theory and Practice, 1917-1941," *Soviet Studies* 36, no. 1 (1984): 45–68.
10. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "Production Collectives and Communes and the 'Imperatives' of Soviet Industrialization, 1929-1931," *Slavic Review* 45, no. 1 (1986): 65–84, quotation on 84.
11. Stalin, *Works* 13 (Moscow, 1955), 58–59.
12. *Ibid*., 364.
13. Samira Saramo, *Building That Bright Future: Soviet Karelia in the Life Writing of Finnish North Americans* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 119.
14. See Donald J. Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1–3, 9; idem., *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 66–69, 79, 110; Andrew Jenks, *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn't Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).
15. Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.* (London: Pelican,1967), 346–7.
16. Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 123–36.

17. *Ibid*., 129.
18. Francis Spufford, *Red Plenty* (London: Graywolf, 2010), 88–89.
19. John Bushnell, "The 'New Soviet Man' Turns Pessimist," in *The Soviet Union Since Stalin*, ed. Stephen F. Cohen, Alexander Rabinowitch and Robert Sharlet (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 181–2.
20. A. Popov, "Uchastie SSSR v organizatsii i provedenii Vsemirnykh festivalei molodezhi i studentov" [The Participation of the USSR in the Organization and Hosting of World Festivals of Youth and Students]. In *Sovetskaia kul'turnaia diplomatiia v usloviiakh kholodnoi voiny, 1945–1989* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2018), 121–69; Pia Koivunen, "The World Youth Festival as a Soviet Cultural Product during the Cold War," *Quaestio Rossica* 8 (2020): 1612–28.
21. Constantin Katsakioris, "The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher Education for a Soviet-Third World Alliance, 1960-91," *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (2019): 282–3.
22. Hilary Lynd and Thom Loyd, "Histories of Color: Blackness and Africanness in the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 81 (2022): 402.
23. Lynd and Loyd, "Histories of Color," 407; Julie Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47 (2006): 34–36.
24. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 76.
25. Stephen A. Smith, "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Communism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13.
26. *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 1964, 12.
27. Samuel H. Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union: Novocherkassk, 1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 51–76. See also P. P. Siuda, *Novocherkassk, 1-3 iiun'ia 1962 g.: Zabastovka i rasstrel (Na osnove svidetel'stv ochevidtsev i interviu s P. P. Siuda)* [Novocherkassk, 1–3 June 1962: Strike and Shooting (On the basis of evidence from eyewitnesses and interviews with R. R. Siuda] (Moscow: Soiuzmedinform,1997).
28. Baron, 6-11, 178.
29. Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021). Quotation on 7.
30. Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 2014), 125.
31. Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 86.
32. Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).
33. This is the gist of Kotkin's *Armageddon Averted*.
34. For the argument that socialism had *never* existed in China because of party leaders' pursuit of "state capitalism," see Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). And, for the contention that the Soviet and other Communist countries' economies always operated within the constraints of the "global liberal economic order," see Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
35. *Perestroika from Below*, produced by Daniel Walkowitz and Barbara Abrash (Past Time Productions, 1990); *The Nation*, Oct. 23, 1989, 451–4; May 27, 1991, 693; Nov. 2, 1992, 502–4, 506; Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989-1992* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).
36. Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass Speak*, 120, 114–15.
37. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "The Freedom of Prices and the Price of Freedom: The Miners' Dilemma in the Soviet Union and its Successor States," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transitional Politics* 13 (1997): 1–27.
38. World Bank, *Ukraine Coal Industry Restructuring Sector Report* (Washington, D.C: World Bank, 1996), i, iv, 19–21.
39. See, for example, Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

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